

## *Unraveling the Present*

*November 1, 2000*

The trick to completing any large, complicated project is to break it down into small, manageable pieces. This is especially true when dealing with the mind. The mind is very complex. Learning how to train it, learning how to bring it to release, free it from its habits of creating unnecessary suffering, requires that we keep things as simple as possible. The more abstract we get, or the more we deal in abstractions, then the further away we get from the actual nitty-gritty of the practice, the things that really will make a difference in the mind.

This is one of the reasons why we start out with the breath. It's the most basic function of the body, and if you can't breathe properly, there's not much else you can think of doing properly, either. So we back up and learn to deal with the breath. Keep things close to home.

When we try to develop discernment, we focus on pain, and again that's something very close to home. Focus on stress. Reduce things to basic experiences that you can relate to immediately, because the more you start dealing with abstractions or big metaphysical theories, the further and further you get away from what you're actually experiencing, and the more room there is for doubt and self-delusion.

Defilements have an easy time hiding behind abstractions. We find people coming up here sometimes talking about their lives, and the more abstract they get about describing what their problems are, the more you realize they're hiding something—not necessarily from me, but from themselves. So if you want to cut away self-delusion, try to keep things as direct and as simple as possible. How's your breath going? How is your mind dealing with unpleasant things as they arise? If you keep your mind on these two things, you can cut through an awful lot of room for self-delusion.

This is why the Buddha's teachings place so much emphasis on the issue of stress and suffering, because that's something right here, and all the issues of the mind gather around that. The image we've used many times before is that it's like a watering hole. All the animals in the savannah have to come to the watering hole, so if you want to study them, just stay at the watering hole. In the same way, your thoughts about who you are and how the world is treating you, how you relate to the body, how you relate to other people, all hover around this issue of stress and pain. If you want to see them, this is where you look. At the same time, when you can reduce things to stress and pain, it's very helpful for cutting through a lot of complications,

because sometimes we hold on to our pain. We actually think it ennobles us. We're proud of our suffering in one way or another.

I've noticed some people resent the idea of translating the word *dukkha* as stress. They feel it doesn't give it enough dignity. Well, that's the whole point. Cut through your all your existential anguish and everything, and you see that it's just that. It's just stress that you create for yourself. When you look at it from that angle, it loses a lot of its appeal, which is the whole point of the teaching.

Even in the states of pleasure you create for yourself, you begin to realize that there's stress behind it. It's like going to see a comedy in a theater. If you sit out in the audience and just let yourself get carried away by the comedy, laughing at all the jokes, you have no idea of how much effort goes into it, how much sweat goes into it, how much stress and strain is weighing on the people who are producing the comedy. If you go back behind stage, you begin to get some idea of this, and after a while it becomes not so funny after all.

It's the same with all the elaborate things we create in our mind. They entertain us, they impress us, whatever, but if you just look at the process of mental creation, you begin to realize how stressful it is, how much make-believe goes into it, and how it doesn't provide the satisfaction that you would normally hope from it. The whole purpose of this analysis is disenchantment and dispassion, because it's only through being disenchanted with these things that you're willing to let them go and start looking for something better.

This simple insistent question is what drives the practice all the way along the line. When you're dealing with concentration, it morphs into questions like: Is your mind really still? Is it really solid? Is it really centered? Then, when you start looking at the rest of your life from the point of view of that concentrated mind, look for the stress, look for the impermanence, look for the extent to which these things are not under your control.

Ultimately, you'll turn those same tools around to analyze the concentrated mind, but don't be in too great a hurry for that. Hold on to that state of concentration. Hold on to your object, whether it's the breath or one of the more formless aspects, like the sense of space or the sense of consciousness, depending on where you are in your concentration practice.

You want to maintain that, keep it going, because it's your tool, your fulcrum point for prying loose a lot of other attachments. You look at the pleasure that you used to get from outside things and you begin to realize that there's not much real pleasure, not much essence to that at all.

Think of all the pleasures you've felt in the past, all the sensual pleasures you've struggled

for: Where are they now? They're gone. The Buddha compares them to dew on the grass. They're there for just a moment and then gone. What they leave behind, though, is a hunger.

