

Experimenting with Stress

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When they teach science in schools, they basically teach you two things. One is the result of people's experiments in the past. And the other is how to run a good experiment yourself.

The first part is the history of science. It's not really science. It's the story of other people doing science. If you really want to be a scientist yourself, you have to learn how to run a good experiment, how to know whether the experiment is good, and whether you've got reliable results.

It's the same with meditation. Reading the texts, listening to dhamma talks: That's learning the history of meditation—what the Buddha did, what his noble disciples have done, what the great teachers of the present have done. But that's more a matter of history and news.

To *be* a meditator you have to learn how to experiment with your own life, and particularly with the issue of suffering. You want to comprehend it so that you can go beyond suffering to the end of suffering, to awakening. So it's important that you not get stuck just on the history of meditation, trying to figure out what realizations these people came to, what understanding they had of their minds, of the world around them. This is the temptation and it's a temptation that people have fallen for many, many times: to try to clone other people's awakening.

You read about the realization and to you try to clone it: "If I can just think in those terms myself." You hear about the arising of the Dhamma Eye or the arising of the realization that everything subject to origination is subject to cessation, and you try to memorize that insight and go around applying it to everything. That's trying to clone awakening, thinking that somehow that's how you get there. But it's not. You get there by following the path, doing what needs to be done to induce the experience that leads to that realization. Only then will you know what the words refer to. Because when you've actually had the realization, the words have a totally different meaning from what they do for an ordinary person in an ordinary state of mind.

So think of meditation as an experiment. Our experiment here is to comprehend suffering and we do that by developing the path. As with any experiment, you learn the most by learning how to run it well. We're here to understand what we're doing to contribute to suffering right here right now, which means learning how to observe our own actions, to see what we're doing when we apply a perception to, say, a pain in the body or a discomfort in the mind, to see what happens when we change the perception.

In other words, we're not here just simply watching suffering in a passive way, because that leads us to believe we are totally passive in receiving sense impressions inside and out. There are certain meditation methods that lead to that conclusion. I've heard people say that they've meditated for years and one of the realizations they've come to is that there is no such thing as progress in meditation. But that's because they don't have a method that gives much of an opportunity to progress.

Some people come here with the idea that you have no control over anything at all. Things just happen in line with their conditions and you have no role in those conditions as well. That's because their meditation method induced them to see things in that way. But that

realization doesn't do much, and it certainly doesn't put an end to suffering.

You put an end to suffering when you realize that you're shaping things in the present moment. That allows you to get more and more sensitive to how you're creating suffering right here right now, and see that you don't have to. This is why the Buddha divided stress and suffering into two types: the stress of the four noble truths and the stress of the three characteristics.

In the three characteristics, things are stressful in and of themselves simply because they're compounded, put together. With any compound, there's a certain amount of stress keeping the compound together. Without the stress, it falls apart.

But that's not the stress or suffering that weighs on the mind. The part that weighs on the mind is the stress in the four noble truths: the stress and suffering of craving and ignorance. That's the stress that we're trying to comprehend. To do this we need to distinguish between the two so that we can see what we are doing that's causing this unnecessary noble truth stress and put an end to it.

As with any experiment, we have to be very alert to what we're doing, and our observer has to be in a good position so it can judge the results, to be a reliable observer.

One requirement, as in any experiment, is that the scientists have to be well funded, with no worry about where the money is coming from, how much money they've got. They're in a position of well being, feeling secure, so that regardless of how the results of the experiment come out, they're okay. If they're hungry or if they aim to please a particular sponsor, then there's trouble. It's very likely that the experiment's results will be skewed. They had a study years back where some university scientists discovered that chocolate was really good for you. But then other people found out that the experiment was sponsored by a chocolate company. It makes you suspicious.

Or even worse if you had scientists who were hungry—say they experimented with apes, and they ended up eating all the bananas, and the apes wound up with nothing. So make sure your mind is well fed, secure, if you're really going to comprehend suffering.

