

## *Painful Thinking*

*January 15, 2005*

The passage we just chanted right now: The phrase, “Those who don’t discern suffering,” sounds kind of strange. Everybody has suffering; everybody knows they have suffering of one kind or another. But the problem is, do we really understand it?

The Buddha’s challenge is that if you really understand it, you’re not going to suffer. It’s because we don’t understand our suffering, we don’t understand exactly what it is that weighs down on the mind, that we have to keep on suffering.

He says it’s something you have to try to comprehend. Most of us don’t try to comprehend it. We try to run away from it. As soon as any kind of suffering comes up in our lives, we don’t have the patience or the strength to just sit and watch it to see exactly what it is.

Say there’s physical pain: You’re going to encounter physical pain tonight as you sit, so you’ve got a chance to figure out exactly where the suffering is in the pain. There’s the physical pain, but there’s also the mental component of suffering and that’s the important issue. How are the two connected?

To see this, you have to make the mind very still. And you have to put the mind in a position where it feels confident that it’s not going to be overwhelmed by the pain, or that it’s not going to really suffer from the pain as it sits and watches.

That’s why we practice concentration focused on the breath. In fact, that’s why we focus on making the breath really comfortable, so that we have a good foundation.

So focus your attention right here, right here at the breath. And notice how it feels. Notice how you can play with it. If you don’t play around, you can’t really understand anything. If you simply watch without any input of your own, you don’t know exactly what makes things change.

This is why we have experiments in science. You change the various factors and see what comes out in terms of the results: which changes in the cause side bring out changes in the effect side, and which ones don’t. And you can understand this only by playing around.

I was reading this evening about Richard Feynman in Brazil complaining that the way they taught science there was simply to read out sentences. Everybody copied the sentences down and then regurgitated them on the exam. They didn’t know what they were talking about, they couldn’t apply them, because they hadn’t taken the principles home and played around with them.

That's what real science is and that's what real meditation is: playing around with causes and effects.

In this case, you change how you focus on the breath to see what effect that has on the breathing. Your focus can be too hard, and it can be too light. How do you know which is which? Well, try different strengths of focus on the breath. Focus on different parts of the body. See where you like to stay focused, where the breath is most comfortable. And notice how the different rhythms of breathing can affect the body as well.

Again, you find this by playing around until you come across some breathing that feels really good. Stick with it for a while. See what happens.

You want to give the mind a sense of feeling really at home here in the present moment. So many of us don't feel at home at all. As soon as we stay in the present moment for a little while, we get bored, or we run across a little bit of pain and we find some way of distracting ourselves. Which means that at some point in the future when really bad pain does come, we're on strange territory. The pain rivets us in the present moment and we're in a place where we don't really know the territory.

So it's wise to get to know the territory first. What have you got here when you've got the mind aware with the breath? What can you do with the breath? These are things you can explore to create that sense of home, to make it all familiar territory.

Once the breath is familiar territory, you can use it not only for dealing with physical pain but also for dealing with mental anguish. Thoughts come up in the mind and you immediately grab hold of them and make yourself suffer because of them. How does that happen?

Again, when you have the breath as your anchor point, it helps keep you focused on the present moment. Otherwise, you tend to slip off into the past, slip off into the future, both with physical pain and with mental pain.

With physical pain we wonder, "How much longer is this pain going to last?" That right there is placing a huge burden on the present moment. You not only have to deal with the present pain but you've got all your imaginings about future pain. Or you think about how long the pain has lasted so far. Again, that causes needless suffering.

That's a very simple example. Mental pain is more complex but comprehending it follows the same basic principle. What are you doing right now to make yourself suffer because of that particular thought, that particular perception of reality? See how much the perception itself is designed to make you suffer. Learn to think in ways that help lessen the suffering.

The Buddha has an interesting technique. He says to remind yourself of the universality of it all. Because so many times when pain comes to us the question is, “Why me?”

There was a cartoon in today’s *New Yorker* that showed a man lying on a hospital bed and it looks like he’s going to die at any moment. His wife is standing behind the bed talking to the doctor and she says, “I can’t believe this is happening to me!”

