

Dissolving Distress

June 15, 2019

In the Buddha's description of right mindfulness, he's telling us how to get the mind into right concentration. The formula is this: You *remain focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world*. That covers two activities. Keeping focused on, say, the breath, in and of itself: That's the first activity. Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: That's the second.

And then you apply three qualities to both activities: You're mindful, you're alert, and you're ardent as, for example, you stay with the breath, simply on its own terms—how it feels as it comes in, how it feels as it goes out—without thinking about anything else related to it. You're just right here.

A good way to stick with that is to make the breath interesting. And it becomes interesting because of the questions you ask: What kind of breathing would feel good? What kind of breathing would feel really nourishing? What kind of breathing does the body need right now?

If you're feeling tense, try to breathe in a way that's relaxing. If you're feeling tired, try to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. If there are pains in different parts of the body, try to create a sense of well-being in another part of the body and then see if you can let that sense of well-being spread from your comfortable spot through the pain and out beyond, to dissolve away any tension you may have built up around the pain.

In other words, learn how to use the breath to help the mind stay in the present with a sense of contentment in being here.

Ajaan Fuang had a number of students who, after he passed away, stuck with the meditation—there were a number of students who didn't—and I noticed that most of the ones who did stick with it had particular pains, particular illnesses, and they had seen the benefits that come from using the breath to help them deal with the illness and the pain. So when you can see that the breath is useful, then it's a lot easier to stick with it *in and of itself*, and not veer off to other preoccupations.

So you're mindful—you keep the breath in mind. You're alert—you're watching what's you're doing and the results you're obtaining. And you're ardent—you try to do this well. Which means that if you do shift off to other things, that's what the second activity is for: You put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts having to do with the world, even *you* in the world, you want to put aside. And to do that, you have to make the world uninteresting.

And for most of us all of our interest in life has to do with stories around the world: things we want out of it, things that have happened in the past, memories that are hurtful, memories that are happy. The mind likes to go over those in the same way you might pick at a scab on a wound. You have to learn how to make those stories uninteresting.

This is especially difficult with stories where you were a victim and you still want to have justice done. That's probably the strongest sense of self there is. But you have to realize that it's not wanted right now, because the way you dig up those old stories is like taking a knife and stabbing yourself with it. Maybe the other person gave you the knife, or stabbed you the first time, but then you pick it up and stab yourself again, and again, and again. It's not helpful.

So one way of making the world uninteresting is to think in the Buddha's terms: Remember that on the night of his awakening, his first knowledge had to do with memories of past lives. You think you have stories. The Buddha had thousands and thousands of them. He remembered where he'd been born, what he looked like, what he was, his experiences of pleasure and pain, what his food was, and how he died. That was it: pleasure, pain, food, death. Then coming back again, and then again and again.

But he didn't go straight from that knowledge to the knowledge of awakening. Instead, he went through the knowledge of seeing all beings in the universe dying and being reborn in line with their actions. This showed him that there was a pattern. Because when you take one person's many lifetimes, all too often there doesn't seem to be much of a pattern. Sometimes you do good in this lifetime and you go to a bad destination afterwards because your mind has fallen in the meantime. Or you do something bad, but then your mind rises to a better stage, and so you go to a good place. It might seem like karma doesn't have any effect. But when you see the long-term results and you see them spread out over many, many beings, many, many lifetimes, you realize that's what drives the universe: our actions.

And it just keeps going on, and on, and on. He said you cannot even conceive of a beginning point, it's been going on that long, while the tears you've shed over these many, many lifetimes are greater than the water in the ocean. And that's just tears over the loss of a mother. Tears from the loss of a father are also more than the tears in the ocean. Loss of a brother, sister, child: in each case, more than the water in the ocean. It's been going on for that long. When he saw how immense the whole issue was, and how immense all these many, many stories were, the individual stories begin to lose a lot of their meaning and interest.

It was from that perspective that he moved into the present moment and focused on what was going on in his mind right here, right now—and that was how he gained awakening.

