

## *To Comprehend Suffering*

*July 11, 2008*

That phrase in the chant just now—“those who don’t discern suffering”—sounds very strange. After all, we see suffering all around us. Someone would have to be very anesthetized not to see it. But even though we see it and feel it, we don’t really know it. In other words, we don’t understand it.

It hounds our lives. And we spend so much time fighting it off that we don’t really see it for what it is. We have lots of misunderstandings about it.

This is why we practice: to understand it. Because once you understand it, you can go beyond it.

First you have to admit that it’s there, because suffering sometimes comes from places where we don’t want to see it: places where we look for happiness, places where we look for pleasure, where we look for security. We feel that if we admit that there was suffering or stress in those things, we’d start to despair. So that’s one reason why we don’t see it, don’t understand it. We don’t want to admit that it’s there.

Other times, it’s simply because we’re so busy pushing it away. It’s like a problem child. If you keep driving the problem child out of the house, you’ll never understand the problem child and you’ll never solve the problem of the child. You’ve got to spend time with the child.

In the same way, you’ve got to spend time with suffering and stress so that you really understand them.

We need tools in our practice, because it’s very hard to overcome that basic raw reaction, which is to push it away or to run away from it. This is why we develop the path of virtue, concentration, and discernment. These are the tools we can develop that can enable us to understand suffering.

Years back, I was involved in a psychology experiment at Oberlin. They had you put your hand in a bucket of ice-water. And there were three groups: The first group was told to pull your hand out as soon as it hurt. The second group was told to keep your hand in there as long as you could. And the third group was told, “Put your hand in the ice bucket and then imagine that the cold of your hand in the ice bucket is being transferred to the other hand, and the warmth of the other hand is being transferred back into the hand in the bucket.” They found that the people in that third group could keep their hands in the bucket much longer than the others because they had a way of dealing with the pain. They weren’t left defenseless.

This is a lot of what meditation practice is, techniques for defending the mind. It teaches ways of dealing with the pain, dealing with the suffering, so that when you face it, you're not totally overcome by it. You don't feel threatened by it.

The first step is to develop your powers of mindfulness and alertness, as when you're focusing on the breath. Because when you're face-to-face with pain and suffering you need to remind yourself of the fact that it's something there right now but it's not always there. It hasn't always been there; it's going to go away at some point. And you do have ways of approaching it so that you don't get overcome by it.

You've got to keep reminding yourself of these things. If you can keep that in mind, you can overcome your knee-jerk reaction of wanting to push it away or to run away from it. This is why you develop mindfulness, to remember these things.

Then you want to develop your alertness so that you can see exactly how the mind is acting and reacting around the pain, so that you can catch it when it's forgotten that its purpose for being here in the present moment is to understand these things. When it's maintaining that intention, you want to be alert to that as well.

This is why we practice with the breath. It develops powers of mindfulness and alertness, and it also gives a way of understanding the pain so that we can separate ourselves from it.

Some of the forest ajaans talk about the fact that when there's a pain in your body, you can take that as your practicing place. Because pains in the body are a lot easier to observe than pains in the mind.

The principles are the same, but first you practice, say, with a pain in your knee or a pain in your waist as you're sitting here. It seems that the waist *is* pain or the knee *is* pain. But you can look at the body and the pain in a way where they are two separate kinds of things.

Body is what they call the four properties or the four elements, *dhatu* in Pali. We're not talking about chemical elements. We're talking about elementary feelings or elementary sensations.

There are four. There's the movement of the energy, there's the solidity, there's the warmth, and then there's the coolness or the liquidity: wind, earth, fire, water. That's how you know you've got a part of the body right there.

Now, the pain is a different kind of sensation. It's none of these four elements. It's a different kind of thing, but we tend to glom them together.

Say there's a pain in your knee. It gets glommed onto the solidity of the knee so that it seems like the pain is really solid. But if you can learn to look at your knee in such a way that you can see, "Oh, that's the energy, and this is the warmth,

and this is the liquidity, and this is the solidity.” You see them as different types of sensations. Then you can separate them out from one another.

Well, the pain is something else as well. You begin to notice: The pain’s not nearly as solid as you thought it was. It moves around a lot. In just keeping that sense of the separateness of the physical sensation as opposed to the actual flavor of the pain, you’ve learned how to separate things out. And in so doing, you separate your mind from the pain as well. You can step back from it a bit.

When you can step back, that’s when you can really watch it, to understand it: how it flares up, how it calms down. Then you begin to watch the mind. What did the mind just do when it flared up? Not in reaction to the flaring up—what did it do to *cause* the flaring up? Then, when it calmed down, what did the mind do at that point? What’s the connection? You can see cause and effect right here in the present moment.

