

Stop Squirming

January 23, 2012

Most people who know anything about Buddhism know that the Buddha taught four noble truths. There's suffering, and its cause. The cause, of course, is craving, with ignorance behind the craving. Then there's the cessation of suffering and the path leading to the cessation. What's less well-known is the fact that each of these truths has a task. In fact, that's why the Buddha divided them up into four different categories to begin with.

When you encounter something—whether it's stress or craving or something that's part of the path, like mindfulness or concentration—you have to know what to do with it. You don't just watch it come or go.

Stress and suffering are to be comprehended. The cause is to be abandoned. The path is to be developed so you can actually realize the cessation of suffering, so that you can actually experience it directly. A large part of our practice is learning how to put these different tasks together—because they have to be done together.

For instance, comprehending stress and suffering: To comprehend the experience of stress and suffering, the pain, the attachment and clinging that go with the pain, you have to watch them. You have to be able to sit with them. This requires a lot of endurance. Most of us don't like sitting with the pain. As soon as there's a pain, we move, run away. And as a result, we only get little glimpses of it. Then we build up all kinds of monsters around it. It's like the monsters under your bed when you're a child. You hear a little noise under your bed and from that one little noise you can create all kinds of monsters. And because you don't dare look under the bed, the monsters just grow.

It's the same with pain. It's something that drives us and because we don't really look at it carefully or continually, it's like a task-master with a whip. It keeps us running, running, running. So we have to learn how to turn around and stare it down, look at it continually to see which part is the actual pain and which are the imaginary monsters with the whips. This is why we develop the path: to give ourselves the strength to do that. In particular, the practice of concentration: You're mindful to stay with the breath and then you try to evaluate and, work with the breath so you can develop a sense of well-being. This becomes your foundation, a place where you can rest. A place you can take as your haven. And because it gives you strength, it gives you your place to take a stance, where you don't feel so threatened by pain—either physical pain or mental pain. You've got another place to go. When emotions are raging in your mind, you can go to the breath, get out of all the arguments of all the different committee members in the mind.

When there's physical pain in one part of the body, you can focus on the breath energy in another part of the body. This is how we build our powers of endurance: by giving ourselves a place of well-being, even in the midst of a difficult situation. There's someplace we can hang on to.

Because otherwise we're not going to be able to comprehend suffering at all. When we can't comprehend it, we won't know exactly what's causing it. Actually, the Buddha divided suffering into two sorts. There's suffering in the four noble truths and there's also suffering or stress in the three characteristics. And the stress of the three characteristics is something that's just everywhere. It's part of the fact that everything is conditioned by causes, held in being only for a little while, only to change. That kind of tenuous existence is inherently stressful. But fortunately that's not the stress of suffering that weighs the mind down. If it were, there wouldn't be anything you could do about it. But what really weighs the mind down is the stress of the four noble truths: the stress that comes from craving and ignorance.

And that's a cause you can do something about. You can replace ignorance with knowledge. When there's knowledge of the right sort, then the craving goes away. You learn how not to indulge in craving or get involved with it. There's a passage where the Buddha compares suffering to two arrows. The first arrow is your shot with is the stress of the three characteristics. But then you shoot yourself with another arrow. That's stress in the four noble truths. So think about that for a minute. The Buddha was a member of the noble warrior class, and part of the knowledge of being a noble warrior back in those days is how to behave if you're shot by an arrow. You lie very still. In fact, the women in the class were trained to be surgeons. They knew how to extract arrows from their husbands and brothers and fathers and sons. And one of the prime instructions when you're shot with an arrow is be still. Try not to move.

The more still you are, the less damage is done. And then you try to relax around the arrow, so you can pull it out. If you tense up around it, you're just holding it in. So think of what it would mean to shoot yourself with another arrow. To begin with, there's the pain of the arrow itself, but then there's also the pain of the movement of shooting yourself. Many of us don't just shoot ourselves. We grope around inside ourselves with the arrow, probe around inside with the arrow, make things worse.

So when you're learning how to concentrate the mind, the ability to get the mind really, really still is an important part of minimizing the mental pain around whatever physical or mental pain there may be. You learn how to relax around the pain. This is why Ajaan Lee talked about finding a part of the body that's comfortable. He compares it to a house where some of the floorboards are good and some of the floorboards are not so good. You don't walk on the areas where the floorboards are going to rot and you're going to fall through. You don't lie down on them. You walk or lie down on the areas where the floorboards are sound. As he points out, if there were no place in the body at all where there was a sense of ease, you'd be dead. So there must be someplace. If you have trouble finding it, think about the sense of space around the body. Focus there. And every movement of the mind that would pull you away from that, just let it go, let it go. Focus on the sense of well-being that you can create as you breathe in in a way that feels good, breathe out in a way that feels good. And systematically go through the body. Think of relaxing it from the top down to the toes. Think of every pore in your skin opening up. All the little tiny muscles that hold the pores tight: Think of them opening up. Then let that sense of relaxation spread from the skin, in, in, into the body.