So you notice the pattern. Instead of going straight from the narratives back to the present moment, he stopped for a minute to think about how huge the universe was, and how long these stories have been going on, and how many different roles he had had. As he said, it would be hard to find someone who hasn't been your mother and your father and your brother and your sister and your child your son and your daughter in the course of that long,

long time. We've switched roles that many times. Sometimes we've been on the good side; sometimes we've been on the bad side. It's back and forth.

There's a story in the commentary of two women come running in to see the Buddha. The first one is holding a child. She's being chased by the second woman, who's trying to kill the child, and she has gone to the Buddha for protection. So he talks to them about their many lifetimes. In one case there was a major wife who had no children, and then a minor wife who had a child, and the major wife was jealous, afraid that she would lose her power, so she killed the child of the minor wife. The minor wife swore revenge, so in the following lifetime the minor wife was born as a fox, the major wife was born as a chicken, the fox ate the chicks of the chicken, so the chicken swore revenge. And they kept going on, and on, and on, to the point where you forget who was who.

And the whole purpose of this is to see how meaningless it is to get worked up about a particular issue where you've been wronged or where you've wronged somebody, because these stories have been going on for so long. You develop a sense of dispassion for the story, you spread goodwill for everybody, everybody involved: goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the other people. Goodwill doesn't mean that you're hoping to continue the stories. It basically means: May you be happy. And you realize that each person's happiness is going to depend on his or her own actions.

So it's this combination of seeing the process of rebirth and karma, and having goodwill for everybody—a goodwill that leads to *samvega* and eventually to a sense of equanimity, realizing we don't want to continue these stories. That's the Buddha's universal narrative solvent for painful memories.

So if you find your mind veering off in that direction, try to look at the narrative in this much larger context. Instead of, "He did this," or "She did this, and then I did that," and then it goes back and forth, just think, "It's just living beings taking on many different roles as they go from life to life, looking for happiness but in an ignorant way, harming themselves, harming others." When you see how long it's been going on, and how huge the process is, how many beings there are, it gives rise to a sense of dispassion.

In this way, you can make greed and distress with reference to the world uninteresting, and you get back to the breath. Because as you focus on the breath, you're learning not only about the breath, but also about your mind. And this is where it gets really interesting—you begin to see how your mind shapes your experience right now.

When the Buddha talks about the breath, it's not simply a matter of watching the breath coming in and going out. He says you try to breathe in and out aware of what he calls *bodily fabrication*. Breathe in and out aware of *mental fabrication*. Bodily fabrication is the breath and its effect on the body. Mental fabrication deals with your perceptions and your feelings, which shape the state of your mind. As you're trying to stay with the breath, keeping it in mind, you realize you have to use certain perceptions, that you're trying to generate certain

feelings, and that both the perceptions and the feelings have an impact on the mind. At the same time, the way you think about the breath will determine how you experience the breath. The way you breathe will have an impact on the mind. The influences go back and forth like this.

And you begin to ask yourself, “What am I doing in this process of fabrication?” There’s verbal fabrication as well, as when you tell yourself, “Focus here, focus there, this breath is comfortable, that breath is not comfortable, how can I make it better?” There’s that kind of fabrication going on, too.

You begin to realize that you’re shaping the present moment, you’ve been doing it all along—and there’s a way to do it better. That should be fascinating: to realize that you have this power, and you can develop this skill—at the same time realizing that if you don’t develop the skill, you’re just going to keep on suffering, even though the suffering could be brought to an end.

So you try to make the breath interesting while you try to make the world uninteresting. You do this with mindfulness, alertness, and you try to do it well. That’s how you can use this exercise in staying with the breath as your frame of reference, to start digging down into your mind and developing new skills inside.

When you see the benefits of this exercise, then you begin to realize that it’s a skill you want to maintain, a skill you want to keep with you, to take with you as you go home. And you want to keep at it, because it’s all about the problems in your mind and how you can solve them. Once you’ve solved the problems in your own mind, then nothing in the world can have an impact on the mind.

So the real work is right here, which is why we take this as our frame of reference and why we put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The problem lies in here, and you can see the problem in action. You can also work on the solution right at the spot where the body and mind meet—at the breath, right here, right now.

So this is the frame of reference for solving the problem—for seeing the problem, understanding it, and getting beyond it.