

# *The Knife of Discernment*

*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

*April, 2002*

The mind feeds on its moods and its objects, so you've got to find something good for it to feed on. We have the choice. There are all kinds of things you could focus on right now. It's up to you to choose the right place to focus, the right place to feed.

So look around in the body. Where is a comfortable place? At what spot can you watch the breath clearly and comfortably? Try to stay in touch with that place – and stay in touch with that sense of comfort as well. After watching it for a while, you'll find that certain ways of breathing give rise to a feeling tone that feels good, feels healing. Try to maintain that feeling tone. This may require adjusting the breath now and then, because the needs of the body, as the mind begins to settle down, begin to change. The breath can grow more and more still, more and more refined. The less your mind jumps around thinking about this, that, and the other thing, the less oxygen you need. So, allow the rhythm of the breath to change as is necessary.

The important thing is learning to *ride* that feeling tone, the way you'd ride a wave with a surfboard: getting a sense of when to lean a little to the left, a little to the right, steer here, steer there, to maintain your sense of balance. As for whatever other issues may come up, remember that you're choosing to feed right here. You don't have to feed on anything else. There may be a little voice in your mind saying, "Look at that! Watch this! You've got to worry about that, worry about this." Just keep reminding yourself, "No, not right now." Your current priority is to develop a good, strong foundation so that you can feel secure in the present moment – so that no matter what happens, you've got a place where you're safe.

As you feed here more and more often, you find that the mind gets stronger. When it gains a sense of nourishment and inner comfort, you can spread that sense of comfort around the body so that it gets more encompassing. If there are parts of the body you can't spread it to, that's okay: You don't have to focus there yet. Focus on the areas where you *can* spread that sense of comfort, where it can seep through easily. Allow yourself to be bathed by it, surrounded by it, so that the mind has more and more good food to feed on.

As it gets stronger, it can begin to look at the other areas that are more problematic, because now it doesn't have to feed on them. This is why pain, for example, has been such a big problem. We keep trying to feed on it. It's as if you have a good kitchen with lots of good food stocked up, but you go rooting around in the garbage pail. So get the mind well fed with this sense of ease, this

sense of wellbeing, and then when you turn to look at pain you can see it in a different way. When you look at something as food, as something to gain sustenance from, you're going to see it in one way. When you look at pain as food, it's disappointing. It's lousy food, and yet when the mind is hungry it feeds on whatever it can find. But when the mind isn't hungry, you can look at the pain with pure curiosity: "Let's look into this. What is this? Let's try to understand it." Your whole attitude toward it changes. Remember: The Buddha said, "Try to comprehend pain." He doesn't say, "Snuff it out."

One way of comprehending it is to see how much you can use the breath to deal with the pain. Another is to see how much your different attitudes toward the pain will change the way you experience it. Experiment *around* the pain to see what happens, and particularly to get a sense of the difference between the physical pain and the mental pain. The Buddha compares pain with being shot by arrows. Physical pain is like being shot with one arrow, but then on top of that you shoot yourself with another arrow, the anguish you build up around the pain, is totally optional. When you've got a body, there are going to be pains. Even the Buddha had physical pains after his Awakening, but the difference is that he knew how not to shoot himself with those unnecessary second, third, fourth, and fifth arrows. And as it turns out, *those* are the ones that really hurt. Those are the ones causing the problems.

But you can't just go marching in and say to yourself, "Okay, you! Out! Stop! Stop shooting arrows!" You've got to learn to see where the dividing line is between the physical pain and the mental pain. You do that by experimenting with the breath, experimenting with the labels you put on the pain, asking yourself questions about the pain – and sometimes the strange questions are the ones that ferret out the strange attitudes you've built up around the pain. For instance, you can you ask, "What shape does the pain have?" It sounds like a strange question, but when you pursue it you find that your imagination has actually given the pain a shape. What happens when you don't give it a shape? How does the pain move around? Is it moving around on its own or is it moving around because you're pushing it around? These are things you have to learn through experiment. It's only through experimentation that things begin to divide out on their own. In other words if you go in with preconceived notions, "The dividing line has to be *here*, or *there*," it turns out that that's not the case at all. You're forcing your ignorance onto the pain which, of course, just makes it worse.

So you've got to learn how to experiment. How do changes in the breathing change the pain? How do changes in your concept of the pain change the pain? How about changes in your concept of how the mind relates to the body: Is the mind in the body? Is the body in the mind? Where in the body is the mind? These may seem like strange questions, but you begin to realize that the mind on an unarticulated level actually does think in those terms. And a lot of our basic assumptions of where the center of our awareness is, where the pain is in relation

to that center, and how it affects that center: These play an important role in how we experience the pain and how we make ourselves suffer unnecessarily from it. So you have to experiment and test things.

But first you've got to get the mind settled down with a sense of wellbeing, for otherwise it's going to be sneaking little bites of the pain, feeding on the pain, and then not liking what it eats. That just complicates the issue, makes it impossible to analyze things and separate them out. To gain this foundation of wellbeing takes time. You've got to be patient. Keep working at it *again and again and again*. You can't say, "I've done this  $x$  number of days, or  $x$  number of weeks, or  $x$  number of years, I should be beyond that."

You just keep working at it as long as necessary. The concentration is the part of the meditation you can *do*, the asking of the questions is something you can do, but the insights that actually give you that "Aha!" – those you can't do. Those come as a result of the other actions, but they're not something you can intend. You can intend to get the mind to settle down, you can intend to learn how to ask those questions, but when the results come, that's something you can't determine in advance. Just make sure that you've got the causes right in terms of the stability of your gaze, the sense of wellbeing you can fall back on whenever you need it, and the quality of appropriate attention – learning how to ask the right questions. That's what you *do* in the meditation, that's what you intend in the meditation, and when these things fall together just right, the results will come.

To ferret out the difference between the physical pain – the pains of the *khandhas*, the pains of the aggregates – as opposed to the pain of attachment, craving, and clinging: That's a distinction you see in the doing. You catch yourself in the doing; you see how the doing affects things. This is something you can't figure out in advance. But when the distinction becomes clear in the doing, then you've cut the mind away from those attachments and cravings.

When the Buddha said that his job was done, this is what he meant. There were still pains in the body, there were still issues in life, but the mind no longer had to suffer because of them. That's where Awakening makes a permanent difference, once and for all. We hear over and over again that, because of the principle of impermanence, even Awakening must be impermanent, but that's not true. The Buddha didn't say that everything is impermanent, only that conditioned things are impermanent. And even on the conditioned level, it's possible to make irrevocable changes.

This is why training the mind is so worthwhile. With practice, we can cut through the fetters that keep us bound to suffering so that they'll never bind us ever again. One of the images they give in the texts is of a palm tree with its crown cut off. It'll never grow any further. Another image is of a carcass of a cow. The butchers take off the skin – cutting all the little tendons and all the connective tissue – but then, no matter how they try to put the skin back on the

cow, it's never connected in the same way. It's right next to the cow, but there are no connections because the knife of discernment has cut them — once and for all.