We try, as we say, to take the bad with the good, which means that we try to cover up the bad as much as possible from ourselves, but the Buddha says, "Don't cover it up. Look at it for what it is." After all, denial is a form of stress as well, and it prevents us from knowing anything better.

So once the mind is still and you feel it's time to look at the rest of your life from that perspective, look for that issue of inconstancy and stress, to give you the proper perspective on things: *proper* in the sense of leading the mind to release. Always keep this in mind.

The Buddha is teaching us skills to bring the mind to true freedom. He's not the sort of person who wanted to just go out and badmouth the world and say, "Well, this isn't good enough and that's not good enough," without giving us something better. He says, "Look, there's something better than this." These are the pleasures you've been contenting with yourself for many, many lifetimes, but they don't give any real contentment. And in the course of trying to find them, you end up doing and saying things that you're later going to regret, that you sometimes can't be proud of.

All the stupid and selfish and cruel things we do in the world are because of our hunger for pleasures we've had in the past. We want to have them all over again. So learning to focus on the stressful side of these things, on their drawbacks, is what encourages us to admit that there must be something better than this, and to be willing to let them go to look for that something better. That's basically what our practice is about—developing the skill to find what's better in the mind.

I mentioned this afternoon about how, in the old days back in ancient civilizations, they talked about two kinds of knowledge: scribe knowledge and warrior knowledge—not warrior in the sense of macho, but in the sense of someone who has developed skills to use in difficult situations. Warrior knowledge is the kind of knowledge we're working on here.

Scribe knowledge just tells us definitions: "This means this, and that means that." It can describe things and it tends to get involved in an awful lot of abstractions, which just pull us away from where we want to be.

Warrior knowledge has a purpose in attaining a particular goal by developing skills. That's what we're working on here—and the skills are basic. The Canon tells stories of seven-year-old boys and girls becoming arahants. So it's not a question of mastering a lot of complicated thought processes. It's actually a process of learning to strip things down into the real basics

and not letting yourself stray far away from them. As I said, when things are kept simple, there's very little room for self-delusion. When they're kept in the area of immediate experience, there's very little room for doubt.

The breath comes in, you know it's coming in; the breath goes out, you know it's going out. There's pain, you know there's pain; there's no pain, you know there's no pain. When you keep it on this level, there's very little opening for confusion, deception, and all the other abstractions that keep us confused about where we want to go and what we want to do, what's really worthwhile in life.

So if you find yourself wandering away from the breath, ask yourself, "Where are you going? What are you looking for? Why are you looking for trouble? Everything you need is right here." Remember, the Buddha gained awakening right here at the breath.

When you're concentrated on the breath, all the types of fabrication the Buddha talked about are right here. Remember that the whole purpose of discernment is to see into the process of fabrication. There are three kinds. There's bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication.

We go down the list.

Bodily fabrication is the breath. Well, that's right here.

Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation, because those are the two mental qualities you need in order to speak. The basic structure of sentences: Directed thought points to the subject of a sentence. Evaluation describes the subject, talks about it. Both of those activities are right here. You're directing your thoughts to the breath and you're evaluating the breath. Then there are mental fabrications, feeling and perception, and those are right at the breath as well. There's the feeling of pleasure or pain, or the neutral feelings that come with the breath. And then perception: Those are the labels you put on things when you say, "Okay, that feels good. That doesn't feel good." All these things are right here. The closer you can stay to being right here, the more clearly you see them, and you realize that these are the basic building blocks of everything else you experience.

When you comprehend the basic building blocks, then the other things are easier to understand as well. When you take these things apart, that takes everything else apart as well.

So always be careful not to wander away from what's simple and direct, what's immediately right here. It's because we overlook what's immediately right here and look at other places that we're so confused. If we can see how all those outside things reconnect right back here, then it's a lot easier to unravel them.

This is why there's so much emphasis on coming into the present moment. It's not the purpose of the practice to get to the present moment. The present moment is part of the path. Come into the present moment so that you can see things and start unraveling all your confusion, unraveling all your attachments and clingings by reducing them to things that you can look at directly. Then you'll realize, "This isn't anything worth hanging on to." When you can start unraveling things like that, then things that are better begin to open up.