

## *The Dualistic Path*

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The Buddha once said that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering—or you can translate it as stress and the end of stress. Those are two things right there. And it's an important distinction to keep in mind, because everything else in the Dhammas is based on that distinction. You can say that it's dualistic, but it's dualistic with a purpose. There's nothing inherently wrong with making this distinction. If you don't see the distinction, if you don't appreciate it, you'll have a hard time following the path. It underlies the motivation: the Buddha's motivation to teach, and our motivation to practice.

There are other distinctions that he taught as well: cause and effect; the things you do that can lead to stress and the things that you do that can lead to the end of stress and suffering. The action and result are two different things. They're connected but they're different.

This is why the essential quality we need to develop is discernment, the ability to see those distinctions. Again it's not just idle discernment. It's the discernment motivated by the realization that suffering is a burden, something we want to end. That's why we begin the meditation with that last chant on the four sublime attitudes. It starts with goodwill. Goodwill for ourselves means wishing for true happiness, in other words, the end of suffering. Goodwill for other people means wishing for their abilities to end suffering as well. The problem is that we're all suffering to some extent, we're all experiencing stress to some extent, but most of us don't realize exactly how much there is.

People who've gained awakening come back and say that the whole world is on fire. Your eyes are on fire, your ears are on fire, your nose, tongue, body, mind are on fire. Compared to the bliss of the total end of suffering found in awakening, that was the Buddha's vision of the world when he came out of his awakening experience: seeing every living being as on fire. But most of us don't really notice it. We enjoy the flames. It's one of the reasons why the Buddha taught meditation, to make you more and more sensitive to the areas where there's suffering, where there's stress that you didn't notice before. As he said, even in feelings of pleasure, there is stress.

We want to sensitize ourselves both to the distinction of the presence and absence of stress, and to the issue of cause and effect. To this end, the Buddha teaches you to meditate, to develop the sense of pleasure, ease, refreshment that can come with concentration. It's part of the path.

So as you work with the breath, allow the breath be comfortable. Try to get more and more sensitive to how the way you breathe can lead to a sense of comfort or discomfort in the body. Again, this teaches you cause and effect, stress and lack of stress. The reason we don't see these things clearly is because our mind is hopping around all the time. But if you stay with one thing consistently, you begin to see things you never saw before.

So try to stay with the breath can as continually as possible. Be sensitive to any bit of dis-ease, tightness, tension, whatever, associated with the breath. Learn to iron it out, smooth it out. And watch for the mind's tendency to jump away. Usually it's avoiding boredom or a little bit of tension. Sometimes even the slightest thing can send the mind off. Learn how to resist that habit. When you resist it, you can stay here. You begin to see, "Oh, there was that little bit of dis-ease that set the mind off, and you hardly noticed it. But this time you noticed it because you're staying here." Then the longer you stay here, the more you begin to see even subtler things in the mind. Concentration can deepen. Your sensitivities get heightened.

You get the breath as comfortable it can be, but you can adjust only it so much. Then you learn to settle down: no more adjusting, just staying one with the breath. But again, even in this sense of oneness, there is a purpose for making distinctions, because we have our old habits of how we tend to divide up the mind. We divide things up in the mind, divide things up in the body. With concentration we bring them all together, and let them sit together for a while so that things get more and more still, the breath gets more and more subtle. Finally, the breath stops. You stay with the stillness of the body, the sense of awareness filling the whole body, the still breath filling the whole body, out to every pore.

When you get there, you begin to see the movements of the mind. And now you're seeing them as they actually happen, not in terms of your preconceived notions of how they act, but in terms of what's actually happening. The mind has its perceptions about things. So what happens when you change the perceptions?

One of the most interesting ways of dealing with this issue is to focus on space. As the body gets still, the breath gets still, your sense of the boundary on the outside of the body begins to disappear. You're sitting here in a mist of sensations, like the droplets of mist outside right now. There's a vague body shape, but it's not really defined. You have the choice of focusing on that vague shape or you can focus on the space between the droplets. That doesn't have a shape at all, doesn't have a boundary. And you've just learned a lesson about the power of perception, and the sense of ease that comes with particular perceptions, the sense of

disturbance or burdensomeness that come with others. You get to choose which ones you find easier to stay with, which are more expansive, light.

Allowing the body to grow still like this is like tuning your radio. As long as there's static, you're going to miss a lot of the signal from radio station. But when you're right on the frequency, you can hear a lot of the subtleties that you missed before. In the same way, when the breath grows still, you get to see a lot of the subtle movements of the mind.

This is why concentration is so important as a basis for discernment. You need some discernment to get the mind to settle down, which strengthens your discernment. Then the greater stillness allows the discernment to be more precise.

The same principle applies to the whole practice. Tune in to a particular level of sensation, a particular level of how the breath feels, how the mind relates to the present moment, and then just stay there for a while. Get used to being there. As you grow more used to being there, it's like going back and forth over a path. The first time you go, you see some of the details alongside of the path, but if you're going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, you come to see them in a lot more detail. You get more familiar with the path until you get to know every little bit of dirt, every little tree, every little leaf, everything, because you've seen it so many times. That's when you start catching some of the things you missed before. You see the levels of stress and suffering you missed the first time around in this particular state. Then you learn to look, again: What are the activities that create that stress? You catch sight of them moving, and can let them go as well.

So this ability to discern stress and the ending of stress is something you have to develop over time until it becomes a skill. It requires all the powers of observation, focus, mindfulness, and alertness that any skill requires. It shows its worth in a temporary way as you catch sight of a particular habit in the mind that's causing stress, and you realize you don't have to use the mind in that way, you don't have to think in that way, react in that way. You can drop that habit. You have a new alternative that creates relatively less stress.

But this skill really shows its worth when you get to point where all intentions stop. All stress stops. You realize that this is what the Buddha was talking about. What he said is true: There really is a deathless. You've already touched it with your mind. You don't get there just by thinking about deathlessness. You get there by making these very precise distinctions, watching them, testing them again and again.

It's in this way that discernment leads to something that's not quite like discernment. It's like the road to Zion Canyon. The road doesn't look like Zion Canyon. But it takes you there. If you try to clone Zion Canyon in your mind,

what you end up with is that little amusement park up past Temecula. They have a clone of the Delicate Arch in Arches National Park. You've got a clone, but it's not the actual arch. You need to follow the road. And although the road doesn't resemble the real arch, it takes you there.