

## *Do You Want to Stop Suffering?*

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When you come to the practice, the Buddha doesn't ask you to make too many assumptions. You don't have to assume that you're basically good or basically bad. All you have to assume is that stress-and-suffering—the Pali word is *dukkha*—is a problem and it weighs down in the mind. It's real. And it has a cause. And there are things you can do to put an end to it by putting an end to the cause. That's it. The question is: Do you want to put an end to suffering or not? Are you willing to admit that the main problem lies inside the mind? If the answer is yes, then he recommends a path of practice.

Notice the word *path* there. You're going someplace. But it's not like going from here to the other side of the country. You're going further into the mind, and the mind's going to change as a result. And there's a goal that the path leads to. It's kind of like the road to the Grand Canyon. As you're travelling along the road to the Grand Canyon, you can't see the Grand Canyon off in the distance. It's not like a road to a mountain, where the mountain can be very clear. But you have people coming back in the other direction on the road saying, "Yeah there really is a Grand Canyon and it's worth the trip down the road."

The road itself doesn't look like the Grand Canyon. If you're coming in from the east, you may notice that the road runs parallel to the canyon of the Little Colorado river and you see, oh, there is a canyon there. It doesn't look like much, but it's a canyon. But then you finally get to the Grand Canyon itself and it's many, many times bigger than any picture you've ever seen could help you imagine. You get to the edge and you say, "Oh yeah, there really is a Grand Canyon, and it's really grand." Now if you hadn't followed the road, you wouldn't have gotten there. The road doesn't create the Grand Canyon, and your following the road doesn't create the Grand Canyon, but following the road gets you there.

It's the same with the end of suffering in the mind. There is a dimension that the mind can contact. If you dig down inside, it's there. In fact, it's there all the time. It's something uncreated—doesn't arise, doesn't pass away—and yet we do a lot of things that get in the way. What the Buddha's teaching us to do is to let go of some of those things and then do other things that make it easier for us to see, things that develop our powers of discernment. Because it's your discernment that's finally going to see this, your ability to make distinctions as

to what's skillful, what's not skillful, what's more or less pleasant, what's more or less effective in getting you to see things.

There's a basic duality there that runs all the way through the path. This comes from the fact, of course, that once you have pleasure and pain, and decide that pain is a problem, you've got a duality. When you realize that there's a cause and there's an effect, you've got another duality. These are useful dualities. You don't let go of them until you get to the threshold of this other dimension.

Now, the fact that the dimension is there means that theoretically you could see it at any time. But your discernment has to get more and more refined for you to see it, which is why the path is gradual. The awakening is sudden. Once the discernment sees this, it sees it through and through and knows for sure, without any doubt that there is a deathless. But for your discernment to get to that level of subtlety, you have to train it. That's why the path is a gradual one.

As the Buddha said, the main factor in the path—there are eight factors altogether—but the main factor is right concentration, getting the mind to settle down and be with one object with a sense of well-being, with a sense even of rapture, so that the mind can be comfortably in one place. When it's in one place, it can see itself clearly. If your mind is darting all over the place all the time, you're more interested in where it's darting to. But when it's in one place, you begin to see: How does it relate to this one thing? What does it mean for the mind to be focused on something? You can see that most clearly when it's focused on one thing. When it's playing a role in shaping its experience, it's a lot easier to see those processes when it's trying to shape one thing.

This is why we focus on the breath. It's right here all the time. It's coming in, it's going out, it's very intimate with the mind. In fact, it's through the breath that the mind influences the rest of the body and can sense the rest of the body. The breath is like a threshold between body and mind.

So take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the breathing process in the body, not just the movement of the air but also the movement of the whole body. Some of the more obvious movements are in the shoulders, in the chest, in the back, in the abdomen. But as you watch this process for a while, you begin to realize that there's a subtle level of movement that goes through the whole body. You may feel it more blatantly in some parts than in others, so focus on the ones where you feel it clearly.

Try to make it comfortable. This, too, involves some duality: This way of breathing is better than that way of breathing; this way of focusing in the mind is better than that way. You're going to be adjusting lots of things. This is called evaluation. You keep returning to the breath. If the mind wanders off, just drop

whatever it's wandering off to and think about the breath again. Get back in touch with the feeling of the breath.

Now, if you can think about the breath and evaluate it with the purpose of getting to settle down, you're developing both concentration and insight at the same time—insight into how you can create a new state of mind right here. You want to see the process of how the mind engages in what's called becoming, taking on an identity in a particular world of experience.

We do this all the time. For instance, you can imagine yourself at work. You get a picture of the world there at work and then you in that world: That's a type of becoming. The fact that you're a human being here in this human world: That's a level of becoming, too. Becoming is something the mind does all the time. But if you want to see this process clearly, you've got to become centered.

Right here, the world right now is going to be the world inside your body. How does the body feel from within? Where are you in the body? Can you see the breath clearly from where you are? If not, move around. You can move the focus to any spot in the body where the sensation of the breathing is clear and you have a sense of ease, a nice kind of energy right there. Once you've got that sense of ease, think of allowing it to spread so that it fills the whole world of your body right here.

