

## *The Focus on Suffering*

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We suffer, but we don't discern suffering. It's an important distinction. Suffering is something we all know very directly. It's one of the most direct experiences in the mind—it comes before thought. But we don't really discern it because we're not looking at it very directly. We're off looking someplace else.

In particular, there's one form of suffering that's very important to look at. It's the suffering we're causing ourselves.

We tend to be more interested in the suffering coming from other people: the things they say, the things they do, their attitude towards us. That's what gets us all worked up. And because we're paying attention outside, we don't see what's going on inside.

So we end up paying attention to things that we can maybe change a little bit but can't change all that much. And we ignore the big thing that we do have the power to change, which is how we react to feelings of pleasure and pain, and how craving builds on top of that. From our craving, we create all kinds of thought-constructs and ideas that lead to suffering. That's what we've got to look at.

Just learning to focus there: That's the first factor of what they call appropriate attention—seeing exactly where there's the suffering you're causing yourself through your craving and clinging. It's there, it's there all the time, simply that you're not looking there. You're looking someplace else.

By learning to look there and see that as important: That's the beginning of right view. It's the beginning of the path. It's what's going to help you discern the suffering.

The Buddha said that right view is sparked by two things. One is hearing someone else talk about it. The other is looking at things in the appropriate way, i.e., looking to see where you're causing yourself stress and suffering through your craving.

There are three kinds of craving that are important. The Buddha doesn't put all kinds of desire under the heading of the cause of suffering. There's actually the desire that's part of right effort, which is part of the path. That's something you've got to develop.

But craving for sensuality; craving to become this, that or the other thing; or the craving that wants a particular state of becoming that's been set up to be destroyed: Those are the three kinds of craving that cause suffering.

Now, you can learn about that by hearing about it. And you can think about it

to see where it makes sense. But the discernment that's actually going to cut through the cause is something you have to develop. You work on it, it's something you do.

After all, there are many times when you can hear something and understand it and think about it, and your thoughts are reasonable. But when you actually try to apply what you've thought through, it doesn't work. What you thought you knew you didn't know clearly enough or precisely enough, or you didn't have a sense of the right time and place.

This is a big factor in the practice: knowing what things to focus on, what things to develop, what things to let go.

The Buddha said there are four tasks connected with this whole problem of suffering. One, is the suffering itself, the stress itself, and that's something you try to comprehend: particularly to see where the clinging is and how it's suffering.

Once you see the clinging, then you can see the craving on which it's based: That craving is something you want to let go of.

As you abandon that craving, you realize the cessation of suffering.

As for the path of practice leading to that cessation, you try to develop it, you give rise to it.

And it's in the process of giving rise to it that you really develop your insight. If you're dealing in abstractions and thoughts and words, it's not necessarily the case that you've understood them properly.

This whole problem of having right opinions: The word *ditthi* in Pali means both view and opinion. Your opinions may be very right, but this may not be the time to talk about them. This is where it's important to have a sense of time and place. And how do you learn that? Through trial-and-error. And how do you learn from trial-and-error? You have to be observant.

Even though your views may be right, if you talk about them at the wrong time or try to impose them on other people, that's wrong. Remember, right view is a tool, and you don't go around carrying your saws and your hammers and your screwdrivers with you to show off to other people all the time. You put them in the tool chest. When you need them, you bring them out. You use them and then you put them back in.

Even though your screwdriver may be a perfectly good screwdriver, if you need a saw and you bring out your screwdriver, you've done the wrong thing.

So here we're working on the path. We're trying to give rise to right concentration as we focus on the breath. There are times when that requires that you do a lot of thinking and evaluation, and other times when it requires nothing of that sort at all: You have to be very quiet, very still, very uninvolved, just

watching what's coming up.

And how do you know which time is which? Trial-and-error. You have to be observant, see what's the proper time for analysis, what's the proper time for stillness.

The Buddha gives an analogy of trying to build a fire. Sometimes the fire is too big for your task so you've got to learn how to dampen it down. Other times it's not enough, in which case you've got to learn how to build the fire up.

It's the same with the factors of awakening. Some of the factors of awakening are energizing. Analysis of what's going on in the present moment, persistence, rapture: These are very energizing factors. If your mind is already scattered, it doesn't help to add more of these things. In other words, the fire's already too strong, and you keep pouring more and more fuel onto the fire, so of course it gets worse. That's when you need the more calming factors: serenity, concentration, equanimity.

Learn how to dampen the fire a little bit so as it's just right for what you need. On the other hand, if the fire looks like it's dying out, you need to add more of the active qualities. As for learning what kind of fire's just right: You can listen to other people explain the idea, but you've got to learn how to apply your own powers of observation to really know.

The Buddha always puts the onus on us. He simply points the way. And the application of his teaching, learning which teaching applies at which time: This is something we have to figure out on our own, by actually doing it, actually trying it out.

That requires that you be the sort of person who's willing to admit mistakes. If you can't admit mistakes, then you never learn. Of course, you don't stop with admitting mistakes. The next step is trying to figure out what you did wrong and to take that as a lesson. When you try it again the next time, try a new approach. Keep perfecting, keep refining your understanding through developing these qualities of mind: virtue, concentration, discernment.

Mindfulness, the Buddha said, is always appropriate—mindfulness and alertness. But as for whether the mind needs energizing or whether it needs calming down, you have to use the mindfulness and alertness to figure that out.

And then apply whatever's appropriate. In this way, your right view and your discernment gets refined through practice, through developing the mind.

The path is something you do, something you work on. Your ability to look at what you're doing, to see when it's working, to see when it's not, and to make the appropriate adjustments: That's what enables the path to develop, that's what enables it to grow—and to provide the results you want.

There's a passage in the Canon that talks about the factors that help right view yield its fruit in terms of release for the mind. There are five factors altogether: One is virtue, you actually observe the precepts. Look at the way you act; look at the way you speak. Try to be more and more skillful at those things. That fosters right view.

Listen and learn, read. That's another factor. Discuss what you've learned to make sure your understanding's right. And then there are the two factors of tranquility and insight.

As you develop these factors, you bring the mind to concentration. As the mind gets into good deep concentration, your tranquility and insight can do more refined work.

This is when you really learn how to discern suffering, even on very subtle levels.

The more advanced stages of insight, when they're talking about emptiness: It basically comes down to this ability to get the mind into a good state of concentration, dealing with all the blatant levels of suffering and stress, and finally getting the mind to settle down with a sense of ease and rapture. Then you begin to notice what's still stressful there. Try to see what you're doing to cause it. Let go of what you're doing that's causing it, and the mind will go into deeper and deeper levels of concentration.

So it all comes down to the ability to look at what you're doing to see where it's not quite right yet, where it needs improvement, and then being willing and happy to do the improvement.

As the Buddha said, one of the customs of the noble ones is to delight in developing. Whatever's needed to develop the path, you take a delight in doing that. That tends to reverse our normal allegiances: We tend to delight in whatever we like. But the Buddha says to delight in developing—in other words, working at this path.

That takes a whole rearrangement of your attitudes. But without that rearrangement, the path just doesn't get developed.

So learn to delight in letting go. Whatever it is you're doing that's causing suffering, be willing to admit it, learn to stop.

That's how the path yields its fruit.