

## *Right Learning*

*October 2, 2003*

The Buddha once said that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering. The reason he taught suffering was so that he could show how to end it. So it all comes down to one thing: the end of suffering.

It's important to remember that every time we meditate. That's the one thing we're focusing on: putting an end to suffering. All the teachings, all the techniques, all the practices aim in that direction and they're meant to be used for that purpose.

So no matter how abstract a teaching may seem, it finds its place in the teaching in the way it either gives an understanding of suffering or leads to the end of suffering. And again, the understanding of the suffering is specifically for the purpose of putting an end to it.

So whether it's the doctrine of karma, the four noble truths, dependent co-arising, emptiness, it's aimed at putting an end to suffering.

Where does suffering happen? Right here in our own minds. So if a teaching applies to what we're doing right here in our mind, fine. That's the Dhamma at that point. If a particular teaching doesn't apply, put it aside. It's not what you need at that particular time. But when you put it aside, don't throw it away. Have it there handy for whenever you need it.

Like the teaching on karma: The Buddha said basically that our experience of the present moment is caused by two things—factors from the past and factors from the present moment. And particularly our intentions: past intentions, present intentions, and the result of the two. The past intention itself is gone, so all we experience now are the results of those past intentions. But then we've got the current intention and the results of that current intention.

It sounds pretty abstract, and it can be seen that way, but it also has a very immediate practical application. When you're here focusing on the breath and yet other things come in, remind yourself that the important thing is not whether or not they come in. It's how you react.

There are going to be things coming in: the mind is designed to churn up thoughts. We've been training it in that direction ever since we first learned how to speak. So it's natural that these thoughts are going to come floating through.

The problem is not whether or not they're going to come floating through, it's whether you try to catch hold of them. A thought may come in and seem to be unfinished, and you have a compulsion to finish it, tie it up neatly before you send

it packing. Well, that in and of itself becomes your present karma and pulls you away from the breath. No matter what the thought, no matter what the emotion: Just leave it as it is, unfinished.

As we were saying last night, the whole nature of the world is that no matter how you tie things up, they're always unfinished. So for the purpose of the meditation, just leave them alone.

One of the techniques the Buddha recommended for dealing with distracting thoughts is just to ignore them. They're there, but you don't have to get involved. Even if you get involved to the extent of trying to drive them away, they've got you.

It's like a crazy person coming and talking to you. You've got work to do and if you try to turn to the crazy person to drive him away, he's got you. You get involved in whatever the discussion it is that he's using to try to pull you away. Your work gets abandoned.

The way to treat a crazy person is to ignore him. He comes up and he'll say all kinds of outrageous things to get your attention, but you just act as if he's not there. You know he's there, but you don't have to get involved. After a while he'll go away.

Or you can think of it as a beggar coming to get something out of you. Again, if you pay attention to the beggar, even enough to drive the beggar away, you start feeling guilty, and the beggar can start preying on your feelings of guilt. But if you pretend that he's not there, after a while he goes away.

The important thing is what you're doing right now. You're not responsible right now for everything that comes into your mind. You just lay claim to one little corner. Be humble. Admit the fact you're not in charge of everything. You can't control everything in the mind. But you do have this one little corner where you have some control: where you're focused on the breath. Start out small.

After a while, once that spot where you're focused on the breath gets established, then it can start to grow. In the beginning, it's a struggle just to stay with that one little spot, but once it starts getting comfortable, it gets easier and easier to stay with it.

And again you don't have to feel compelled to get the best possible breath. Don't turn it into a chore. Make it something you enjoy. You're here to play with the meditation.

That was one of Ajaan Fuang's instructions that always sounded the strangest. He said to meditate playfully. Not in a desultory way, but enjoy it. Think of all the different crazy ways you can breathe right now.

It's like getting a new stereo. You turn up the treble, you turn up the bass—

not because you seriously want to hear your music all treble or all bass, but because it's just fun to see what you can do with the machine. After you've explored some of the extremes, then you start fine-tuning it until you get it to the point where it sounds just right.

The important thing is that the breath not become a chore. If breathing becomes a chore, that simply makes life that much heavier. The breath can be something you enjoy playing with. It can become your sport. Then you have something to play with all the time.

At the same time, you start learning more and more about this process of karma, exactly how what you do right now really does shape your experience. You're not a slave to past experiences.

Often we think of the teaching on karma as something deterministic or fatalistic. "I've got to suffer because of my past karma," or, "This had to happen because of past karma." That puts your whole life out of your control. But when you start playing with the breath, you begin to realize that a lot of the shaping of your present experiences is something you're doing right now. You improvise it. You cook it up fresh every moment.

That puts an element of freedom into your life. What we're doing as we meditate is to explore this freedom we have right here in the present moment to see how far it goes. As the Buddha said, when you explore this area, that's when you start learning how to put an end to suffering. That's the best use of your freedom.

