

The Fourth Noble Truth

November 19, 2015

As Ajaan Fuang once said, when you follow a path, even if it's one you've followed many times before, you always have to pay careful attention, because today there may be new things on the path that weren't there before. Some of them may be dangerous. Some of them can be good. If you're not paying careful attention, you won't see them. You trust the path. It's always been the same path. You've walked it many times before. There's never been a snake there before. There's never been anything else dangerous. But that doesn't mean there can't be a snake now. And if you're walking in the dark without a flashlight, you put yourself in danger.

So you want to look carefully at where you're going. At the same time, as Ajaan Lee once said, as you walk along the path, there may be little plants along the side of the path that you can eat. So you look carefully because paths can have both dangers and unexpected benefits.

These are good analogies to keep in mind as you follow the path of the breath.

You breathe in and out how many times in a lifetime? And as meditators, we've probably been watching the breath for who knows how many thousands of hours. But you never know when there's going to be something new: something good or bad in the breath, or something good or bad in the mind—because it's the mind together with the breath that makes the breath a path. The breath on its own is not a path. But the mind interacting with the breath: That's the path. And it's going to take us someplace.

When the Buddha sets out the four noble truths, pay attention to how he talks about the relationship between the first and the second, i.e., suffering and its cause. For the cause, he uses the word *samudaya*, which means something that arises together. It's what you look for when stress or suffering comes. You want to look at what arises together in the mind along with the suffering. There's a causal relationship between the two.

But in the pair of the third noble truth and the fourth, he doesn't call the fourth truth a *samudaya*. It's a *magga*: a path. In other words, the path doesn't cause the cessation of suffering to be, but it takes you there.

There are many images and explanations in the Canon that make this clear, such as the image of the raft going across the river. The raft doesn't cause the other shore, but it helps you get there. You put the raft together and you hold on tight to it as you cross the river. When you've reached the other side, you let it go because you're not there for the sake of the raft. You're there for the sake of the other shore. But that doesn't mean that you don't do a good job of tying the raft together, or that you don't hold on tight to the raft while you're crossing over.

There's another passage where the Buddha says the noble eightfold path is the path of *kamma* that puts an end to *kamma*. It's composed of a series of actions, but it takes the mind to something that's not an action at all. So the path is not a cause of the deathless. But it takes you there. This is why the image of the path is so appropriate. The path to the top of a mountain doesn't cause the top of the mountain to be, but it gets you there.

So, as we're watching the breath—and the mind together with the breath—it's a path, which means it's not the goal of what we're practicing for. But to get to the goal properly, you have to pay careful attention to the path. Watch carefully what you're doing because there may be some unexpected things here. And you want to be alert enough to see them.

The texts describing how the Buddha finally got on the right path give two different versions of which of the factors he first discovered. In one version, it was right resolve. In the other, it was right concentration. But the two go together. Noble right resolve is directed thought and evaluation together with singleness of mind. These are the factors that get you into the first *jhana*. You're supposed to put aside thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of harmfulness. When you really stick with that, the mind will naturally fall into a state where it's pulling away from unskillful things.

And you've got the breath right here to settle in on. So you direct your directed thought and evaluation to the breath. In other words, your inner chatter focuses on the breath. You want to stay right here. Of course, this builds on all the other factors of the path, but it also brings them all to fruition.

Ajaan Lee has a nice explanation, saying that when the mind is in right concentration, really noble right concentration, you've got all the factors of the path together. For instance, right view: Your directed thought and evaluation are looking at where there's any unnecessary stress bearing down on the mind, and are trying to do away with whatever's causing it. Here in particular, what in the breath is uncomfortable? What can you do to straighten it out? And once you've got a sense of ease in the breath, how can you make the most of it so that it provides a good place for the mind to settle down? As the mind settles in, which mental factors get in the way of making the concentration more solid and less stressful? What can you do to drop them?

That connects directly with right resolve: You resolve on not going back to your sensual thoughts. You're going to stay right here, and to show more goodwill for the mind by making it even more concentrated. Right speech: Your internal chatter is directed to the breath and the way the mind relates to the breath. Right action: All your activities are dealing with the breath and the mind together—adjusting them this way, adjusting them that way, to see what works in giving rise to a sense of ease. Right livelihood: You use that sense of ease to provide for the well-being and maintenance of the mind. Right effort: You stick with it. If anything unskillful comes up, you just let it go and try to keep it from coming back. If anything skillful arises, you maintain it. You don't just let everything come and go. As for right mindfulness, the word "mindfulness" means keeping something in mind. In this case, you're keeping your breath in mind. You're also keeping in mind the need to protect your concentration on the breath.

It's in this way that everything converges into right concentration, so that right concentration gathers up all the other factors of the path and makes them whole.

It's good to think of the factors coming together this way, for otherwise, if you think of them as separate, you have too many different things to think about, like a mother chicken trying to gather up a bunch of baby chicks running around. Here we have only one thing to think about, which is: How is the mind relating to the breath? In the beginning, the main focus is on the breath. When you're trying to get the mind into jhana, you don't take jhana as your object. You take the breath as your object. If you approach the breath properly, the jhana will come without your having to think about it. You simply think about the breath and evaluate the breath until you get more and more absorbed in the breath. That's when the sense of pleasure and rapture can arise as a result. Then you make the most of them.