That's why meditation is not just something you do with your eyes closed. It's part of the larger context of your life. You're encouraged to be generous, because it creates a sense of well being in the mind, a sense of trust. The practice of generosity gives you a way to experiment before you even sit down to meditate. You learn to see that you do have a choice. If you have something you can keep it or give it to somebody else, and that moment when you realize that giving it to somebody else feels better than just eating it or using it yourself, that's an important realization. In fact, it's around that realization that the rest of the practice grows.

This is why the Buddha never gave dana talks the way they're given nowadays. When asked where a gift should be given, he said, "Wherever your heart feels inspired." That's it, there was no "should" in giving, aside from the recommendation that it's really good for you to give. But where you want to give, how much you want to give, who you want to give it to, is totally up to you. Because when it's totally up to you and you sense that freedom, that's when the giving feels really good. You gain a sense of, one, your freedom of choice and, two, the feeling of well being that comes from doing something skillful.

You learn this not so much because you trust what other people say as it is that you see the sense of well being that comes from doing something skillful. This opens your mind to the possibility that maybe other people have skillful motives as well when they give. It's not just that they're trying to get something out of you. So being generous opens up the mind to the

possibility that there might be somebody out there who really does want to teach the way to the end of suffering, and it's not just to milk you for your money. In this way generosity helps put the mind in the state of well being where it can be a good experimenter.

The same with the precepts. You realize that you sometimes have a choice to harm other beings and you can get away with it, but you'd rather not. Then when you sit down and meditate, you have that memory in mind so that you don't have a lot of regrets in the past. There's no sense of dishonesty in the mind. But if you're looking for true happiness and yet you go out and create suffering for other beings, there's a dishonesty there that leads to a dishonesty in the meditation.

You don't need to lie to yourself that you've caused noone any harm, and you're not wounded by your own regrets—neither of which are conducive to meditation.

So you want your scientist to have a clear conscience, and to have a sense of freedom that it doesn't matter how the results of the experiment come out, the scientist is still going to get paid. Make sure the scientist is well nourished. That's why we practice concentration to create a sense of well being around the breath that's really good, really gratifying.

Because the breath is with you all the time as long as you are alive, you can tap into that source of nourishment whenever you want. It's a skill you have to develop, but it *can* be developed and one that can give rise to a sense of nourishment right here and now.

So when the scientist is well fed, well trained, that's the kind of scientist who is ready to start exploring and experimenting with suffering and stress. As you're sitting, you find there are pains in your body, in your hips, in your legs, in your feet, in your back. The first line of action is to find that sense of well being so you don't feel threatened by the pain. If you feel threatened by the pain, your immediate reaction is that you've got to get rid of it, to push it away. But that's not how you learn about it, you learn about it by experimenting.

It's something that you don't learn about it by simply sitting passively. You have to realize that maybe I'm doing something that's causing this pain, particularly if there's a sense of disease in the mind around the physical pain. That's something to look that you really ought to look for: Why are you causing that suffering?

Because it's not necessary. We take it for granted that when there's pain in the body there's going to be anguish in the mind, but it doesn't have to be that way.

That's why the Buddha made that distinction between the two types of stress. Pain in the body is the pain of the three characteristics, but that anguish in the mind, that's that stress and suffering of four noble truths. And it may be the case that even with physical pain we're doing something to contribute to it by the way we perceive it, simply by the way we breathe, how the breath energy is going around the pain.

So this is a good test case for how you can change what you're doing with the pain, to see how working with the breath has an impact both on the physical pain and on the discomfort in the mind. Find a spot in the body where the breath does feel good, and take that as your dwelling. Make this dwelling solid and still. It's like making sure that all the equipment for your experiment is on a good solid table. It's not rocking around.

That enables you to detect small fluctuations. Because that's what's happening in the mind: There are little, tiny fluctuations in the mind that can make all the difference between anguish and freedom from anguish.

