

# *Suppressed Emotions*

*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

*December 11, 2004*

Researchers have done studies showing that people who regularly suppress their emotions tend to be stupider than people who don't: They're less observant and have trouble thinking through things clearly. And so the question is, when you're meditating are you making yourself stupid? It depends on how you meditate.

But first you have to understand what it means to suppress an emotion: You deny that it's there. In other words, suppressing it doesn't just mean that you're simply not expressing it; it means that you're also trying to hide it from yourself. The walls of denial go up in the mind. They make it difficult to think clearly, to connect things, to see relationships. And it takes a lot of energy to keep those walls up, which means you have less energy to observe things. This is why suppressing emotions makes you stupid.

So as you meditate, it's important to understand that you're not here to suppress an emotion, to deny that it exists. You want to be very clear about what's going on in the mind, but at the same time you want to learn how to use the mind wisely, to approach your emotions wisely. When fear, greed, anger, or delusion come up in the mind, it's not necessarily helpful to express them outside because sometimes that makes it difficult to observe what's going on, too. There has to be a middle way between the expression and the suppression. This is important. Often as you meditate you try to tell yourself, "Don't react. Just be equanimous. Don't get excited. Don't get worked up about things." And then you try to convince yourself that that's what's actually happening. You see ideals of what an enlightened person is like – very calm, peaceful, equanimous – and you try to clone the calm, to clone the equanimity. Remember, though, that Right Cloning is not one of the factors of the Path.

The relevant factor is Right Mindfulness: having the right frame of reference for dealing with pain and pleasure as they come. If you view the pleasure simply as something to run toward, or the pain as something to fear or run away from, you're creating a situation in which the emotions that arise – the liking and the disliking – are going to get in the way of really seeing anything. So you want to create a different frame. Instead of seeing yourself as a person partaking of the pain or the pleasure, you want to dismantle that perception. You want to have another way of approaching pain and pleasure so that you don't feel threatened by the pain and don't simply indulge in the pleasure.

This is why you need a technique as the foundation of your meditation. We've talked many times about meditation as not just a technique, but you can't meditate without a technique, either. You need to view the technique in the

context of certain values, certain understandings, but you can't denigrate technique—because it provides part of your frame of reference.

For example, you're dealing here with the breath, and you may notice that some ways of breathing are more comfortable than others. Then you begin to realize the connection between the discomfort and the breath, the comfort and the breath. And because the breath is something you can control to a certain extent, you've got your handle. You can try breathing in different ways. You can change the rhythm. You can change the texture, the depth. You can try heavy breathing, light breathing, broad or narrow, shallow or deep. That's changing the mechanics of the breathing.

You can also change your perception of the breath. When you breathe in, exactly what's happening? What's moving? And what's moving what? Often we have cartoon ideas about the process, and those ideas determine which muscles we're going to expand, which ones we're going to contract, which sensations we believe have to be part of the in-breath, which sensations have to be part of the out-breath. But if you can learn to question those presuppositions, you find that the breathing opens up. There are lots more possibilities. You can conceive of the body as a sponge: When you breathe, there's energy coming in and out through every pore. If you apply that perception to the breathing, the actual physical sensation of the breathing is going to change as well. The rhythm is going to change. Or you can think of having an energy core that runs down the center of the body. The in-breath comes in to that central core; when it goes out, it leaves that central core. Or you can think of breathing in and out through parts of the body that normally aren't associated with the breath. You can breathe in and out through your legs for example, or through your brain or your hands.

As you experiment with notions of the breathing, you discover lots of varieties. And they have different results in terms of feelings of ease or discomfort, pleasure or pain. You find that patterns of tension in the body that you assumed were a necessary part of having the body sit upright, or having the body breathe, are actually not necessary at all. You can breathe through them and they begin to loosen up. This leads you to explore other feelings of blockage or pain in the body as well.

