

Fourth Truth, First Duty

July 23, 2023

When the Buddha gave his first sermon, the topic was the four noble truths. But he didn't start with the first truth. He started with the fourth, the path. He showed that that was what the truths were all about. That's the purpose they served, as part of the path to the end of suffering.

But you can also take it as meaning that of the different duties for the truths, the duty for the path is the one you work on first. You try to develop it—all the factors, right view down through right concentration—and in doing so, you're getting yourself ready to perform the duties for the other truths: to comprehend suffering, to abandon its cause, and to realize its cessation.

So focus on what you're doing right now to develop the path. Right now we're working on right mindfulness, right concentration, right effort. You find a topic, like the breath, and you stay focused there. Keep track of the breath coming in, going out. In the beginning, you simply discern how the breath is going in the body right now, whether it's long or short, but then you train yourself. You train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. You train yourself to calm what the Buddha calls bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath. He calls it that because he wants to call attention to the fact that there is an intentional element in how you breathe.

That's going to play a huge role in the rest of the breath meditation, because you can then intentionally train yourself to breathe in a way that feels refreshing. Train yourself to breathe in a way that feels pleasant. Train yourself to be sensitive to how feelings and perceptions play a role in influencing your mind. In this case, it would be the feelings of pleasure that you're trying to create. And then the perception, the image of the breath that you hold in mind to stay with the breath.

You can imagine the breath, picture it to yourself, in any number of ways. Think of it as the energy flowing through the body. After all, the Buddha lists breath, not as the tactile sensation at the nose, but as part of the wind element in the body itself. That's energy, the energy that allows the air to come in through the nose and it allows it to go out. Where do you feel that energy? If you can perceive it as a whole-body process, going down through all the nerves and blood vessels, that allows the sense of ease and fullness, ease, and refreshment to spread throughout the whole body. It opens up channels in the body that otherwise you may have forced to close because your imagination couldn't think of them as possibly being open.

Then you calm the feelings and you calm the perceptions. In other words, you try to see which perception of breath is most calming to the mind, which feelings most calming to the mind.

If you have any background in what the Buddha said about the first noble truth, you begin to realize you're dealing directly with some of the aggregates right here. You've got the form of the body, which is the breath. You've got the feeling of pleasure that you're trying to create. You've got the perceptions, the mental images, the mental labels you hold in mind, and the process of fabrication: the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself as you're doing this and as you hold perceptions in mind. Those are four of the five aggregates, and then of course you've got consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

So in the course of developing concentration, you're getting hands-on experience with the aggregates. This is going to be really important because in the Buddha's analysis, suffering is clinging to the aggregates. So you're getting to know the aggregates as you develop them in the right direction. It's one of the ways in which developing the path helps you to comprehend suffering, which is the duty with regard to the first noble truth. You get to see what these aggregates are.

Especially when you start out, the idea of aggregates makes them sound like things. You may wonder, why is the Buddha dividing your experience up into things like this? But as you're getting hands-on experience with them, as you bring the mind to a state of concentration through right mindfulness, you begin to see that they're activities: Feelings feel, perceptions perceive, fabrications fabricate. They're defined by the activity that do. And you can begin to see how you hold on to them.

Now, for the sake of concentration, you do want to hold on to them. But an important part of both right mindfulness and right concentration is that you put aside any thoughts about anything else that has to do the world. You begin to see that those are perceptions and fabrications, too. This will sensitize you to other perceptions, other fabrications, and other feelings as you go through the day. After all, the work we do with the breath here is not meant to be done only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed. These are skills you can carry with you as you go through the rest of the day.

There are times when you're engaged in other work, and it may be too much to be engaged in the work and have a sense of when the breath is coming in, when the breath is going out, but you *can* have a general sense of how the breath energy feels throughout the body. It's a general feeling tone—and you can keep it relaxed. If you sense yourself tensing up, you automatically relax it again. Breathe through the tension. Again: hands-on experience with feelings and perceptions. You begin

to see the ways in which you really do make yourself suffer by the way you cling to unskillful fabrications, unskillful feelings and perceptions. Then you can ask yourself why.

You'll see a lot of them have to do with sensual pleasures. Sensuality in the Buddha's terminology deals not so much with the actual sensual pleasures themselves, but more with the mind's fascination with thinking about them. You begin to realize that that fascination is one of the big enemies as you're trying to get the mind into concentration. But getting the mind into concentration helps you separate yourself out from that kind of thinking, gives you an alternative form of pleasure—what the Buddha calls the pleasure of form, sitting here breathing, as you inhabit the body and sense the body from within, the whole body, from the head down to the feet. You can make it all pleasurable by the way you breathe, by the way you perceive the breath, and that gives you a good alternative to sensual pleasure.

As the Buddha said, for most of us our only alternative to pain is sensuality. That's as far as we can see things, as far as our imagination goes. The practice of concentration actually stretches your imagination, stretches the range of your experience here. And as the Buddha said further, if you don't have this alternative form of pleasure, the mind is going to go back to sensuality no matter how much you tell yourself about the drawbacks of sensuality.

So you're strengthening yourself, at the same time you're sensitizing yourself to how you put your experience together and how you have choices in putting your experience together. These are things you learn by developing the path. They help you see your clingings and your cravings a lot more clearly. And you can see the drawbacks of your cravings, which enables you to perform the duty with regard to them, which is to abandon them.

So the path comes first. When you develop the path, it gets you ready to perform the other duties with regard to the truths. So focus your attention here. Get really good at this. Develop this as a skill, and you're going to learn a lot about the mind. You're going to learn about the body and the processes by which you ordinarily cause suffering for yourself. And you get insight into how you don't have to do that anymore.

This is where your main focus should be. The Buddha calls right concentration the heart of the path, while the other factors of the path are its requisites or its aids.

So place your attention right here. Work on these skills. You don't have to know too much about Buddhist theory in order to do this, but you find that you

will learn an awful lot about what the Buddha is talking about—not only what he’s talking about, but learning how to do the duties he’s set out.

So stay focused on the breath. You don’t even have to think about right mindfulness or right concentration. Just be focused on the breath, making it comfortable, allowing that sense of comfort to spread throughout the body, then maintaining that as best you can. Then everything else you need to know will appear right here.