So every time you breathe in and breathe out, you have the opportunity to stay with the breath, to maintain your concentration. If anything disturbs it, you can drop it.

This is how the Buddha applies the teaching on emptiness. Often we hear of emptiness as being something very abstract, very metaphysical. But in the Pali Canon, it's pretty straightforward. You look at what's there in the mind to see exactly how much disturbance there still is. Wherever there's a disturbance to the peace of mind, there's going to be suffering right there if you latch onto it, if you lay claim to it.

So instead, you focus on the area that's not disturbed. You begin to realize that the disturbance doesn't have to fill your whole range of awareness. There may be a thought chattering away in the back of your mind, but you don't have to pull it in and make it fill your whole mind. It can be just there in the back of the mind. You know that it's there, you don't deny that it's there, you admit its presence, but then you learn to work around it.

Learn to see which tendencies you have in the mind that are going to latch on

to it, and just let them go, let them go, let them go.

This technique not only helps you get into a good state of concentration but, once you're there, it also helps you to realize that your concentration is composed of many different elements. After a while, some of the elements start seeming unnecessary and they, too, become disturbances.

The Buddha talks about directed thought and evaluation in the first jhana. You direct your thoughts to the breath and you evaluate the breath. You keep working with the breath until you've done just about what you can with the breath. You begin to notice, as you do this, what factors make a breath uncomfortable. Sometimes they're physical factors; sometimes they're mental factors. If you're too anxious or in too much of a hurry to get things straightened out in the breath, that forces it too much. So it's not so much the physical process of breathing that's the problem, it's the attitude of the mind.

In fact, Ajaan Lee says at one point when you're really skillful, you find that you can feel comfortable with any kind of breath. Which shows again that the issue is less and less the physical side of the breathing, and more the mental side: your attitude toward the breathing, how you can learn how to fit in with almost any kind of breathing. This is something you learn from that element of play in the meditation.

But after a while, you've got the breath and the mind in tune enough, balanced enough so that you no longer have to keep reminding yourself to direct your thinking to the breath, you no longer have to evaluate the breath. Ajaan Fuang's analogy is of a jar of water. In Thailand they have these huge water jars that they put at drain spouts, as their way of collecting rainwater. As he said, there comes a point where your jar is full and no matter how much more water you put into the jar, the jar can only stay that full.

In other words, the breath energy in the body has been worked with, you've adjusted it, it feels good throughout the body. You get to a point where you really can't do anything more with the breath. Any fiddling around will just get in the way.

So at that point, you can drop the directed thought and the evaluation because they're now disturbances. They got you into the meditation to begin with but once you're firmly established there, then you can put them aside as a disturbance. Because they are a disturbance, you just drop them and focus in on that sensation of the breath directly, letting it fill your entire awareness.

This is how the Buddha has you apply the teaching on emptiness. Again, it's there for the purpose of putting an end to suffering. You don't have to worry about whether things are empty of self-nature or own-nature. You just see: "Is

there a disturbance here in my mind right now?” If there is, you note it but you don’t focus on it. You don’t make that the whole of your awareness. It’s just that much disturbance and you don’t have to add any more disturbance on top of it. You see what’s there, you admit what’s there, but you don’t add anything to it. In that way, the teaching on emptiness becomes a tool for coming to the end of suffering.

So when you remember the purpose of the teachings, which is to gain enough understanding of suffering so that you can put an end to suffering, then you can look at each teaching that comes your way to see how it can be used in that direction, to see if it’s appropriate for your current problem in the meditation, your current problem in the practice. If it doesn’t seem to apply, put it aside for the time being. If it does, put it to use.

And don’t forget that you’ve got all these tools. That’s what all those teachings in the Pali Canon over there are for, in all those books we have on the bookshelves. They’re for this awareness right here, right now, teaching you how to get rid of the suffering that’s right here, right now—the sense of burdensomeness, the sense of stress, however you want to translate the word *dukkha*.

So you don’t have to carry the teachings around on your shoulders to weigh yourself down, but you don’t throw them away either. They have their uses. When you read about them, think about what the use would be. When you’re meditating, if an issue comes up in your meditation, try to think about what the different teachings have taught you that might help in dealing with the particular problem you’ve got right here, right now.

That way, you take a balanced attitude toward what you’ve read, what you’ve learned—not weighing yourself down with it but not trashing it. Keep the teachings as tools in your toolboxes, so that you can use the tools to make the mind lighter and lighter as you practice, so that your understanding of what’s going on right here in the present moment becomes clearer and clearer.

Those two things go together. The greater the understanding, the lighter the practice. As the Buddha said, learning about suffering and putting an end to suffering come down to one thing. And you see their oneness right here.