Say there's a pain in your knee. How much of that pain is actually the result of physical causes and how much of it is a result of the way you're breathing? You can experiment, and in this way the technique gives you a different framework for looking at sensations of pleasure, sensations of pain. In other words, where there's pleasure you realize that to maintain that pleasure you can't just wallow in it or create a sense of yourself as gulping it down, because that usually puts an end to it. But if you stay with the breath and maintain your perception of the breathing in the right way, you can maintain that sense of pleasure, too. It's a positive thing. After all, the pleasure that comes from concentration is one of the factors of the path, Right Concentration. It's something to be developed.

As for the pain, that also becomes something you can approach with the tools you've learned from your technique. Try breathing through the tension around the pain. If the pain is in your knee, you can think of the breath coming in and out right at the knee. Or you can think of it going down the leg and through the pain in the knee and then out through the toes. Or if it's already coming into the knee, you can think of it coming in from the kneecap or coming in from behind the knee. There are all kinds of ways you can play with your perceptions of the breath.

As you experiment with them, you find that they have an important impact on the actual feeling of pain and your attitude toward the pain. You feel less threatened by it. You begin to develop an inquisitive attitude, which as the Buddha said is how you approach the First Noble Truth. You want to comprehend it, and that requires you to be inquisitive about pain, trying to understand it.

So the breathing technique gives you several important approaches for dealing with the pain. Instead of just sitting here and spinning out over the pain – thinking, “Here I am sitting and hurting myself by letting my knee get all bent up like this” – you can focus instead on, “Okay, what are the mechanics of the pain? How do they relate to the energy flow in the body?” Having a comfortable breath sensation as your basis in some other part of the body gives you a place you can go when the pain gets too much to handle. You've got a place you can turn around and run to, and when you have that sense of safety and security then you feel less threatened by the pain. You're more inquisitive, and at the same time you actually have tools that can lessen the pain.

And because your approach is one of being inquisitive rather than trying to push the pain away or squeeze it away, your attitude is going to have a huge effect on how you experience the pain. There are cases where the change in attitude will make the pain go away. At other times the pain won't go away but it doesn't matter because you're not involved in trying to feed off the pain. You don't find yourself forced to consume the pain. You're not a consumer anymore. You're an experimenter, inquiring into “What's the nature of this pain? How much does the way you breathe affect the pain? How much does your attitude affect the pain? What are you doing that makes the pain hurt the mind?” After all, the pain is something in the body. It doesn't have to hurt the mind. We're doing unskillful things, we have unskillful attitudes, unskillful ways of relating to the pain that drag it into the mind. We've got to turn around and look: “Okay, what are we doing that turns the pain into suffering for the mind?”

So by creating this new frame of reference through the technique, you're not suppressing your fear of pain. Your new frame of reference changes your attitude toward the pain so that you can see it more clearly.

We often believe that our emotions are a given, that they're purely visceral, that they come prior to our thoughts, but that's not necessarily so. A lot of unspoken or poorly articulated attitudes have gotten buried in our minds – a lot

of unskillful habits of dealing with pain, say, that come from way back when. Those are the things that fuel our emotions around pain. They also fuel our emotions around pleasure. As we create this new framework, though, we'll start stirring up some of those attitudes and calling them into question: "Who is this 'me' that's been devouring the pleasure and then suddenly finds itself devouring pain? Who is this consumer? And is it just consuming or is it also producing the pain, producing the pleasure?" Start questioning these attitudes to get a clearer sense of what's actually going on.

In this way you're not trying to clone enlightenment and you're not trying to suppress your emotions. You're just learning how to deal with your emotions in a more intelligent way. And that way the meditation, instead of making you dumber, actually makes you more perceptive, more intelligent, better able to see relationships. It's not a matter of suppression. It's not a matter of pretending that you're awakened when you're not. You're just learning to be very frank about what's actually going on by learning to question your assumptions of what seems to be obvious about what's going on.

So the meditation is not a process of programming you to have a certain sort of personality or certain sort of demeanor. It's not teaching you to clone anything. It's a series of instructions for how to explore. Instead of piling more denial on top of the denial already there in the mind, you're learning how to peel it away and not to be afraid of it, not to be afraid of what you're going to find as you peel it away, because you've got your tools to deal with whatever comes up.