

## *Right Next to Ignorance*

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The Buddha traces the causes of suffering back to ignorance. The formal definition is ignorance of the four noble truths. But you can hear the four noble truths, learn about them, memorize them, and still be ignorant.

The definition could be translated in another way: We don't see things *in terms of* the four noble truths. That's getting closer. In other words, knowledge means that you look at your experience—what's coming in through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—and you see it in terms of where there's stress, what's causing the stress, what the cessation of stress would be, and how you would practice in order to bring about that cessation.

That's asking you take on a framework that you don't normally take. The normal framework is “me in the world, encountering things I like and don't like, suffering from the things I don't like.” That's the way we tend to think about the issue.

The Buddha's asking us to look at it in a different way. With each of those ways of looking, he says there's a duty. When you see that something is stressful, you try to comprehend it. In other words, you watch it and try to understand it to the point where you gain dispassion for it, because as he defines the nature of suffering, it's clinging, which is something you do. You're not simply a passive victim of suffering. You're actively doing it. Things you cling to, things that you hold dearly: Those are precisely the things you suffer from. So you've got to develop some dispassion for them. Otherwise, there's no getting away from suffering.

As for the cause, craving, you want to abandon it. Craving for sensuality—in other words, enjoying sensual fantasies. Craving for becoming, wanting to take on an identity in this world so that you can get pleasures out of the world. And then craving for non-becoming: You find that your identity is not working well, so you want to destroy it. All those kinds of craving are to be abandoned.

The cessation is to be realized. And the cessation is defined, basically, as the abandoning of craving. So there are two layers right there: You abandon craving, and then you watch, observe, and realize that when you let go of the craving, suffering really does stop.

We develop the path so that we can put the mind in a position where it can see that happening. This is why we concentrate, taking the Buddha's definition of right mindfulness as our frame of reference. In other words, you're going to stay

with the body right here, in and of itself. You're not going to think about the body in the world, either your imaginary worlds or in the actual human world. You focus on: This is what it's like to have a body right here.

One of the ways you can do that is by focusing on the breath, simply watching it as a process on its own. As you do, you're going to see how it's connected with other events in the body and other events in the mind. But that's what you want to see: It's a process, because it's in understanding the process that you're going to be able to detect ignorance. But ignorance is elusive. It's like trying to turn a light on darkness: You turn a light on darkness, and it's not darkness anymore. You want to see ignorance in action.

As Ajaan Suwat pointed out one time, if you're going to see ignorance in action, you have to look right next to it. Now, the Buddha talks about different ways of understanding how ignorance is caused, and how it functions in causing other things. So you want to look at the causal factors right before it and right after it.

The primary explanation of the causal chain, of course, is in dependent co-arising, where he talks about how ignorance conditions fabrication. So what have we got? Right next to ignorance, you've got the breath—that's bodily fabrication. You've got directed thought and evaluation—that's verbal fabrication. And then you've got feelings and perceptions—mental fabrication.

This is one of the reasons why we focus on the breath, thinking about the processes of how the breath is fabricated, and thinking about directed thought and evaluation and the perceptions we bring to the breath, because our ignorance is right next to these things. It's conditioning these things.

You might say the path is one of really getting to know these processes really well. In the beginning, you're working *not* with knowledge; you're working on a conviction that this is going to be a good place to look. You get used to staying here, because ignorance is not going to show itself quickly. So you've got to be patient.

You can't say, "Well, I don't like doing this. My mind doesn't settle down very easily." You've got to look at the problem where it's happening. It's like that old joke about the man traveling from one island to another in the Philippines. I learned this from my Filipino foster family when I was an exchange student there. This guy's keys fell off the side of the boat, so they asked him, "Why don't you jump down in the water and find the keys?" He said, "I want to wait till we get to the port." "Why's that?" "Because the light is better there." You look where you lost the keys. You don't look where you think you'd rather look.

You're ignorant here, so you've got to watch right here. Watch your breath. The mind resists. You keep coming back. If the mind resists for a long time, you might have to find another way of getting the mind to settle down. The Buddha talks about there being a fever in the body or a fever in the mind, which means you're getting antsy and you don't want to settle down right here. Well, you find another topic. Find something you find inspiring. You might think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Think about your generosity. Think about your virtue. In times like this, you want to think about how good it has been, the times when you actually were able to carry through with the precepts when it was difficult, or you were able to be generous when it was difficult, to give you a sense of well-being.

But eventually you do want to get back to the breath, because that's right next to where ignorance is. The way you ordinarily direct your thoughts and evaluate things—in other words, the way you talk to yourself—is right next to ignorance too. A lot of times, there are conversations in the mind. You find they operate on many levels. This is one of the things you're going to discover as you get the mind to settle down. You peel away one level of conversation and you find, "Oh, there's another one." There's a conversation, and then there's somebody commenting on it. And often there's a commentator on the commentator.

You get really, really still so that you can see these things, to see: What are the various levels talking about? You want to peel these levels away until you get to one that's just basically asking the question, "What to do next? What to do next? What to do next?" It's a question. At the very basis of our experience of time and place, there's a question. You can see that, and you ask yourself, "Well, who's talking to whom in here?" That's when you're getting really close to ignorance.

Of course, there are also your perceptions—the labels you place on things—and your feelings. One of the reasons why so much attention is given to understanding feelings of pain is because a lot of your inner conversation and your inner perceptions are going to hover around pain. Which means that there's going to be ignorance hovering around them, too. This is one of the reasons why we focus right here, because all these things are right here, and they're right next to ignorance.