As for the areas where you can't get a sense of relaxation or there's a sense of pain, just go around them. Don't touch them. Don't get involved with them. Think of the relaxation as a liquid seeping through the body. There are areas where it won't be able to seep. There are these little rocks here and there. Ok, just go around them. That's the way of water. And we know the way of water eventually erodes the rocks away.

Then think of the breath being even more refined than that. It's like cosmic radiation: It can penetrate rocks. Think of the breath going right through. You don't have to push it through or exert any pressure. Just think of it already going right through the spaces between the atoms in the body and the spaces between the sensation-points in the pain. This helps to loosen up the tendency we have to tense up around the pain. It also gives us a sense of confidence. We have a source of strength in the body that's not affected by the pain, and that can actually make the pain a lot easier to deal with.

When you get really good at this, then you can actually look at the pain directly. That's how you start to comprehend it. And of course, in the meantime, you've been learning things about the way the mind habitually creates more pain, shoots you, not with just a second arrow, but a third and a fourth and a fifth. Who knows how many arrows we shoot ourselves with in the course of a day?

If you see yourself tempted to shoot another arrow, you can look into that. Why are you tempted to do that? And then you can stop—because you know you've got a better way of dealing with the pain than shooting yourself again. This is how we develop endurance, which is one of the perfections.

When the Buddha gave his summary of the Dhamma to that meeting of 1,250 monks before sending them out to teach, the first thing he talked about was endurance, patience. That's because these are the qualities of mind that allow us to comprehend stress, to the point where we actually see what are we doing that's causing it. For there to be the stress of the four noble truths, there has to be a movement of the mind. And unlike the stress in the three characteristics, that movement is not necessary. It's a habit we've developed in our ignorance.

So try to put the mind in a position where it can develop knowledge, the type of knowledge that watching things continually. We're not running away, not trying to push them away. Instead, we want to see: What is this experience of pain? What causes it to come? What causes it to go? What's the difference between pain in the body and pain in the mind? We tend to glom those together as well.

This is why discernment is such an important part of the practice. It's learning to see these distinctions. Which kind of pain or suffering is the first arrow? Which kind is the second arrow? How does it come? How does it go? Watching its coming and going, we're not here just to say, "Oh, it's coming and going, that's it. Everything is impermanent. Well, that's the end of that. Let's go on to the next one." That's not the point of what we're trying to do. You watch things come and go so you can figure out when pain comes, when the pain increases, what did you just do? When the pain decreases, what did you just do? You want to be able to see the connections between these things. And you see them only when you're very, very, very still.

So try to develop, at the very beginning, at least one sense of a center in the body. It might be in the head, in the chest, anywhere, where you feel that this is your safe haven.

Learn how to maintain that sense of center, that sense of well-being in the center. Then think of that sense of well-being spreading from that spot. That way, you have your foundation, you have your standing position, where you can watch the pain and not feel threatened by it.

And this way you help not only yourself but other people, too. Look at the people in the world who can't handle pain—and at all the trouble they create for other people around them, people who want to help them. But there's only so much you can do for another person's pain. Even kings can't tell their followers to take their pain from them

There's a passage in the Canon where a monk is asking a king, "Do you have a recurring illness?" And the king says, "Yes, I have a recurring illness, and people sometimes stand around while I'm suffering the pain of the illness and wondering if I'm going to survive." And the monk says, "Here you are king. Can you tell all of your followers, all of the people who work for you, to share the pain, so you can feel less of it?" The king replies, "No, I can't. I have to feel it all by myself."

There's only so much other people can do when they see you're in pain. And then they just stand around and feel miserable because they can't help any further. But if you learn how to be with your pain and not feel threatened by it, seeing the distinction between your awareness and the actual sensation of the pain, seeing the way the mind uses perceptions to create a bridge from the pain into the mind itself, and learning how to cut that, then you can be with pain and not suffer. And when you're not suffering, you're not throwing yourself on other people for help. So you're less of a burden, not only to yourself, but also to the people around you.

This is why learning how to face pain is such an important skill. And why it's important to develop the powers of endurance and patience that enable you to watch, watch, watch what's going on. We're not here just to endure. As one of the forest ajaans said, if it were simply a matter of endurance, then chickens would have been awakened long before we were, because they can sit for really long periods of time.

We endure so that we can understand, so we can see things from a steady point of view. If your point of view is moving around all the time, then you're not going to be able to detect subtle things. It's only when your gaze is really, really still that you can see subtle things. It's like going out at night and sitting very still, watching the moon go behind a tree. You realize that you can watch the moon move. You can see it move, even though it's very slow and very subtle, it's moving all the time.

The movements of the mind are even more subtle than that, so you have to get very, very still around your core where you feel at ease and sense of nourishment, a sense of refreshment. Learn how to maintain that and protect it, without closing up around it. Think of it as a little spot that's radiating well-being inside you and allow that sense of radiant well-being to fill whatever parts of the body that are open to its influence. That will give you the foundation you need for the endurance and steadiness of gaze that will enable you to comprehend suffering to the point where you can abandon its cause and realize its cessation.

And that's what the practice is all about.