

Fear & Anger

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One of the reasons we focus on the breath as the foundation of our meditation is to give us a good place to stand. Lots of different emotions, lots of different ideas, can come washing through the mind, and if you don't have someplace outside of the mind where you can take your stance, you get washed away. Greed comes in. Anger comes in. Fear comes in. And they can be overwhelming if you don't have a place to stand outside of them. So we focus on the breath as a way of getting outside of these overwhelming emotions, to realize they don't have to take over totally. We can have at least one corner of our awareness where they're not raging and strong.

Not only does the breath give us a place to stand, it also gives us some ammunition to use against these things. When anger comes, when fear comes, part of their power comes from the way they change the processes of the body. Hormones get poured into your bloodstream. Your heart beats a lot faster. Your stomach tightens up. And when both your mind and your body are taken over by an emotion like this, the only response that seems possible is just to give in. But you don't have to give in. You can work with your breath to counteract at least the physical side of the emotion first. Regardless of what's happening in the mind, you can still breathe calmly. In fact, this is an important way of retraining yourself. Even though scary thoughts or infuriating thoughts are coming through the mind, you can still breathe calmly. They don't need to have such a total impact.

So while we're meditating here, it's good to gain practice in being sensitive to what kind of breathing feels good, and where the different parts of the body are getting caught in unskillful energy patterns. It's one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee has you focus on the centers of the breath—the middle of the head, the palate, the base of the throat, the middle the chest, just above the navel—because they tend to be trigger points. Once a trigger point has been engaged, everything else seems to seize up as well. If you keep the trigger point relaxed, open, at ease, then the other physical reactions don't happen. That way your body can be an ally against these emotions instead of just simply being part of the victim, or dragged over to their side.

Being sensitive to the breath also helps you notice when these things are just beginning to creep up on you, because sometimes they don't come full blast. They creep up a little bit and then they build and build and build. If you're distracted, thinking about something else or aware of something else, you don't notice what's happening until they've taken over. This is why we emphasize being sensitive to the body not only while you're sitting here meditating but also as you go through the day. If you know that you have particular trigger points, keep your awareness centered on them. Keep those spots open regardless. Your first order of business is: No matter what happens, keep those spots open so the body doesn't get triggered.

That way, if something does start creeping in, you'll notice it immediately. And you find that these emotions are a lot easier to deal with when you catch

them right at the very beginning, before they trigger the hormones, before they trigger the physical reactions, because otherwise, once those reactions are triggered, you simply have to ride them out, and that may take a while. And of course when the body starts reacting, the anger seems constant, it seems to be there all the time. Actually, though, it may not be there all the time. Maybe it comes and goes. But the physical reactions seem to be constant, and they give the impression that the anger is still there. Maybe the thought that triggered those reactions is long gone. But when you see the reactions continuing, continuing, continuing, you think, “Well, gee, that emotion must still be there.” And you dig it back up again. You’re giving it more power than it really needs to have, or than it actually has.

You have to understand that even though the physical reaction is still happening, the mental trigger may have been long gone. And you don’t have to dig it back up again. You’re just riding out the after-effects of the emotion. As long as you’re determined not to be overcome, not to be swayed by these things, you’re okay. That puts you in a position where you can start looking at them as processes.

Remember that the Buddha said states of experience—and this includes emotions—have three components. The first is the physical, which is related to the breath. The second is the verbal component: the thoughts and narratives that go along with emotion. The third is the mental component: the feelings and the perceptions—the mental labels, the concepts that underlie the thinking, that underlie the verbal side. Once the physical side is relatively calmed down so that you can gain a toehold here, you can start looking at the other components: What are the thoughts, what are the ideas behind that particular emotion that got you going? What are the beliefs, the narratives? Do you have to believe them? Do you have to engage in them? Maybe you could tell yourself other narratives about this situation. That way you recast the situation in a way that doesn’t generate anger or fear.

Now, if the object of your fear is genuine and not just a dream or a random idea that’s wandered through your mind, you have to dig a little bit deeper and say, “Okay, even though there is this genuine danger, what’s the most skillful way to respond?” Simply giving in to the fear is not going to help. Ignoring it is not going to help, either. You’ve got an actual danger you’ve got to deal with.

So try to use your ingenuity to see how much you can prepare for the danger and what things you have to let go of so that you don’t magnify the danger. It’s like riding out a storm, as when we have these huge windstorms here and all you can do is just hide out in your hut, hide out in your tent, and hope that nothing falls on you. In the meantime, all kinds of damage is being done outside but you can’t do anything about it in the course of the storm. For the time being, you have to let go of any desire to protect those things. But you can protect your mental state, wait till the storm has passed, and then go out and survey the damage.

Often you’ll find that the fears, the anger, and all these other unskillful emotions come from holding onto things, laying claim to things that simply leave you exposed: a particular relationship, a particular job, a particular way of doing things, your body. As long as you continue to lay claim to these things, you’re open to danger. You’re open to difficulties. So you have to remind yourself: “These things are not me. These things are not mine.”