As you get the mind to settle down, you find some of these layers of fabrication will peel away. The directed thought and evaluation peel away after a while, and you're just with one perception of the breath coming in, going out—minimal conversation. But that requires a strong perception. As you protect the feelings, the feeling tones, the feelings of pleasure and rapture, then the pleasure gets

stronger, the rapture gets stronger. Then it gets too much. You try to tune into a subtler level of pleasure, and the rapture begins to evaporate.

It's worth noting that the levels of jhana are defined by their feeling tone. As I mentioned the other day, the Buddha doesn't say, "first jhana accompanied by pleasure and rapture." He just says, "first jhana—pleasure and rapture accompanied by directed thought and evaluation." You're with the feeling tone. But again, you have to stay primarily with the breath. You have to stay with the frame of reference. Otherwise, the feeling tone will take over, and you'll zone out. But you've got the feeling right here. You can look right here at the feeling, how you respond to the feeling of pleasure. When it seems to be too gross—even the pleasure gets too gross—then there's a feeling of equanimity. How do you understand that?

The Buddha says you want to watch right there. Some people say, "Ah, this is it! Everything's very still, very quiet." They talk about returning to your pure nature of knowing—but that's not what it is. It's just equanimity, and you can get fixated on the equanimity. But again, ignorance is right there, right nearby. So this is one of the ways you get close to ignorance so that you can see it.

There's that other analysis which is that ignorance is kept going by the hindrances, which means that if you understand the processes by which the mind gets distracted, the steps by which it changes from being focused on the breath to being focused on, say, a desire for a certain food, or a desire to see justice done here or there, to see people punished—whatever the hindrance—what are the steps between being focused here and moving? There tends to be a lot of ignorance in there as well. This is why you want to be as alert as possible to when the mind slips off, so that you can catch it. You begin to see stages in the process of moving that you didn't see before. That's another way of clearing up ignorance.

There's also a passage where the Buddha talks about how ignorance is fed by the three *āsavas* or outflows, effluents of the mind: sensual desire, becoming, and ignorance itself. How does sensual desire flow out of the mind? It's not the case that something beautiful has to come, and then you feel desire for it, or a thought of something beautiful has to come, and then you feel a desire for it. Sometimes the desire is there before you have anything specific to latch on to. That desire is going to look for something to latch on to. Can you see that happen? This current that the *ajānas* talk about so much, the current of the mind flowing out—can you watch it flow but without your going with it, either to latch on to a particular pleasure, or to latch on to a thought-world in which you might take on an identity?

So as you notice, the things you need to look at in order to see ignorance are all right here as you're focused on the breath and thinking in terms of fabrication, thinking in terms of how to keep the mind from going with the hindrances, or thinking in terms of how to watch the mind as it flows out. It's like being a hunter: You know that the animals tend to go to a certain place, so you go to that place and hang out. You're very quiet and very watchful, because you can't time when they're going to come. You can't say, "I'm going to be hungry at four o'clock, so I want something to come by here by three, so that I can have it in time for when I'm hungry."

I talked with an anthropologist one time. He was talking about how in more modern anthropology, when you're going to go study a primitive tribe, you try to learn all the skills that the people in the tribe practice so that you really understand the life of the tribe from within. And he was saying that there's one skill that educated Westerners really have trouble mastering. In fact, they can't master it at all. That's the old ways of hunting. We weren't talking about modern ways of hunting where everything's tipped in favor of the person with lots of gear. The old kind of hunting, when you had to just be very quiet, very still, but very alert at the same time: That was the problem. It's mastering that mind state that's quiet and alert, and very, very patient that modern people have trouble mastering.

But even though it may be hard to develop, that's what we've got to develop, because as I said, ignorance will show itself at these places, but it's never going to tell you when. We're all too eager, usually, to fill in the blanks, thinking we know when we really don't, thinking we understand when we don't. It requires a certain humility, the admission that "Yeah, I really don't know." If you don't admit that you don't know, you won't even have in your mind the possibility that what you *think* you know could actually be ignorance. But that's precisely what it is—the same way that the things you think will give you happiness, the things you like, are precisely the things that are causing you to suffer.

The four noble truths are not intuitive. They make sense on paper, but when you actually look at how the mind works, they go against a lot of our habits. It's in learning how to develop new habits that we can actually see things in terms of the noble truths and carry through with their duties. So it's always important that you bring to the practice the attitude that you're willing to learn.

Or as Ajaan Suwat would say, you've been acting in stupid ways, and now you recognize your stupidity. You're not going to recognize the total depth of your stupidity until you're done with ignorance, which is one of the reasons why, when people really do gain awakening, there's no pride. It's the realization of something

you should have known but you kept ignoring. But when you finally do know it: That's when there's the end of suffering. And that's all that matters at that point.

Ajaan Suwat said when you find the ultimate happiness that comes with that, you don't care about whether there's somebody there or not somebody there, whether there's a self there or no self there to experience it. The happiness is sufficient in and of itself. Questions of self and not-self don't matter. Or as Ajaan Maha Boowa would say, if you take ideas of self and not-self and try to plaster them on nibbāna, it's as if you're covering it with excrement. But when you find it, it's pure.

That's what they say. So check and see for yourself.