Comprehending Stress

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We’re trying to get the mind to settle down, with a sense of ease for the breath, because we have work to do. We want to make sure the mind is ready to do the work. You feed it, you let it rest, to make sure that it’s ready to do the work and you can do the work well. So for the time being, allow the mind to rest. Let it be nourished with the breath. Try to breathe in a way that feels really good. Start out with some good long deep breaths. Wake up the body. And as you’re breathing long, try to allow the long breath to be comfortable all the way in. If you feel any tension building up as you’re breathing, notice where the tension is. Notice, relax it and continue breathing in long. And same with the out-breath. If you find that by breathing out you’re beginning to squeeze the energy, first try to see if you can breathe out and keep relaxed. Keep a sense of fullness in the different parts of the body, allowing the breath to go out. And if you can’t do that, then try to work with the rhythm of the breath. Make the breath shorter, not quite so deep. And see if you can get the rhythm going just right. It’s like working with one of those sewing machines that require you to pump. If you get the rhythm wrong, you screw things up. So try to find the rhythm that feels just right for the body. And allow yourself to enjoy whatever feels right for you. Feelings of pleasure there are. That’s part of the nourishment that comes from concentration. One of the phrases they use in the text is of the mind settling in and indulging in its concentration. You want the mind to be well-fed and well-rested because it does have work to do. The work is comprehending stress. And we need to comprehend it because we tend to be bewildered by it. There’s physical pain, there’s mental pain. Sometimes we get them all glommed together. There’s the pain that comes from clinging. And then there’s just the pain of having a body that changes. We have to learn how to sort that out. As for pain in the mind, you have to divide that up into different types, too. Some of your mental pain comes from thinking in wrong ways. And other mental pain comes from the fact that you’re actually doing the path and part of the mind is unhappy. Which means that the part where you’re doing the path is not wrong. But you’ve got to check out what’s the part of the mind that’s not on board here. So you’ve got to learn how to sort these things out. And because our normal reaction to pain and stress is either to push it away or to run away from it, we never get a good look at it. And so it’s hard to make these distinctions, which is why we need to feed the mind and rest the mind first. So it’s in a good mood and it’s strong enough to actually sit and watch these things and not be in too great a hurry to jump to conclusions. So you do what you can to build your powers of patience, your powers of endurance. So when there’s any pain in the body, you don’t go jumping into it. Here again, working with the breath is a really useful ally because you can get certain parts of the body feeling really good. Breathing in, breathing out. If you notice any tension in the different joints or in the different muscles, allow it to relax. So the flow of energy through the body feels good. Take that as your foundation. If you’re not really ready to look into the pain yet, you can avoid it for the time being. But not by leaving the body, not by leaving the present moment. You want to stay right here. Stay with the parts of the body that really do feel good. One of Ajaan Lee’s images is of a house where some of the floorboards are rotten and some of them are good. If you’re going to lie down and sleep, you lie down on the spots where the floorboards are good. But you’re not going to be avoiding the pain forever. Simply, you need your tactics. You need your place to retreat so that when you finally do start looking into the pain, you have the confidence to know that if things get really bad, you’ve got a safe place to go. Using strength from the parts of the body that feel good, that enables you to watch the stress and watch the pain and not have to jump into it and identify with it. And in the meantime, you put the mind in a good mood so that it’s willing to look at this issue of pain and look at this issue of stress and being willing to admit that the main part of the problem comes from within, from attitudes that you’ve been holding onto. And as we were mentioning earlier today, pain actually performs a really useful function in that it alerts you to the fact that the way you’ve been dealing with your life has something wrong. Because otherwise you get totally bound up in your thought worlds and your attitudes. There’s a little knot of mental activity that’s listed in what the Buddha calls “name.” There’s perception and attention and intention. And these three tend to influence one another. Your perceptions are determined by what you want, what you’re intending. And your intentions, of course, are determined by how you perceive the world, what you pay attention to. And again, what you pay attention to is determined by what you want. It would seem like it all spins around in circles and there hardly would be a way out. And certainly when we begin to notice it, the way we’re spinning around here is causing a lot of stress. And you’re open to the possibility that that stress may be unnecessary. You’ve had enough. It’s like that old principle in AA. Some people are not willing to change their ways until they have hit rock bottom. You hit rock bottom hard enough and you