

Coping & Beyond Coping

September 19, 2022

When you meditate, you're learning two basic skills: One is the ability to pull yourself out of unhealthy thought worlds, and the other is the ability to create a safe place inside for your awareness to settle. We create that place by giving the mind something good to focus on, something nearby—the breath, the way you feel the body from inside.

When we talk about the breath, it's not the air coming in and out through the nose. It's more the feeling of energy that flows through the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. It's one of the few physical processes that you can actually exert some control over.

You can make the breath longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. You can think about the breath in lots of different ways. Because it is an energy flow, you can of it flowing through the nerves as you breathe in. You can think of it flowing through the blood vessels all throughout the body. You can create a good, comfortable place to stay, a sense of well-being that doesn't have to depend on things outside.

Now, you recognize that these two skills—pulling yourself out of unhealthy thought worlds, and giving yourself a good place to stay—are basic coping mechanisms. We live in a world where there's a lot of suffering. There are the basic facts of aging, illness, and death, and on top of that the cruelty that people impose on one another. If we can't pull ourselves back from those things, if we find ourselves immersed in the suffering that comes from that, we have trouble coping. So we find our ways of pulling out, and the meditation basically gives you good healthy ways of pulling out.

One way of pulling out that we all try to find is to look at the light side of things, and oftentimes that helps. Humor is an important part of the practice. If you can see yourself doing something really stupid and laugh to yourself in a good-natured way about it, that pulls you out of some very unhealthy patterns. But there are times when humor can be inhumane.

The ancient Greeks had a saying: "Human beings cry; the gods laugh." Human beings are the ones who are undergoing tragedies, whereas the gods are up on Olympus at a distance, looking down at human beings, and in some cases feeling sorry for them, but sometimes laughing. And the laughter is not necessarily good-natured laughter.

So you need other skills besides humor. You need the wisdom that comes from taking a

larger perspective on things. The Buddha talks about this. There are cases where people come to him and they've just lost a wife, a husband, a child; and he has them reflect on the fact that this is the way it is: Wherever there's birth, there's going to be aging, there's going to be illness, there's going to be death. There's no place on earth where you can escape this fact.

That thought may seem oppressive at first, but when you realize that you're not the only one suffering from this, you start thinking about all the people in the world who've lost children, parents, or spouses, and it takes some of the personal sting away. The universe isn't dumping just on you. You were the one who wanted to be born. This is what you get. What did you expect?

That thought, too, can help you cope. But we practice meditation more than just for the sake of coping. We want to see: Where does this all come from? If we were simply on the receiving end of the bad things the world throws at us, that would be one thing, but the Buddha's insight was basically that we're out there throwing boomerangs.

As he says, when you step back from the world, you're trying to step back from greed and distress with reference to the world. The distress is the part we don't like, but there's greed for the world, too. That's what leads us to get involved in the world to begin with, and then we have to pull out. Then we want to get involved again, then we pull out again. He saw that we play a much more active role in creating the world than we might normally think. This is why the Buddha's insight into the mind goes beyond the ordinary.

When he lists the causes of suffering, they don't start with sensory contact. It's not that we suffer from the bad sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations in the world. We bring a lot to those sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. In fact, it's through our actions that we have this experience to begin with.

And the actions that we bring to the world to shape our experience of the world tend to be unskillful, which is another reason why we have to meditate. It's to get more sensitive to how we're shaping things through ignorance. Now we can learn how to bring some knowledge to the process. And in bringing knowledge to the process, we can stop the suffering. Totally. That's a radical insight.

There's a passage in the Canon where a king and a young monk are having a conversation. The king knew the young monk before he had ordained. He came from a wealthy family, he was healthy, there hadn't been deaths in the family recently. So why did he ordain? The young monk talks about the reasons. First, he says, he learned from the Buddha, "The world is swept

away, it does not endure. It offers no shelter. There's no one in charge. It has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. And it's insatiable, a slave to craving."

The king asks for some explanations. In the course of explaining what he means, and the young monk points out that we live in a world where we start out young, strong, healthy, and in the case of the king with a lot of wealth. But those things don't last.

The king, when he was young, had been strong; he saw no one else who was as strong as he was. But now he's 80 years old. He means to put his foot one place, and it goes someplace else. As for his power as a king, when he has an illness he can't tell his courtiers to share out the pain of the illness so that he can feel less pain. He has to feel the pain all alone.

As for having nothing of its own, the young monk points out, "This wealth you have in your storehouses, can you take it with you when you go?" "No." So the king reflects on that: The good things in life are inconstant and stressful, and they don't really belong to you.

But then the young monk asks him, "Suppose someone were to come and tell you there was a kingdom off to the east, with lots of wealth, but with a very weak army. You could take it with your army. Would you take it?"

Here the king is 80 years old, and he's been made to reflect on how he can't keep anything that he's got, yet he says, "Sure I'd go for it." "How about a kingdom to the west?" "Sure." "To the north?" "Yes." "To the south?" "Yes." "How about a kingdom on the other side of the ocean?" "Yes." "That," the young monk concludes, "is what I meant by saying 'The world is insatiable, a slave to craving.'"

We see these things in the world that bring us suffering, and yet we don't see the fact that we're the ones who have created these conditions. We keep wanting to come back, come back, come back. Even when you're 80 years old, you haven't had enough. And the mind is such that it doesn't have to depend on the body; it can leave this body and find another one, like a hermit crab leaving one shell and going into another. We go for youth, health, wealth, and we've got to lose those things again, and yet we want it more, want it again.

Now, if you meditate, you can find out *why* the mind does this. What is this craving that keeps us going? It's craving for things that are always going to disappoint. The Buddha discovered that that was the source of our suffering. If we were able to cure that problem, then there wouldn't be anything to suffer from. There would be no need to cope, because we wouldn't be creating the suffering that would force us to have to cope. We realize that we suffer not because of things coming in at us through the senses—it's because of what's coming

out of our mind.

But can find that there is a dimension in the mind that's free from that craving, that doesn't have to suffer aging, illness, and death. And it's the highest happiness.

So we don't just cope, we go beyond coping. We realize that the source of the problem is not out there. What the world throws at us is what we're throwing out, and it comes back at us.

We can learn how to stop. This skill comes from meditation: getting the mind still, getting it more and more sensitive to how it creates worlds—and how it doesn't have to. Those are the skills that offer us the way out.