

To Discern Suffering

June 20, 2013

The chant just now talked about people who don't discern suffering: You wonder who that might be. Everybody knows that they're suffering. You can know it, you can sense it—but that doesn't mean you discern it. To discern it means that you understand it.

The word *dukkha* we translate as suffering can also mean stress or pain.

Everybody knows pain. But to really understand suffering and to understand pain, you need to realize that there are two kinds. There's the kind that's simply inherent in the way things are, and there's the kind that's added on.

When the Buddha's talking in terms of the four noble truths, he's talking about the added-on pain, the added-on suffering: in other words, the suffering caused by the mind.

The pain of the body is something that's going to be there. Even the pleasures of the body contain their element of pain.

There's a passage in the Canon that talks about how pain is painful in remaining and pleasant in changing—assuming that it changes for the less painful—whereas pleasure is pleasant in remaining and painful in changing. When it goes away, there's an element of pain right there. So pleasure and pain are connected.

In Ajaan Chah's image, pain is like the mouth of a snake, and pleasure is like the tail. They're connected. We think we can grab on to the tail. It looks safe, it doesn't have any teeth. But if you think that way, you've forgotten that the tail is connected to the head. You touch the tail and the head's going to turn around and bite you.

In the same way, the simple pleasures and pains of the body are connected and get mixed together.

But that's not what the Buddha's talking about when he talks about discerning suffering. He's talking about the suffering that you add on through the clinging, through the craving: in other words, the act of hanging on to the tail of the snake.

That's what we're here to discern, it's what we're here to study: What is this added suffering?

As it turns out, this is the only suffering that really weighs down the mind. There can be pain in the body, but if there's no clinging around the pain, there's not going to be any suffering in the mind.

The good news is that the suffering in the mind is unnecessary. You don't have to do it; you don't have to experience it.

This is why we look into the mind, why the training of the mind has you sitting here with your eyes closed. If the suffering were caused by the world outside, we'd have to keep our eyes open to be on the lookout for what the world might do. But we sit here with our eyes closed so that we can focus on what the mind is doing, how the mind is adding a lot of unnecessary burden on itself.

The Buddha gives a long list of different ways in which we suffer. We suffer around aging; we suffer around illness; we suffer around death. Not getting what we want; getting what we don't want; not getting to live with things we like, having to live with things we don't like: Those are just plain old facts. These things happen in the world.

The suffering around that, though, comes from the clinging. This is why his summary of suffering is the five clinging-aggregates. Now, the aggregates themselves don't cling, but they're the object of clinging. Or to say that they're objects is not quite right, because they're actually activities.

Your sense of your body right now depends on the movement of the blood, the movement of the energy in the body. If you didn't have that, you wouldn't sense the form of your body at all. To see things requires that your eyes move. There's an activity in just being aware of a physical object.

Then there are the feelings of pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain.

The perceptions, the labels you give to things: saying, "This is pleasure, this is pain, this pleasure I can handle, this pleasure I can't handle."

Thought-fabrications add even more complex layers of likes and dislikes and analysis on top of things.

And then there's consciousness, your awareness of these things.

We hold on to these things. This is how we suffer.

The word for *clinging* in Pali means basically to feed on things. The image comes from fire. Back in those days, they felt that fire clung to its fuel and, in clinging to the fuel, that's how it fed itself. At the same time, it was trapped in the fuel. Once it latched on to the fuel, it was trapped there until it let go. In other words, the fuel was not trapping it. Its own clinging was trapping it.

This is the image that the Buddha wants you to hold in mind when you think about how you're suffering. You're not suffering because things are latching on to you. You're latched on to them. And in latching on to them, you've trapped yourself.

If it were simply a straightforward matter just to let go, the practice wouldn't be all that hard. But it's not all that straightforward. There are some twists and turns in the path. And one of them is you have to use these same aggregates to create the path.

As when we're sitting here and meditating right now: Your sense of the body sitting here right now, that's form. Working with the breath energy, learning to perceive the body as composed of breath energy, that's all form. There's also the perception that holds you there. So those are two of the aggregates.

Then as you stay with the breath you analyze it, adjust it, so that it's a good breath to be with, the mind can settle down. That analysing and adjusting is fabrication.

Then feelings result: feelings of pleasure, feelings of fullness, which can be pleasant or unpleasant for some people. Sometimes the sense of rapture or refreshment gets really strong to the point that people feel threatened by it, in which case it becomes unpleasant. But if you can learn to accept it simply as a sign that the mind is settling down, then your perception of it is going to change. It becomes pleasant again.

And then you're aware of all these things: That's consciousness.

So you've got the five aggregates right here.