In Thai they have a phrase for this, “where things arise together at the same time and pass away together at the same time”: *koed kap dap phrawm*. There’s a mental movement and then it’ll have an immediate effect on the body, how you sense the pain. Then, when that movement dies down, the pain dies down. You want to see that.

What was the movement? Usually it’s a perception: the way you label things, saying this is this and that’s that. You see how that labeling creates a bridge between the physical pain and the mind. This insight teaches you a lot of lessons on how you cause unnecessary pain and suffering for the mind. It’s through your perceptions.

It also gives you a sense of how you come to discern the suffering as opposed to simply suffering from it—how you learn to get the mind really, really still but alert at the same time.

Ajaan Khamdee, one of the forest masters, compares it to being a hunter. When you go out to hunt, you have to be very still and very alert—and those are two qualities that are difficult to develop together. Because for the most part when we’re still, we tend to get drowsy and drift off and fall asleep. When we’re alert, we’re nervous. What we’re trying to do is to develop a state of mind in which you can be very still and very alert at the same time.

This is another reason why we work with the breath energy in the body. Find ways of breathing that make the body a much more comfortable place to stay, so that it feels like the mind can just settle down and be really snug with the body here in the present moment.

We tend to be leery of staying with the body because sometimes we focus on the body and there’s a pain here and a discomfort there and we don’t like it. And

the mind is immediately ready to go off and create an alternative world for itself where it can think about other things and just drop the body for the time being.

This is one of the reasons why we don't discern suffering: We keep running away into our other little worlds. So we've got to come back and stay with this world of the body.

Thinking of the breath energy in the body gives you a way of approaching this mass of sensations we have here—learning how to tinker with it a little bit to see what would feel better, what you would like to sit with right now.

There those instructions in *Keeping the Breath in Mind*: That's one way of thinking of the breath energy in the body.

But if you read some of Ajaan Lee's other writings, you find he had lots of different ways of conceiving the breath energy, picturing the breath energy. Sometimes he'd think of breath energy coming in a solid flow of energy from the soles of the feet up the legs, up your backbone. And then there was an alternative one starting around the navel and coming up the front of the body. Or you can think of the breath energy going down.

Hakuin, a famous Zen monk, had a problem that he called "Zen sickness," in which the energy of his body tended to get pulled up into his head. So he had to think of a big glob of butter sitting on top of his head and melting going down the body to bring the energy back down.

So it's perfectly legitimate to picture the energy in the body doing different things. Having that picture and holding it in mind, which is a way of developing mindfulness, sends a signal to the body so that it can breathe in a different way. The energy can move in a different way because you allow it to happen. You conceive of it simply as a possibility and sometimes just that much is enough to allow it to happen.

When you've found a good way of relating to the energy in the body, then it's easier for the mind to settle down, settle down.

Then it doesn't have to do any adjusting. It just stays right there. If the body's going to breathe, the body's going to breathe on its own. You don't have to do any more breathing. You don't have to force the breathing for it.

In the beginning, it takes a little bit of adjustment, but ultimately when you feel just perfectly balanced with the body, the way you focus on the body feels just right. You don't have to do anything. Just stay right there. If the body needs to breathe, it'll breathe. If it doesn't, it won't.

That degree of stillness allows the mind to rest up, gain its bearings. After a while you can start using it to look at things more clearly.

But if you can, allow it to rest first so that it can develop a good sense of good,

strong well-being. Because when you approach the problem of suffering and stress from basically a good mood in the heart, a mood of good humor, you tend to see things a lot more clearly.

If you're in a bad humor, you miss a lot. You're suffering because of this, this isn't right, that's not right. And all you can think about is how much you want to change things—which again is like pushing your problem child out of the house.

Try to come to the whole issue with a sense of good humor: how there is suffering but it's not the end of the world. There's pain but it doesn't have to overcome you. If you're coming from a better place, then you can see things more clearly.

So pay some attention to how you experience the energy in the body, in what ways you can conceive of it: flowing up, flowing down, coming from the center of the body, coming into the body through the pores of the skin, thinking of the body as a big sponge—whatever perception helps you relate to the energy in the body in a more balanced and comfortable way.

This enables you to develop a sense of snugness with the body in the present moment, allowing the mind to settle down and really be still so that you can then use it to discern suffering, to understand it—and through understanding it, go beyond it.

Practicing first with pain in the body, you also learn how to apply the same principles to mental pain, mental anguish, mental dis-ease. It's the same sort of thing. You learn how to separate yourself out from it and realize that whatever the thought may be in the mind that's causing you pain, the pain is one thing, the thought is something else. The awareness is something else still. When you can see that, then you separate yourself from the pain. But to see that, the mind has to get very, very still and very solid.

So that's what we work on first: creating this foundation, so that someday we, too, will discern suffering and also discern the path to the end of the suffering. And see the end of suffering for ourselves—so that it's not just words in a book or words in a chant. It's an actual experience.