What you're learning is that the mind can play a role in shaping its experience right now, and if it pays careful attention to what it's doing, it can make a really nice experience. As the Buddha says, if you stay with this one object and evaluate it with more and more attention and more and more care so that you can see more subtle things inside, then the mind gets a greater and greater sense of confidence in settling down here. If the body doesn't feel comfortable from within, it's ready to leave at any time. Or if the sense of comfort is gross, it may be interesting for a while but after a while it gets tiring. So if you feel that things are a little bit gross inside, try to make your attention more subtle and think about subtle energies in the body, wherever you may feel them—anything that you may find refreshing, soothing. You're the one who gets to choose what feels good right now.

So you're learning an important lesson about kamma, that kamma is not just results of things you did in the past and you don't always have to wait a long time for the results to come. You focus on the breath right now and, if you do it with skill, you can get good results right now. You're shaping this experience. It's a kind of becoming but it's a kind of becoming where you see what's going on clearly. This is what makes the difference. With other types of becoming—when you decide you want to be this or want to be that or you'd rather be here

or be there—you're more focused on the world or the identity you want, and you're not so focused on what is it that drives you, what's going on, what are the processes by which this happens. But by getting still and taking these processes apart, you begin to realize how the mind creates stress for itself and how it can learn not to create stress. So you settle down right here.

The work of the evaluation is like coming into a house and seeing that it's a mess and so you straighten it out. The more you straighten it out, the more pleasant it's going to be to stay there. You may say, "Gee there's a lot of work in straightening it out, why don't I just lie down here in the corner?" You could do that, but what if there are ants and centipedes and mice and old needles from coke addicts who used to be in the house? I mean, all kinds of things can be in the house. You might say, "I'm perfectly fine right here where I am, this is okay." But is it? If you're lazy, you say, "I don't want to do any more work on it, I'm not going to clean out this house." Well, you can learn to live in an unpleasant house but you're not going to stay there with any sense of well-being.

So you do the work. That's what the evaluation is: the work that helps you settle down. You find that the body becomes a nicer and nicer place to stay. You finally get to the point where you've cleaned it out thoroughly and you don't need to clean out anymore, aside for a little bit of dusting here and there maybe. That's when you can really settle in. The breath feels fine all over the body, and there's a strong sense that you can settle in with a sense of ease. If it's not comfortable enough, the mind isn't going to want to settle in.

But there comes a point when you have to tell yourself, "This is as good as it's going to get and it's plenty good enough." You can relax more thoroughly into the body; there's less sense of tension. The mind moves to a deeper state of concentration. There's a strong sense of energy, well-being, and all you have to do is stay focused. Your inner vision doesn't have to move around to the different parts of the body. You can be focused at one spot but you're connected to everything. It's like being a spider in a web. The spider's in one spot but if there's any little movement in the web, it knows what's going on. Everything is connected. From then on, that's really all you have to do: Just maintain the sense of being centered in the body.

Now, the breath may grow more refined. It may even get to the point where it feels like it's not moving at all. As long as you're fully aware of the body, you're fine. The body will breathe if it needs to. You don't try to stop it from breathing. Some people hear that when you get into deep concentration the breath stops, and so they hold the breath, which doesn't help at all. You allow it to stop on its own. The strong sense of energy at some point may get a little bit

tiresome, so you try to focus in on a more subtle level of energy, like going under the radar or like tuning into a different radio station. You've been listening to a lot of rock for a while which was fine but then you get tired of that. You want something more soothing, so you change the frequency. And the different frequencies are all right here, like the radio waves in the air. We've got Tijuana right now, we've got Los Angeles, all coming through the meditation hall. It depends on which frequency you tune into which one you're going to hear.

So you try to tune in to the subtlest, most soothing level of energy you can find in the body. As the focus gets more subtle, the breath gets more subtle. And, as I said, even if it seems to stop, you're fine. There's an oxygen exchange going on at the pores of the skin, and if the mind is really, really still, that'll be plenty for you.

When you get good at this, you can begin to observe the mind as it goes in and out of the concentration, and you begin to see subtle ways in which the mind is shaping things—when it's doing it well, when it's not doing it so well. Then you can carry that sensitivity into other areas of your life. You learn to watch your mind more carefully. This ability to watch your own mind in action: That's the discernment that allows you to dig deeper and deeper and deeper inside, always with that thought in mind: There's something that you're doing that's causing stress, that's weighing down the mind, and you don't have to do it. You want to look for it.

It's like peeling layers off of an onion. You peel one layer and, ah, there's another layer. You peel another, ah, there's another layer—but you finally get to a point where there are no more layers. This is the path inside. And it goes somewhere special. You find that once you run out of the layers, there really is what the Buddha said there is. There is a deathless dimension in the mind, something that doesn't die. It's not born, it doesn't die, it's just there. And it is the end of suffering, the end of stress.

Training the mind here in concentration is what enables your discernment to see that. Without this training, you're not going to see it. It can be there all the time but you're not going to get any benefit from it. It's like knowing there's gold under your house, but if you don't dig down, you won't find it. Or like knowing that there's fresh water in salt water, but if you don't distil it, you never get to drink the fresh water. If you say, "Oh there's fresh water in here, I might as well just drink whatever I've got," you're going to die from drinking the salt water.

So, again, it's the same principle as being willing to clean out the house so that you can live here comfortably. You want to dig down to find the gold and

get some use from it, you want to distil the sea water so that you can get the fresh water that's there.

Assuming that you want gold or you want fresh water. Again, as I said, the Buddha doesn't ask you to assume very much, but you can ask your mind: Are you satisfied where you are? Or do you want to foster the imagination that allows for the idea that there's something better and you're willing to do the work? If the answer is Yes, then this is the path.