In fact, this is the one part of the path that the Buddha specifically analyzes in terms of aggregates. You could, if you wanted to, think about the other factors of the path in terms of aggregates as well. While you're practicing, you have to hold on to these things. You don't just watch them arise and pass away, and say, "Oh, wasn't that interesting! Here comes concentration, there it goes, or here it comes again."

In the beginning, that's the way it may seem, but you can't just stay at that beginning level. You have to try to figure out: What can you do to get the mind to stay with the breath? You have to learn how to recognize when it's staying and appreciate the little bits of quiet you get. Then it's simply a matter of stitching them together.

Sometimes the quiet or the stillness doesn't seem very impressive, and you get disappointed with it. You throw it away and try to look for it someplace else. What you don't realize is that it's by stitching together all these little moments of quiet that you get a bigger sense of quiet.

What does the stitching? Mindfulness is what connects one moment of quiet to the next moment of quiet to the next. You remember what you're doing. That's what mindfulness means. You put it together with alertness, which is watching what's going on.

This is how you develop the path. As these little bits of stillness get more and more continuous, they have a change to grow. Your awareness seeps down into the body and you learn to stay here.

This is going to involve a certain amount of clinging. You have to be attached

to the meditation, attached to being quiet, in order to be able to stick with it, to feel motivated that you want to stay here longer and longer and really figure out what the problem is if you can't stay here long.

Ajaan Chah has a nice image here. Going down to the market, you buy a banana and then you come back. Someone asks you, "Why are you carrying the banana?" You say, "I'm going to eat it." "Are you going to eat the peel, too?" "No." "Then why are you carrying the peel?"

Ajaan Chah then asks, "With what you answer that person?" And his response is that you answer with desire. In other words, if you're going to figure out some discernment in how to answer that question, you've got to have some desire to give rise to the discernment.

Then you can tell the person, "The time hasn't come to throw away the peel. I need it to hold the banana and not let it mush in my fingers."

It's the same with the concentration. You hold on to it as it's developing, out of the desire to create a path. You don't want the concentration to turn into mush in your mind.

Desire is not a bad thing. All too many people think that the Buddha had nothing but bad things to say about desire, but that's not true. Under right effort he talks about having the desire to give rise to skillful qualities of mind when they're not there and then to develop them when they arise; and then the desire to abandon unskillful qualities that have arisen and to try to keep them from arising again. This desire is a part of the path. It's something good, something you should do. This kind of desire is worth developing.

So you have to use the aggregates; you have to use your desires. A lot of the things that you're eventually going to let you first have to learn how to develop and make them skillful.

That's how you create the path. After all, the path is something fabricated. It's made out of those same aggregates that suffering is made out of. It even contains an element of clinging as part of the path—which means eventually you're going to have to learn how to get beyond the path, too. But, you have to develop it first.

You can't short-circuit the path simply by trying to clone awakening. Awakening isn't anything you can clone. What you're cloning is just an ignorant image of what you think an awakened person should do.

It's like that salad dressing they used to have in Thailand. Someone from Thailand came West and saw mayonnaise someplace. They went back to Thailand and decided to recreate it. How did they do it? They made it out of condensed milk. After all, condensed milk looks creamy and white, just like mayonnaise. For years when I was first in Thailand, that's what you would get on salad: condensed

milk. They thought it was salad dressing.

That's cloning something without understanding how it's put together.

You put together the path. The path is not identical with nibbana, it's not identical with awakening, but it gets you there. It doesn't cause awakening—it takes you to the awakened state. It helps bring about the moment when you see “Okay, there is this deathless element, there is this deathless dimension.” And at that moment, you let the path go.

That's your first taste of awakening. You have to come back and develop the path some more after that, but you've learned some important things. For one, what the Buddha was talking about was really true. There is a deathless element. There is an end to suffering. You've seen it but you haven't fully entered into it.

That's the point where they say that your conviction is verified. And it's at this point that you really begin to understand suffering, you really begin to discern suffering: exactly what the mind put into it to create it, to keep it going, how the mind was burdening itself all the time.

In other words, you see it thoroughly to the point of disenchantment. You no longer want to feed on it. That's what the word disenchantment, or *nibbida*, means in Pali: a sense of having had enough of a certain food and you're tired of eating it. That's the point where the feeding stops, where the clinging stops and all the unnecessary suffering stops.

When you see that freedom from suffering, that's when you really discern suffering.

So what we're doing here is learning to look at something we've all experienced, but we're learning to look at it in a new way. We look at it really deeply. This is why the word discernment is used. You pull apart all the different threads. You get the mind really, really still so that you can take these things apart.

And as the Buddha said, once you discern suffering in this way, then you're sure that you'll be able to end it.

So everything you need to know is right here. You simply have to learn how to observe it more carefully.

That's what makes all the difference.