

Dhammacentric

January 21, 2021

Of the Buddha's teachings, there are only two that he said are categorical. One is that skillful qualities should be developed, and unskillful qualities should be abandoned. The other is the four noble truths along with their duties. Suffering and stress are to be comprehended. Their origination is to be abandoned. Their cessation is to be realized, and the path to their cessation is to be developed. These things are always true, always beneficial, and always should be kept in mind.

The question is, when the Buddha talks about right mindfulness, why doesn't he say that? After all, "mindfulness" means keeping something in mind. Why does he focus instead on keeping in mind the body in and of itself, feelings, mind states, mental qualities in and of themselves, with no direct mention of the duties of the four noble truths or the duties with regard to skillful and unskillful qualities?

Now, there is indirect mention in the quality of ardency. Ardency is what knows its duties and tries to do them well. But still it's strange that there's no direct mention of these duties under the path factor of right mindfulness. It may be because the duties are already mentioned in terms of right view. But still, why is there so much emphasis on body, feelings, mind, mental qualities in and of themselves, with no direct mention of the fact that these duties have to be kept in mind at the same time?

Part of the answer may be that you have to be in the right place for those duties to make sense, for them to be clear. And getting you right at the body in and of itself puts you in the right place.

It's like the old theories about astronomy. When they thought that the Earth was at the center of the solar system, and they tried to make sense of the orbits of the planets, with their retrograde motions and other variables, everything got more and more and more complex, harder and harder to understand. But when they finally placed the Sun at the center of the motions of the planets, then everything made a lot more sense. Things were clearer. It became more obvious what was going to happen.

And it's the same sort of thing here. As we go through life with our selves and our stories in the center, then the duties of the four noble truths, the duties with regard to skillful and unskillful action seem far away. They seem to rub up against what seems to be common sense. But when we can get out of our egocentric point of view, our narrative-centric point of view, and take on a dhammacentric point

of view, then the duties of the four noble truths, the duties of skillful and unskillful action become a lot clearer.

Think of the Buddha's first step in getting on the path, when he divided his thoughts into two sorts: motivated by sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness on one side; and renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness on the other side. He made the division based on two things: one, where these thoughts came from; and two, where they were going to lead, looking at them simply as parts of a system of cause and effect. As for his likes and dislikes, he had to get those out of the center and put them to the side. When he was able to do that, he was able to get the mind into patterns of skillful thinking, and then from there into concentration, and from concentration into awakening.

It was because he was able to put his stories to the side, and to put the center simply in looking at things in terms of cause and effect right there in the present moment—that's how he was able to make it all the way to awakening, and to fulfill those duties of the categorical truths.

So when he has us focus on the breath in and of itself, he's trying to take *us* out of the center and put the *breath* in the center: just the body in and of itself—not in terms of whether we like our body or don't like our body, or the history of our body—but just what we've got right now.

And given what you've got right now, what's the best thing you can do with it? Well, you breathe in a way that feels really good. You're aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. You calm the breathing down, because the body's not the problem. The problem is the mind. The more you can get the breath calm, the more clearly you can see what's going on in the mind.

The same with feelings: If you're going to look at feelings simply in and of themselves, then it's obvious that feelings not of the flesh—i.e., feelings related to the practice—are more skillful than your ordinary, everyday pleasures and pains.

Pain not of the flesh is the pain of realizing that there is a goal that can be attained, and you're not there yet. Other people have attained it, though, so you should be able to attain it, too. That places a duty on you. But better than that is the pleasure not of the flesh, where you're able to get the mind into strong states of concentration. And even better than that is equanimity not of the flesh where things can calm down and arrive at an even deeper peace. That's the basic pattern of those steps in breath meditation dealing with feelings. When feelings calm down, they let you look directly at the mind.

You want to get the mind energized so that it feels good inside, gladdened inside. When the mind's gladdened, it's easier to settle down. Then you get it concentrated, and from there you go through the stages of concentration. You

release it from the lower ones to get it as still as you can. And there you are: You're in the right place. You're where the Buddha was when he gained awakening. And it's from this point that things begin to make sense.

You look at those duties with regard to the four noble truths. Three of them have to do with dispassion. For example, comprehending suffering: Comprehension is defined as putting an end to passion, aversion, and delusion. Abandoning the origination of suffering requires dispassion for craving. And the cessation of suffering is dispassion itself. So with those first three, you're aiming at dispassion. You reserve your passion for the path, because you've got to do it well. That's where the ardency comes in.

Then you reflect on the Buddha's analysis of how to give rise to dispassion. You see the things that the Buddha said should become objects of dispassion, and you look for how they are originated, how they pass away. In other words, you see their inconstancy. Then you look for the allure. Why do you go for them when they're inconstant?

When the mind is settled like this, and there's a sense of well-being inside, it's a lot easier to admit to yourself some of the unskillful ways in which you've been going for certain patterns of thought, letting yourself see them as alluring. It's a lot easier to see that they're not really worth it. You've got something better. That helps you see the drawbacks. When compare the drawbacks with the allure, and see how flimsy the allure is in comparison to the price you have to pay for going for those things, that's how you give rise to dispassion.

So it's from this spot that the duties with regard to the four noble truths begin to make a lot more sense. They're a lot clearer. They don't seem to have a lot of epicycles and other weird machinations that would be obscure and abstract. They make a lot of sense because when the mind is settled, it can look at itself a lot more clearly. When it's centered, it can apply a lot more focus. You're at the right frame of reference. You're not centered in yourself and your stories. You've moved the center over to simply the present moment in and of itself, mind states in the present moment, in and of themselves. Then, when you deal with them on those terms, treating them in terms of the duties that the Buddha laid down for the four noble truths is a lot easier, makes a lot more sense.

So as you're practicing right mindfulness, learning how to shift your center of gravity, shift your focus, shift your center to the body in and of itself, the mind in and of itself, you're putting yourself in the right spot: the spot where the Buddha was, the spot where the duties of the four noble truths seem a lot more intuitive, and are a lot easier to carry out.