

Equanimity & Exertion

January 1, 2015

We meditate to put an end to the causes of suffering and stress.

And as the Buddha said, there are two kinds. Which means you need two kinds of meditation or two aspects to the meditation.

The first kind is the kind of suffering or stress whose cause goes away when all you do is just look at it with equanimity. In other words, you don't react. You're just there with it, watching it. That cause of stress gets embarrassed and goes away. It's there because you haven't been looking carefully. You've been ignoring it. But if you turn around and look straight at it, you realize that "This is really dumb." You're causing yourself stress and it's unnecessary. Why do it?

So there is that aspect of the meditation where you just look at things. But there's another kind of cause of stress that the Buddha says doesn't go away when you look at it. It just sits there and keeps acting.

If you compare it to a person, it's like someone who has no sense of shame whatsoever. You can see that it's causing stress, but it basically says, "So what? I like this. This is what I want."

You'll find that it has lots of friends in the committee of your mind who will argue for it. That kind of cause of suffering, the Buddha said, goes away only when you do what he calls "exerting a fabrication." The word "fabrication," *sankhara*, here, means that you work with intentions and try to figure the cause out. You try to use various strategies to deal with it.

The strategies can be involved either with physical fabrication—which is the breath—or with verbal fabrication: the way you frame the issue in your mind and talk to yourself about it.

Then there are also mental fabrications, which are perceptions—the labels you have for things, which can be either individual words or mental pictures—and then feelings: feelings of either pleasure, pain, or neither-pleasure-nor-pain.

You can work with all of these things to deal with that second kind of cause. For instance, there are times when working with feelings of pleasure is good, and times when working with feelings of pain is good.

All of these points the Buddha made in a sutta where he's talking about a conversation he had with the Jains. The Jains believed that if you just were equanimous about everything that came up—good, bad, indifferent—that's all you had to do. They particularly liked to be equanimous about pain. They felt that if you could stare the pain down and just be with it without reacting in any way

whatsoever, you'd be burning off your old karma. That would be enough to rid yourself of that particular cause of suffering.

They accused the Buddhist monks of living in pleasure, living in indulgence. So the Buddha said, "There is a kind of pleasure that's actually good for the practice."

This was one of his first realizations in his quest for awakening. He'd been undergoing all sorts of self-torture for six years, but finally reached the point when he realized that "This is not working." And he thought, "Is there another way?" He'd tried sensual pleasures and that didn't work. He'd tried self-torment and that didn't work. What was left?

He realized he'd been thinking in terms of black and white, all pain and all pleasure: All pleasure is bad; all pain is good. Well, neither was right.

So he took a more nuanced look, "Okay, what kind of pleasure is okay?" He realized that there was another alternative: the pleasure of concentration, in which you get the mind totally focused on an object that has nothing to do with sensuality. You start out by directing your thoughts—which is a fabrication—toward a single object, and evaluating the object so that the mind can settle down with it.

Like we're doing right now here with the breath: You work with the breath. If it's not comfortable, you can work with it and make it longer, shorter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow. See what does feel comfortable right now. The breath itself is a fabrication. Your directed thought and evaluation—that's a fabrication, too.

And they have, as the Buddha realized, no blame. Looking for pleasure in this way is blameless. Sometimes you hear about the dangers of concentration, but the Buddha never talked in those terms. The one danger he mentioned is that you get good at it and then you don't move on to use the concentration for gaining insight.

But there's nothing wrong with getting good at the concentration. In fact, it's absolutely necessary. He says that without that kind of concentration, you can't really see things clearly. You see some things but not everything. There's a lot that gets hidden when the mind isn't really, really still.

So you fabricate a calm state of mind; you fabricate comfortable breathing. That kind of pleasure is okay. That kind of fabrication is useful for seeing things you wouldn't see otherwise. Once you get used to this level of pleasure and then think about your old ways, you begin to realize, "Those old ways of thinking, those ways of acting are not so attractive anymore."

That's one way of working with pleasure and using fabrication—physical, verbal, mental—to work with some of the defilements that are causing you

suffering and stress.

There are other times, though, when you have to work with pain. In other words, you have to take an unpleasant object, pick up an unpleasant way of thinking, or be willing just to sit with pain to see what there is in the mind that makes the pain even worse.

There are some times when you indulge in various pleasures and you find that the quality of your mind is going down. So you've got to do something about that. This is why you have to deal with pain.

The Buddha says that contemplation of the body is a painful topic. But focusing just on the body is not the all-around approach to dealing with lust or sensual desire. As the Buddha said, we're actually attached not so much to the object of the lust or the object of the desire. We're attached more to the process of desiring itself. It's fun to think about things you might want and to plan about them. We're addicted to this.

So you have to turn around and look at the process of desiring, lusting, craving something from a point of view that allows you to see that these activities are nothing you really want to get involved with. You can start seeing this fantasizing really is unattractive because there's an obsession there that gives rise to the passion. The passion keeps us fabricating these things again and again and again. It's all very stressful, and produces nothing of any substance.

You want to be able to look at it in a way that allows you to pull back and say, "Nope. I see the direct connection between this and the suffering it causes. And it's not worth it."

So find some way of looking at how bad lust can be for you. You might ask yourself if you could have a tape recording of the thoughts going through the mind of the person you're lusting for when they see you coming. It might turn you off totally. You might realize that you're a fool. That would be enough to give rise to some dispassion.

In other words, you have to exercise your imagination here to look at things in a new way.

In either case, what you're trying to do is give rise to a sense of dispassion for that particular cause of suffering. Because it's the passion that gets us involved with it and keeps us involved. We're not going to stop until we can really develop a strong dispassion for these things.

So you find that in some cases all you have to do is get the mind quiet, look at something, and it begins to wither away because it just doesn't compare with the pleasure of the concentration.

There are other parts of the mind, though, that say, "Okay, we'll have

concentration but we'll have this, too. I'll have my times to be still, but I'll also have times to go for that particular desire, that particular defilement." Sometimes it's anger. Sometimes we like anger.

This is where you have to start thinking about these things in ways that develop dispassion for them, using the three kinds of fabrication. When anger comes, what does it feel like? What does your breathing feel like? Often your breathing aggravates the anger. What happens if you try to breathe in a calm way that soothes the body down? Even though the mind may be running around on fire, at least you can breathe calmly. See what that does.

Then you look at the issue. In what way are you talking to yourself about the issue that's giving rise to anger? Can you look at it in a different way? What are the underlying perceptions? Are you perceiving yourself as a victim? Are you really totally a victim or are you just doing that to make yourself feel justified and lashing out?

You've got to take these things apart. If you don't take them apart, they'll just stay there as a solid lump in the mind. No matter how much you look at them and treat them with equanimity and are non-reactive, they're not going to go anywhere. You have to be able to see through them. See exactly how a particular desire is related to a particular cause of suffering, and how the suffering is related to that. Then ask yourself, "Is it worth it?"

So as you're meditating you can't have just one approach. You have to have many approaches, because the causes of suffering in the mind have many approaches as well. They hold their power over the mind in many different ways.

Learn to develop your range as a meditator. Only then will you be able to ferret out the causes of suffering that simple non-reactivity can't touch. After all, you want to be able to ferret out everything that's causing suffering so that you can abandon your attachment to everything that causes suffering. Because who wants any suffering at all?

Some people will content themselves and say, "Well, okay, this is enough." Do you want to be one of those people?

You have to be really true to yourself, true to your desire to find, as the Buddha did, whether there's a state of mind that's totally free from suffering. If there is, it's worth going all the way.