

Working from the Inside

April 2, 2015

The Buddha once said that all he taught was suffering or stress—the Pali word is *dukkha*—and the end of suffering and stress. Now, where do we experience that? It's in a part of us that no one else can touch, no one else can experience. Each of us has our own sufferings. We can see other people suffering and that can have an effect on us, but we don't really feel their suffering. It has an effect on us if we let it, if we have a sympathetic reaction. But, it's our choice as to whether we want to let that suffering in. And even then, our sympathetic reaction is not the same thing as their suffering. The only suffering we really feel is the suffering right here.

The end of suffering is also experienced right here. And the path to its end is something we develop in the same part of our awareness—the part that nobody else can know. Think of those questionnaires they have about people's level of happiness. They think they've learned something if they can pin it down that Denmark has an 8.4 average level of happiness, whereas Poland has a 6.7, something like that. But it's all very subjective. When you say, "How does your level of happiness rate on a one to ten?" what is there about happiness you can measure? And how can you take your one-to-ten and measure it against somebody else's one-to-ten?

This is where we run up against something really important, which is that our problem is inside us, and other people's problems are inside them. We can offer advice. We can try to help them in various ways. But the ultimate problem of how much each of us is suffering is something that depends on our own level of skill, which is why this is a path that each of us has to follow for him or herself.

But it's not a selfish path.

You think about people you've known and loved that you see suffering, but they get to a point where you can't reach into them. There's nothing you can do to help. It's very frustrating. That gives you a very strong sense of how independent we are. There's a chasm that you can't cross. But if other people see us suffering, it's going to be hard for them, too. They sympathize but they can't get across that chasm. So as we learn how to take care of ourselves this way, it means that we're going to be much less of a burden on other people.

So our work here is not selfish work. The more we get results, the more we're able to offer advice to other people, which is the best thing we can do. This thought gives you motivation. Your views, your intentions: These are things you

generate yourself. The same applies for other people. They generate their own. You can push and nudge and try to help them here and there, but again, they can resist if they want to. They get sometimes so deeply involved in their own suffering that they can't pay attention, even when they want to pay attention. So you have to work on what you're responsible for.

You can hope that the good energy that comes from that, the insights that come from that, can be spread out. But your first priority is what you're doing right here, right now.

As you meditate, you're working on three qualities. There's alertness: seeing what you're doing as you're doing it, along with the results of what you're doing. Notice that. It's activities of the mind that you're looking at. It's not that you're just openly aware to everything that's coming through the senses in the present. You want to focus specifically on what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. This is a teaching on action. Meditation is about action, the actions of the mind.

And you have a purpose. This is what ardency is for. It includes your motivation, your desire. This is where desire is a good thing. You decide to do this skillfully. You *want* to do this skillfully. Then there's mindfulness, which is your ability to remember, to keep something in mind. As the mind gets more quiet, you have better access to lessons you've learned from the past that you might apply right now.

So apply them to staying with the breath. Everything else you can put aside right now.

How do you get your mind to settle down right here? If the mind is going to have any measure of success in this path, you have to get it under control. You give it something to do and you stick with it. You keep watch to see when it's going to start slipping off. It has its telltale signs. There's a slight of loosening in your concentration, or there's a little bit of questioning or antsiness. Sometimes the decision to leave is made before you actually leave—on an underground level. You want to be alert for that. If you catch the mind loosening up like that, try to breathe in a way that's really comfortable so that the mind gets more interested again.

Or do new things with the breath. Think of the breath as coming in different parts of the body that you don't normally think of it. If there's a pain in a particular part of the body, you may want to see what the breath can do for the pain. If you know that one of your organs is malfunctioning, see if you can direct a little extra good, healthy breath energy there. In other words, give the mind something to do in the present moment that keeps its interest up. At the same

time, you're making the body a more pleasant place to stay so that it's easy for the mind to settle down and to stay settled down once you've done the basic clearing out work.

