

## *Tranquility & Insight in Tandem*

*June 12, 2012*

The Buddha said he taught two things, suffering and the end of suffering, or in other terms, stress and the end of stress. That's why we're here. In fact, that's what all the teachings really are all about, understanding suffering and stress, and then doing what we can to put an end to it. With each of the four noble truths that we chanted just now, there's a duty. It's not that when stress arises you just watch it, and when the cause arises you just watch it, and when the path arises you just watch it come and go.

The Buddha never taught that. Stress is something you want to comprehend. In other words, you want to be able to sit with it and watch it to figure it out: not to be okay with it, or to accept it, but try to understand it. What's going on here? Everything we do is for the sake of happiness, and yet we keep causing stress and suffering. You want to understand why. And particularly, you want to comprehend stress down to two things. One, seeing where it's coming from, and two, learning how to develop dispassion for where it's coming from.

Where it's coming from is the cause, which is traditionally identified as craving. But you have to see: Exactly what does craving mean? One of the Thai translations for the Pali word for craving, *tanha*, is *thirst*. Another translation is *struggle*. We see something we want and we just struggle towards it. We struggle to get things that are hard to get. But there actually is a struggle in the path as well, so you have to make a clear distinction there.

These are things we have to ferret out and watch for ourselves. Sitting with stress and suffering is not a pleasant thing, so you want to put the mind in a position where it can do so more easily, so that it doesn't feel threatened by them and is willing to sit with them for long periods of time.

That's why we develop the path and particularly why we try to develop mindfulness and concentration. The two go together. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. Concentration is getting the mind to stay with one thing. You can't stay with one thing unless you can keep reminding yourself to stay there, because moments of attention in the mind are normally very fleeting. They come and they go very quickly. So you need mindfulness to stitch them together. That way, you can watch what's going on and watch it in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being.

This part of the path is really important, because if you don't have that sense of pleasure, that sense of refreshment as you meditate, it's very easy to wander off. At

the same time, you're not getting the nourishment you need in order to be able to look at stress and look at suffering, to see what it is you're doing, because it is an internal cause here. We can say we're suffering because of conditions outside, but that's because we pull conditions outside into the mind in ways that we don't have to. So how can you be aware of the world outside and yet not suffer from it? That's something you have to watch carefully. And again to watch it, the mind has to be very steady. If the mind isn't steady, you can't see anything really clearly.

It's like running past a tree. If someone were to ask you after you ran past the tree: How many leaves are on the tree? How many birds were there? What kind of birds were they? the fact that you were running and saw things only in a blur, or maybe a few little details here and there but not the whole thing, would mean that you couldn't answer the questions. To see the whole tree, you've got to stand there and watch. And it's the same with stress and suffering. You have to be able to stand there and watch to see what's going on, to figure things out.

As you figure things out here, to some extent what you learn in the texts will be helpful, but you don't want to carry too much of that kind of knowledge into the meditation. Otherwise, it just becomes extended thinking. You should be looking to see what you're doing while you do it. You want to be sensitive to see—as you're staying here with the breath, and there's a sense of ease, but there's a wavering in the ease—what caused the wavering? What did the mind do? That's the kind of insight you want to get into the mind, not insight in terms of the words of the books. The words are helpful, but there's a lot of the Dhamma that's not in words. It's in seeing the movements of the mind.

That's what the teachings on inconstancy or *anicca* are all about. It's not that we say, "Oh gee, everything in the world is inconstant," and leave it at that. We want to see particularly: Where's the inconstancy in the ease and well-being that we're trying to create here? When the level of stress goes up, what did you do? When it goes down, what did you do? In other words, we're not here for a general abstract principle. We're here for the particulars.

Each time you feel stress or suffering, it's a particular stress, it's a particular suffering, and there's a particular cause. There was a particular craving. And you're not here just to generalize, "Okay, there's craving and so much for that." You want to see these particular cravings as they move. How do they flow out? What are they flowing for? What are they looking for?

When you're first trying to settle down with the breath, the obvious things are the cravings that pull you away from the breath. You're sitting here focusing on the breath, it's coming in and going out, and then all of a sudden you realize you've been away for five minutes or whatever. The question is, what happened?

There was a lapse of mindfulness. And with a lapse of mindfulness, the mind can do all kinds of things.

Even though you're sitting here saying you're going to meditate, only part of the committee in your mind has signed on. There are a lot of committee members waiting for you to leave a gap in your mindfulness so that they can go off and do what they want. So you have to be mindful, alert, watching what's happening—reminding yourself that this is where you want to stay, and trying to be as consistent as possible with this.

When you catch the mind wandering off, as soon as you've realized that it's wandered off, come right back and try to breathe in a way that feels refreshing, to give yourself a positive association for being with the breath.