say, “Okay, I’ve got to find out some other way of living here.” One of the parts of being a good meditator is not having to hit rock bottom, but noticing there’s stress here and it’s a sign something’s wrong. Either I’m doing the meditation right, but there’s part of the mind that’s resisting, or else I’m just doing something wrong entirely. And you don’t have to wait until you hit rock bottom. The Buddha’s image is of a horse. There are lots of different horses, different types of horses. There’s the horse that when you tell it to do something, all you have to do is mention the word “whip” and it goes and follows your instructions. Then there are the horses that actually have to see the whip before they’ll follow instructions. In others, you have to touch them with a whip. In others, the whip actually has to go into the skin and a little bit into the flesh. In others, it has to go all the way into the bone before they’re willing to do anything. You have to ask yourself, “Which kind of a horse are you?” Try to be the first kind as much as you can. I’ve got the example of the Buddha and all of his noble disciples, that by paying attention to stress and pain, you really can find a way out. So instead of waiting until things get really bad, try to be as sensitive as possible as you can to whatever pains are burdening the mind, whatever ways of thinking are burdening the mind. Ask yourself, “Do you really have to think in those ways? Are there other ways of thinking?” This is why we need instruction in the Dhamma. That’s the other part of the Buddha’s bewilderment. What goes along with the bewilderment with stress or pain is that you want to know, “Is there somebody who knows a way out, someone who can give me advice?” And if you look to the Buddha for advice, you’re looking in the right place. Our problem is that for most of our lives we’ve been looking in other places, at least part of the service that the Dhamma teaches. The Dhamma gives to us is that it provides us with alternative ways of thinking, alternative ways of looking at things. This is why the Buddha put such emphasis on practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. In other words, not trying to adjust the Dhamma to suit your preferences, but realizing maybe there’s something wrong with your preferences and a willingness to give the Dhamma a chance on its own terms. So it’s really important that you develop the qualities of mind that allow you to look at stress and look at pain and sort things out. Where’s the stress? That’s mental. Where’s the stress? That’s physical. Physical stress, physical pain, that’s pretty normal. Although sometimes stress in the body will indicate there’s something going on in the mind as well. So you’ve got to check for that. And when there’s stress in the mind, there’s some craving someplace, some clinging someplace. That doesn’t have to be there. That’s where you want to look for it. And if you can catch it, allow yourself to let it go. Of course, you don’t let go of the stress. You have to look for the cause. Like coming into a kitchen and seeing the kitchen is full of smoke. Most of us try to put out the smoke, and for some reason it just keeps coming and coming and coming. That’s because you can’t put out the smoke, you put out the fire. You put out the fire, the smoke stops. An important part of dealing with mental stress and mental pain is figuring out where the fire is. The duty with regard to stress and pain is to comprehend it. It’s the cause that you abandon. And until you abandon the cause, the stress and pain are just going to keep on coming and coming and coming, and keep on bewildering us and keep us searching for some way out. And with the Dhamma, as it provides us with, a good idea of where it comes from and how we can put an end to it. You think of all the things the Buddha could have talked about after his awakening. He could have spent his forty-five years talking about the wonderful things he learned in those forty-nine days of contemplating the bliss of release. He could have talked about the leaves in the forest. No, he chose the handful of leaves, dealing with the four noble truths, dealing specifically with stress and its cause, and how to put an end to it. And the duty is appropriate to those different truths—how to comprehend stress, how to abandon its cause by developing the path. Because you saw that stress and pain are the main things that bewilder people in this life. They’re the problem we have from the very beginning, regardless of what your culture is, regardless of your background. We’re born into this world and the first thing that bewilders us is the stress and the pain. And it’s this issue of stress and pain that creates all our problems, all the burdens on the mind. Once we figure this issue out, then there are no more burdens, no more problems. There’s nothing more to weigh the mind down. So always keep in mind the fact that this is the work that has to be done. And you look at your own strength to see how well you can accomplish it. If you find that you’re trying to figure these things out and you’re getting nowhere, it’s a time just to put them aside for the time being and go back to the breath. Open the mind so that it’s ready to do some more work. When it’s feeling strong and well-fed, try to get back to this issue and keep at this. And you find that ultimately everything does get sorted out and you end your bewilderment. And you discover that the Buddha was right, that when you deal with this problem, everything else gets taken care of as well. (crickets chirping)

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