Ajaan Lee makes a connection between these three qualities of alertness, ardency, and mindfulness on the one hand, and then the factors of getting the mind into jhāna on the other. The jhana factors have a list of five: directed thought, evaluation, singleness of preoccupation, pleasure, and rapture. As he pointed out, the pleasure and rapture are the results. You want to focus on the other factors first, because those are the ones you do.

Directed thought relates to your mindfulness. You're remembering to stay right with one thing.

Evaluation deals with your ardency. Try to make this a good, comfortable place to stay, doing what you can if you find that things are difficult. There may be parts of the body that don't seem to want to open up; breath channels that seem blocked. What can you do to work around those blockages? What can you do so that the parts of the body that seem tight and constricted will trust you enough so they'll open up?

They're like wild animals. If you stare at a wild animal, it'll run away. If you glance off to the side, it'll think you're not noticing it. It'll just stay right there. You can actually observe it through the corner of your eye. You might want to try that approach. If there are areas of tightness in your throat and your chest, don't focus straight in on them. Focus off to the side a bit. Let the breath energy gradually, gradually, gradually work around them. That's evaluation.

Then your alertness, when it's really steady, develops into singleness of preoccupation. You're with one thing and you watch that one thing.

This is how mindfulness practice, which those first three qualities come from, melds into concentration practice. When everything comes together, then the pleasure and the rapture are right there. Rapture may be too strong a word sometimes. The word refreshment may seem more like what you feel— although there are times, if the body is really starved for energy and you get more snugly together with your object, that the sense of being refreshed gets really, really rapturous and strong. But again, that'll vary from session to session.

What's important in this kind of practice is that you've got tranquility and insight working together. Tranquility is the directed thought and singleness of preoccupation. The insight comes from the evaluation which, remember, is related to the ardency.

This is another one of Ajaan Lee's insights. He said the wisdom faculty in all this comes from your desire to do it well.

Wisdom is not just knowing the names for things or being able to analyze things. You're trying to understand things through doing—through doing things skillfully. This is why the Buddha talked about a level of understanding that comes not just from listening or from thinking but from actually developing qualities of the mind. Your desire to do this well is the beginning of that kind of wisdom. As you learn how to do it with more and more skill, that's when your wisdom and discernment start to show their results.

This is why one of Ajaan Lee's favorite types of imagery has to do with skills: the skills of weaving a basket, carpentry, sewing things, making tiles, taking silver and making objects out of the silver.

It's in the doing that you learn. Then as you do these things, you learn about the qualities of mind that shape your experience in general. It's what the Buddha calls fabrication. Bodily fabrication is the breath. Verbal fabrication is the directed thought and evaluation. Mental fabrications are the feelings and perceptions. The perception here would be the mental image you hold of the breath. You can try playing with that.

And you give rise to feelings of well-being. If you don't, you have feelings of dis-ease. Try to turn those areas of dis-ease into ease: That's what the ardency and the evaluation are for. As you learn how to shape the state of concentration, you begin to become more and more sensitive to how you shape things throughout the rest of the day as well. You realize you're not here simply passively taking things in and then reacting. You're proactive. So you want to be sensitive to how you're shaping things, so that you can do it skillfully.

All these things come together so that you can shape this part of your awareness that you experience and no one else can see or know or touch. You learn how to approach this part of your awareness from within. The problem lies within. The solution lies within as well.

The Buddha wasn't the sort of person who would say that the reason you're suffering is because there's a chemical imbalance in your body, so we'll work with the chemistry. Or you're suffering because society is one way or another, so we have to straighten out society. Those things can contribute to the way you make yourself suffer, but the real issue is the level of your skill—approaching consciousness from within; approaching your experience from within. When you learn how to do that well, then you've taken care of what you're responsible for. And this part of your awareness no longer becomes a source of worry for other people. When you see someone else suffering, you'll have real knowledge to offer them, knowledge that you've learned from the doing. You can give them advice on how they do this, too. It's the best gift you can give.