That's another one of the duties of evaluation: As you're evaluating the breath to give rise to a sense of ease, you also evaluate how to spread that ease around in the body so as to get the most use out of the ease. The Buddha compares this stage of concentration to kneading water into a ball of dough. When you're really good, you don't add too much water or too little. All the dough is moistened, and yet there's no water dripping out. What you're trying to do is to develop a sense of whole-body awareness, and it comes best when things feel really good throughout the body. There's also a sense of singleness of preoccupation, both in the sense that the breath is the one thing the mind is focused on, and in the sense that the breath fills your awareness here in the body so that the body is one mass of breath energy.

Then as you stick with this, the relationship of the mind to the breath gets more solid to the point where you don't have to do any of the directed thought and evaluation anymore. You're just there with the breath. There's a sense of unity, of unification. The breath and the mind seem to merge into one.

You follow this through the next levels of jhana until you finally get to the fourth, where everything in the body is so well-connected—all the breath channels are so well-connected, the body is so nourished with the breath—that you don't even have to breathe in and out. It's not because you're suppressing the breath. It's simply because there's no need for it. The breath energy feels full in the body. The body's oxygen needs are apparently met by the

exchange at the skin. Because your mind is so still, the brain is using a lot less oxygen, so you can be very still right here without feeling any need to breathe.

There are four jhanas, but when the Buddha talks about noble right concentration, he adds a fifth factor. He calls it “having your theme well in hand.” In other words, you’re able to step back a little bit from what you’re doing. When you’re thoroughly in a state of concentration, you’re here planted with the breath. There’s not much thinking around that sense of oneness, aside from simply the perception that holds you there. But for the fifth factor, the Buddha gives images of a person sitting, looking at someone lying down; or of a person standing up, looking at a person sitting. In other words, your focal point shifts slightly to the mind observing your mind as it’s related to the breath. You’re pulling out a little bit, using a smidgeon of directed thought and evaluation, asking questions that build on the lessons you’ve learned about how to deal with uncomfortable breathing—how to make it more comfortable and how to make use of that sense of comfort—and applying them directly to the mind.

Now, those questions actually fall under the terms of the four noble truths. Where’s the stress? What’s causing it? What can be done to put an end to it?

So you step back a little bit to watch the mind and apply the questions of the four noble truths to your concentration. It’s at this point—where you’re looking not only at the breath, but also at the mind in relationship to the breath—that right concentration becomes noble right concentration. You’re here with one object, but you’re examining it and seeing how the mind relates to objects. What does it mean to relate to an object? What kind of relationships do you have going on? What are the activities that keep these relationships going? Even when the mind is very, very still, there are still some subtle feelings and perceptions and thought constructs hovering around the object, maintaining that relationship.

It’s when you see this that you can go on to the next stage, which is to gain some dispassion for even this state of concentration. Prior to that, you settle into the concentration and, as the Buddha says, you indulge in it. There’s nothing else you have to do, nowhere else you have to go. You’re right here. And you can use that level of involvement in the concentration to help peel away a lot of really gross defilements, because as you leave concentration, and the mind picks up greed or aversion or delusion, you see how gross those things are. The mind inclines to not go for them because it’s got a better point of view, a better perspective, coming from a better place to stay. When the defilements are clamoring for instant gratification, you see you’ve got this alternative form of pleasure, the pleasure of concentration, right here, to feed them. You’ve got this comfortable way of breathing. It’s free. It’s immediate. It’s visceral. Just that fact can help peel away a lot of the appeal of things you were attached to before.

But ultimately, you use that ability to step back to take apart the concentration itself—when you see that even in these really nice states of stillness, there’s still some fabrication going on. There’s still some inconstancy in the feelings and perceptions. Things go up and down. The level of pleasure goes up and down. The level of stress goes up and down. It’s very delicate and subtle, but it’s there. When the mind can see that and gain some dispassion for it, that’s when it opens up to another dimension, which is not right concentration or right view.

We’re not here for the purpose of right view, or for any of the other factors of the path. We use them. They’re all activities—even right view, which we tend to see as the mind’s picture of things standing apart from its activities. We see it as the theory as opposed to the practice. That’s what it seems to be, but as you actually observe your mind in action, you begin to realize that right view is not a theory apart from the practice. It’s an action and so it’s part of the practice. Everything we do when we’re talking about the Dhamma is all part of the practice. And all the factors come together here where the mind can observe itself carefully in stillness and see what’s worth holding onto and what’s not, letting go of what’s not—to the point where it doesn’t have to hold onto anything. That’s the kamma that puts an end to kamma.

So this is the path we're following right here as we're bringing the mind to the breath. It's a matter of being very observant of what you meet along the path. There may be some surprises. So even though the path is not what you're here for, don't keep glancing down toward the end of the path, saying, "Gee, when am I going to get there?" Say, "I'm right here. I've got to look very carefully right here where I'm placing my feet because who knows what's going to come up in the path tonight?" The path and the goal are two separate things, but their duties are not separate. It's in the act of observing yourself as you develop the path that you get to realize the end of suffering.

Always be alert as you walk along the path because it's the only way you get to see things you never saw before, or as the Buddha says, "to obtain the as-yet unobtained, to reach the as-yet unreached, to realize the as-yet unrealized." That's what this truth is for.