Once your mind is really still with the breath, feels good with the breath, the table on which the equipment is placed is rock solid. So if there's a slight fluctuation you know it's not

just the table wobbling. Something actually wobbled in the mind.

When you gain this sense of your center here that you feel secure in, then you can start looking at the pain. You can start to ask questions about it as you take this more proactive attitude toward the pain. Simply being proactive can, in and of itself, reduce a lot of the suffering. You don't feel like you're a helpless victim. You're not just on the receiving end.

You can start probing here probing there, asking this question, asking that question, "Where is the pain most prominent? Does the prominent the spot of the pain stay in the same place all the time or does it move around? If you find that it moves around is there anything else moving around in the mind or [with it now]?"

Or do you see the pain as having infiltrated the body? Try ferreting out the different sensations you feel in the body. There is the sensation of solidity, there's the sensation of warmth, there's the sensation of liquidity, and then there's the breath—all of which are the four elements or properties that make up the physical sense of the body—and then there's the pain. These are five different things. Can you see them as different, or do you tend to glom the pain on to the other sensations?

As you glom it on, there's the going to be the sense of distress that this is *my* hip, *my* knee, *my* leg with the pain. But if the leg is one thing, and the pain is something else, then you watch the pain as flitting around.

As long as your mind has enough energy to keep it up this investigation, then you really don't have to suffer from the pain.

Your willingness to be inquisitive, your willingness to experiment and not worry about results because you know your funding is secure and you don't have to please the executives and marketers: That's when you really start seeing what's actually going on. That's when you'll begin to realize there's a lot you're going to understand in meditation that's not in the books. Even though there are many principles in the books and principles help open your mind to what meditation can do, what you see through your own experiment is going to provide a particular meaning to you, because it's your ignorance that will be examined—not just some generalized ignorance, but your specific ignorance, your specific misunderstandings around the mind and its relation to pains. They're going to be taken apart.

This is why it has to be an experiment for all of us, for each of us as our own specific misunderstandings. Probe in to see exactly how your set of assumptions cause specific pains and suffering. How do they act on the pain? How do you change those assumptions? Do you see the impact of the change? How do you finally get to a set of assumptions where the pain goes away? The pain in the body doesn't necessarily go away, but the pain in the mind goes away: *That's* the really important one. You want to be able to do that again and again so you see more clearly exactly what happened in the mind.

Ajaan Maha Boowa makes the point that the questions you ask about pain today that seem to be getting results may not get the same results tomorrow. So you have to ask a different set of questions, which means that that particular type of suffering is based on a slightly different form of ignorance. You've got to tackle ignorance from the many different directions.

If you find that probing around the pain asking these questions, the pain's beginning to take over, that's a sign that your concentration isn't strong enough, so you go back and rest in your own quiet spot, rest in your comfortable spot, and think of that sense of comfort spreading out to fill up the whole body, going out through the pain, out the tips of toes, and all the tips of fingers. You don't need to investigate at that point, just simply allow yourself some time to be

nourished. It's like the scientists. They can't stay in the laboratory 24 / 7. They've got to eat. They've got to rest.

You can't have them eating and resting in the laboratory. In the same way, you have to eat and rest. You can't be looking at this all the time. You need time to regain strength. And then when you're well and rested, come back and probe into the pain. This way with the experiment you come to the realizations that really do make a difference in your own mind.

When we practice the Dhamma, we're also looking after ourselves. That's a word play in Thai. The word for "practice" and the word for "looking after somebody" are the same words: "patipat." The Ajaans would often make that point. We're not here just to practice somebody else's ideas about things. We're here to look after our own mind, look after the way it's been causing suffering for itself, heedlessly, and find a way to put an end to that.

In some ways the practice follows the general principles, but it's going to be very particular for you, dealing with your own particular forms of ignorance, your own particular forms of craving. These are the things you've got to explore. This is why it's an experiment.

So make sure that you understand the rules of a good experiment, learn how to conduct a good experiment, so that you get the results you can really trust.