Then when you catch yourself wandering off again, come right back. It has to be quick. In other words, as soon as you catch yourself, come back. You don't have to tie up the loose ends of your thinking or work out the implications of that particular thought before you return. You've got to drop the thought. No matter what, come right back.

Hopefully, you get quicker and quicker at this, to the point where you can actually sense when the mind is about to go. That's when you're on the safe side. You realize that the mind is beginning to get a little loose in its connection with the breath, so you do what you can to tighten things up again. Make the mind more snug with its object again.

So in the beginning, insight into inconstancy is for reminding yourself of the drawbacks of the things that are going to pull you away from the object of concentration, that they're really not worth it.

As you get more solid in your concentration, then the theme of inconstancy begins to focus on the quality of your concentration itself. How does it go up? How does it go down? And what do you do when it goes up? What do you do when it goes down? Try to figure this out so that you can make the concentration steadier and steadier and steadier, so that it becomes a better and better foundation for seeing what else is going on in the mind, both in the concentration and in the things right around it.

So these four truths are not just four nice ideas the Buddha happened to think up. They're four categories for how you're looking at what you're doing, what you're experiencing at any time. Where is the stress? You want to know that, so that you can comprehend it. When you comprehend it to the point where you see what you're doing that's causing the stress, you want to abandon the cause. As for the path—i.e., the qualities you're developing here that help you see these things clearly—you want to develop those.

All of this is fabrication. What we're learning to do is take this process of fabrication, which often causes so much stress and suffering in the mind, and learn how to put it to a better use. Make it part of the path. Without this fabrication, you don't go anywhere. The path is incomplete. You can just sit and watch and accept whatever comes up—good, bad, indifferent, whatever—but it doesn't become a path. It doesn't go anywhere. You learn patience, and you learn equanimity, but there's a lot more than needs to be learned.

As the Buddha said, there are some causes of stress that go away when you simply look at them, but not all of them. In fact, most of them require that you look at how you're thinking, look at how you're fabricating around them, and learn how to fabricate in new ways. The word fabrication here, *sankhara*, applies to several things. It applies to the fabrication of the breath, what adjustments you're making to the breath. It applies to your thoughts, the way you pick up a topic in your mind and evaluate it. That's called verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. Then there are feelings and perceptions: feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain, and the perceptions, the images you use to send messages in the mind. Those are mental fabrications. The difference between evaluating and directing thought, on the one hand, and perceptions on the other hand, is that the evaluation tends to be in sentences, whereas the perceptions are just words or images.

Like right now you're working with the breath. Part of the mind is talking to itself about the breath. That's the verbal fabrication. You may have an image in your mind of when the breath comes in, where does it come in? How does it spread through the body? That's a perception. The question is, how can you manipulate your thoughts and perceptions so that there's a sense of ease and well being that comes with the breath? You try to develop these things to provide yourself with a better and better foundation for seeing things clearly, to see the movements in the mind, to see the ups and downs of inconstancy, so that you can figure out the cause. Seeing things coming and going without seeing their causes doesn't really give you any insight. The insight has to come from seeing: What did you do? What's the connection? To see the connections, you have to watch things consistently.

It's not a matter of jumping in and jumping out, or channel surfing. You want to stick with this one channel all the way through, so that ultimately you can accomplish the duty for third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, which is to realize it, to actually see it happening.

This is how insight and tranquility go together. The calm and the tranquility give you the foundation from which you can see, and the insight into the mind is so that you can get the mind to settle down even further.

These two things work together, enabling you to detect gross fabrications and let them go in favor of subtler ones. The subtler the fabrication, the more clearly you see movements in the mind. So insight in this case is not composed of long drawn out contemplations. It's a very quick seeing: "Oh, there's this, and it's connected with that." You're witnessing it right here right now. It's not what the books told you. You're learning from what you're doing.

This is why it's important to be clear about what you're doing, because all too often if you just say, "Oh, I'm just going to be with whatever's coming up," there's a lot of fabrication going on behind the scenes, and you're going to miss it. You want to be open and honest with yourself: "I did this and I chose that and this is what happened." That's the kind of insight that makes a difference. It really does accomplish what the Buddha's whole purpose in teaching was, which is to figure out how to put an end to this suffering and stress that we so foolishly keep creating.

Ajaan Lee's image of how tranquility and insight work together is of holding on to a post and spinning around the post. You keep running around, running around, running around. You don't get dizzy because you're firmly with the post. If you go out in the middle of the yard and just spin around like this, you get dizzy and fall down. You've got to have something to hold on to. Just make sure that your insights stay very close to the post, because that's where all the interesting and important things are happening.