

## *Duties*

*August 20, 2009*

There are times when the practice seems daunting: a lot of things remember, a lot of things to do. Especially when you look at your own mind and it seems to be full of all kinds of turmoil. You read about the minds of arahants—their task done, no passion, no aversion, no delusion, not suffering, no limitations—and that seems very far from the mind you're experiencing right now.

This is called renunciate grief, the grief you feel when you realize that there is a deathless goal that others have attained, but there's a lot you need to do to get to the goal and you haven't gotten there yet. But the Buddha doesn't advise you give up or not to have any goals or say, "Well, I don't want to do this," because that's even more hopeless. That gets you back into householder grief, which has no end at all.

So it's useful to think about the path in at least two different ways. One is to compare it with the suffering you'd experience if you weren't on the path. There's an image in the *Inferno*, where Dante is going through hell. On one level of hell everybody's in a whirlwind. People are spinning around, spinning around in the wind. Every now and then a face appears out of the wind. You can have brief snatches of conversation with the face and then it goes. Then the face comes back for another snatch, and it's gone again. And then it's gone for good. That's a lot of what our human life is like. We meet one another for a brief instant, then we're gone. Then we meet one another again but then we're gone again. You see their life a little bit in your life and then it gets obscured. And it doesn't end, at least if you don't decide that you want to get out.

So when you think about the suffering and the hardships on the path, realize that the sufferings and hardships of life off the path are a great deal more.

Secondly, when you think about the duties of the path, think about the duties of the world: the things you have to do in order to please other people, in order to keep your job, in order to deal with your family, deal with your friends, deal with your boss, deal with all the other things that go on in life. You realize there's no security in doing those duties at all. You get a job with a big corporation and you think you're going to be safe because the corporation is sure to last for a long time, it's too big to fail. Well, they decide that in order to not fail they have to cut their work staff. They come up with all kinds of fabrications so that they don't have to be held responsible for the cash short-flow and someone else can take the hit. That's the way of the world.

And many of the things you have to do in the world are demeaning, things you'd rather not do, but either hunger or poverty or fear of loss of your job, loss of status forces you to do them.

So think about that when the tasks of the path seem onerous. When you look at those tasks, there may seem to be a lot of them: all those foundations of mindfulness, all those noble truths, all those wings to awakening, all those recollections. It's too much to do at any one time. But the Buddha's not asking to do them all at any one time. And he doesn't force you to do them. Remember: These are tasks that you take on because you see they're worthwhile.

There's that first line in Karaniya Metta Sutta, *Karaniyam-attha-kusalena yantam santam padam abhisamecca*: This is to be done by one skilled in aims, breaking through to the state of peace. No one is forcing you to aim at the state of peace. The Buddha never set himself up as a god. But, he says, if you look at the world the way it's, if you want to find peace, then this is what you have to do.

There are basically four tasks: comprehending suffering or stress, abandoning its cause, developing the path to the cessation of stress, and then realizing cessation. That's it: four duties. Now, the way you implement them may require other tools, but think of them as just that: auxiliary tools. The four duties form the overarching framework you want to keep in mind at all times. To do this is what the Buddha called fostering appropriate attention: using the questions he asked, the teachings he gave, in a way that fits into this frame. Anything that didn't fit into this frame, he'd just put it aside.

The truths are not just lists to read about or think about. They're categories for looking at your life, so that at any one moment, you can see which duty you've got to do. You run into some stress, and you ask yourself, "Well, what is this? What category does it fall under?" The first noble truth. So try to start taking it apart to comprehend it.

When the Buddha taught the five clinging-aggregates, this is why: to help you take your suffering and stress apart, to understand what it's made of. Exactly what are you clinging to right now, *how* are you clinging, so that you feel that stress, you feel that burden on your mind. It might be form or feeling or perception—i.e., the labels you put on things—the thoughts you fabricate about things. Or you're simply holding on to the consciousness, your awareness of the six senses. There's a clinging to some of these things or at least one of these things at any one time whenever there's stress.

And you can cling in different ways. You can cling simply because you want some sensual pleasure out of these things, or you're clinging to your thoughts about those pleasures—planning, fantasizing. Then maybe your plans are realized

or not, but then, of course, things are going to change, and you realize they last for only a little bit, then they're gone. Or your plans are frustrated.

Or you might be clinging in terms of views that things have to be a certain way. And of course, they're not going to be that way all the time. Or you're clinging to practices and habits that you're stuck on: This has to be done in that way, that has to be done this way; placing a lot of obligations on yourself that are really not necessary at all; forcing yourself to do things because you say, "I've got to do it this way," but then suffering because of that. Or you can cling to ideas of yourself: Who's going to gain the pleasure? Who is the person holding on to these views? And what do those views tell you about that person?"

These are the different ways of clinging.

So the Buddha offers you these as tools for analyzing what's going on when you're suffering. Learning how to look at your suffering in these ways helps you to step back and depersonalize it, de-romanticize it. These tools, these categories, give you a handle for understanding these things.

So it's a good task trying to comprehend your suffering in those terms, because it helps to lighten the burden.

Then, when you see that these things are stress, then you look for the cause: Why do you cling to these things? Because of craving. What's the craving? What underlies the craving? You don't have to trace back through all the different factors of dependent co-Arising, but the cause is essentially craving and ignorance, compounded by the different intentions you have, and the different ways you have of paying attention, the different perceptions you apply to things: All these things come to play.

So again, the teachings are there to show you that you have a variety of tools, a variety of ways of understanding of what's going on. It's not that you have to hold all the tools in your hand all at the same time. That would be like building a house and holding a hammer and saw and the wrench and the chisel and the planer and all your other tools in your hands all at once. Of course you'd never get anything done. And fortunately, these tools the Buddha gives you are not tools that you have to carry around in your pocket or sling over your shoulder. They just float around within reach. Once you've developed them, they're there. It's as if they're floating in the air around you. You just pick one out of the air and use it, then put it back where it was in the air. In this way, you find that doing these tasks is not onerous at all. Even though you may not get to the end of suffering right now, at least you lighten your burden.

The same holds true with developing the path. The factors of the path are all good things to do: having right view, right resolve, where you have no ill will for

anyone, you're not tied down to your sensual desires, you don't want to harm anyone. You engage in right speech, right action, right livelihood; you develop the desire to abandon unskillful mental qualities and to develop skillful ones in their place. The mind gets established in mindfulness and alertness. Concentration grows with a sense of rapture and ease.

These are all good things to develop. They may not be easy but they are good. And they're certainly a lot easier than the sufferings we go through if we don't develop these qualities. When these qualities are developed, they allow us to let go of our passion for craving. All the mental worlds we create around things: When we lose our passion for them, they just stop. That will allow us to realize the end of suffering, which is the most amazing task of all.

So these are tasks you can apply right now and see results—to some extent at least—right now. As they become skills, you find that they do a better and better job of uprooting the causes of whatever suffering you've been experiencing, and getting you past the suffering. They're good tasks, good skills to develop. No one's forcing you, aside from the fact that there's suffering breathing down your neck all the time if you don't. But the Buddha didn't sick the suffering on you. It's already there. You're creating it. When you see that you've created enough, you realize that it's time to check out these tools, develop them as skills.

So even though the path may be long, and it's a gradual path, still it does have its rewards all along the way. So take heart in that. And remember it's one of the few things in the world that does come to closure. The affairs of the world never end. They just keep spinning around like that whirlwind. But the path does come to an end, a good end. That right there is a good reason to take heart.