Of course, the real problem there is what’s happening to the guy dying in bed. But we always have this tendency to make it, “Why is it happening to *me*?” Well, it’s always a good exercise to think about all the other people it’s happening to as well. This is part of the human condition.

It may seem strange, but it actually does help lighten the suffering, at least that sense of being the unfair focus of what is actually a very normal occurrence. When you can get rid of that, the pain is a lot less.

It opens the mind to other possibilities as well. What can be done to deal with this universal condition? This gives you the impetus for wanting to understand suffering and stress in a larger sense, when you don’t feel so much the focus of what’s going wrong with the world.

That’s just one example. There are lots of examples where you can see how the particular way you’re thinking is piling a lot of unnecessary suffering and stress on the situation.

The Buddha compares it to being shot with two arrows. First there’s the particular event outside that has you upset, which is the first arrow, and then there’s the all the thinking that you add on top of that, which is like a second arrow. It’s bad enough being shot by one arrow, yet you add more yourself. Many times it’s not just one extra arrow—there are lots of extra arrows.

The best way to see this is to learn how to step back from your thinking and step back from your feelings. Just stay there with the breath, watch these things happening. You can get some practice with this as you’re learning to stay with the breath because all kinds of random thoughts will come right through your head as you’re sitting here. If you can’t learn how to let go of those random thoughts, then when things that seem a lot more serious come through the mind, it’s going to be a lot harder not to latch on to them as well.

So this is good practice, staying with the breath, staying with a physical sensation that gives you a good vantage point outside that big swimming vat of all your thoughts. If you’re inside all the thinking processes, jumping from one thought to another, it’s hard to get any sense of perspective of where a particular thought is going, where it came from. But if you stay with the physical sensation of

the breathing and learn how to make that your home, it's a lot easier to see the movements of the mind from beginning to end.

You can make a comparison with someone who's been born on a train. You look out the windows of the train and it's always been moving. As far as you're concerned, everything is moving. Not only do cars move and people move but mountains move, houses move, because you're moving. If you want to see what's really moving and what's not, you have to get off the train. That's when you see, "Oh! Mountains don't move." At least most of the time they don't.

But the point here is that you get a sense of what's really constant and what's not. When you can get out of your swimming around in the thoughts and just stay with the breathing, you get an idea of which thoughts are constant and which ones are not, which ones are bringing suffering into the mind.

And you can ask yourself, "How much do I really have to think these thoughts? Why do I have to bring them in?" Part of the mind will say, "Because it's reality, this is the real situation." Well, look at it. Is it really that real? Which aspects of the thoughts you're thinking don't have to be there, which are actually causing more trouble than they're worth? When you step outside of your thinking, you begin to see this more easily.

As you get more and more skilled at not adding extra suffering onto the suffering of the pain that's already there, you begin to realize what an important skill this is. And what an important problem it's focusing on.

This is why the Buddha started his teachings with the four noble truths. There's suffering in life and there's a cause to that suffering, and you can put an end to the suffering by following a path of practice that puts an end to the cause.

It sounds all very straightforward. Some people have complained that it seems to be a very limited kind of teaching. They want to hear more things about interconnectedness or emptiness or compassion for humanity.

Well, this *is* the Buddha's compassion for humanity. Everybody's causing him- or herself a lot of suffering. And because we're causing ourselves suffering, we cause suffering for other people as well. When we're burdened down and other people become burdened down, we can't help them with their burdens because what we're carrying around is more than heavy enough. Sometimes we sway and lean and fall over on other people because of our burdens.

But the Buddha pointed out that if you can unlearn those habits and replace them with habits that don't add suffering, it really takes care of all the issues in life. When our issues are taken care of, we have more time to help other people with theirs.

So try to develop a sense of how important this particular skill is, how

important this issue is, and why it's a worthwhile use of your time to learn how to develop this skill. Because it's in the practice that it shows its true worth.

Starting from this simple foundation—learning how to stay with the breath continually with a sense of ease, a sense of comfort, a sense of familiarity with the body—you can develop all kinds of useful abilities.