As you pursue the issue, you find that it often comes down to fear of death, especially if you're in physical danger. You do what you can to protect yourself, but you also have to remember that you've got your precepts. You've got to protect them, too. In fact, they should come first. There are limitations on what you can do to protect yourself physically and still maintain the skillfulness of the mind. In the forest tradition, when a monk is set to go out to a dangerous forest or a place where there's either disease or dangerous animals, the teacher will say, almost sarcastically, "Are you afraid to die?" Most people would normally say, "Of course, yes." But in the forest tradition, you're supposed to make yourself ready to die no matter what. After all, you can stay in a safe place and yet still die. You may surround yourself with all kinds of protection yet you've still got the inner workings of your body that can kill you at any time. So you have to learn how to induce the state of mind that says, "No, I don't have to be afraid." You have to realize that "I'm not the body." The body's been a very useful tool. It's been very helpful. But there will come a point where you have to let it go. So why not practice thinking that way now, so that when death actually does come you're prepared? You've been practicing. You can die without letting your virtues die. You can die and yet maintain the skillfulness of the mind.

There's that great passage in the Canon where a monk is going off to a dangerous land and the Buddha says, "The people there are dangerous. They're known to be very harsh, very barbaric and cruel. What are you going to do if they denounce you?" The monk says, "Well, I'm going to think, 'These people are really good in that they're not hitting me.'" "What if they hit you?" "These people are very good and civilized in that they're not stabbing me." "What if they stab you?" "They're good and civilized in that they're not killing me." "What if they kill you?" "Well at least my death wasn't a cowardly suicide." The Buddha says, "Okay, you're prepared to go."

This monk's way of thinking is his way of working with the mental fabrication, the perception, that "This body is me. If the body gets killed, that's the end, wipeout, total annihilation." You have to remember that that's not the case. Certain mental processes still survive—and you want them to survive and arrive in good shape, i.e., carrying lots of good kamma with them. So you don't want to die in the midst of doing something unskillful.

Sometimes when we're discussing the precepts, people will bring up situations such as, "What if someone is going to kill you if you don't lie?" Well, then, how do you guarantee that when you do lie, they're still not going to kill you? Or that they're not going to kill the people you love? What would that be like—you go ahead and lie and yet they still kill your children anyway? At the very least make sure that the things you *are* responsible for—your actions—stay within the precepts, within the bounds of what's skillful. The knowledge that you've maintained your honor can give you a lot of strength even as you go through the process of death. And you leave a noble example for those you leave behind.

So this is how you take apart unskillful emotions: You take apart the physical side, then the verbal side, then the mental side. For the mental side, you have to learn how to think outside the box. The same with the verbal side—because "verbal," here, refers to your inner chatter, what you say to yourself. Often what you say to yourself can be a lot more harmful than what people do or say

outside. So a large part of your training lies in learning how to talk to yourself in skillful ways.

There's a widespread misunderstanding that the most important part of the practice is bare attention, simply watching things in a non-reactive way. But that's not what the Buddha taught. He taught that the most important part of the practice is *appropriate* attention, where you learn to look at the situation and divide it up into four categories: where's the stress; where's the cause of stress; what would be the cessation of that stress, i.e., by abandoning the cause; and then how you do that: the path of practice that you develop to abandon the cause of stress. In other words, you see things in terms of the four noble truths. Each truth has a task, which has to be mastered as a skill and brought to completion: comprehend the stress, abandon the cause, develop the path, so that you can realize the cessation. That's a very different approach from simply being non-reactive, or learning to accept whatever comes.

If you see that a particular line of thinking is causing a lot of stress and suffering, remember: Abandoning is the task you do with the cause of stress. To drop that line of thinking, you actually have to change it, to think in the opposite way. Deep down you may feel, "This body is me." Well, what if it's not you? How does that change things? "My preferences are me." Well, what if they're not? How does that change things?

So the practice is not a matter of just watching or just being aware of things. If you see that something is unskillful, you've got to counteract it. And to counteract it, you've got to ask yourself: "What are your underlying assumptions?" The things you say "of course" to. Learn how to question that "of course."

Think of all the great advances in science, the people who questioned the "of course." "Why do apples fall out of trees?" "Well, of course: It's their nature to fall." That was what people believed for centuries. Yet Isaac Newton said, "Wait a minute, why?" And people made fun of him for asking why, but he ultimately came up with a totally different explanation. Not only does the apple fall, but the earth rises to the apple a little bit. Matter attracts matter. Of course now people are still trying to figure that one out. Why is there gravity? Maybe it's not a force; maybe it's a curve in space-time. But what's that? It's still a question, but it moves the discussion forward in a way that yields lots of benefits. If it weren't for Newton's formulae, we wouldn't have been able to send out satellites and space probes to gather information about the universe.

It's through learning how to question your basic assumptions that you gain and advance. You begin to see, "Oh, this is something I believed all along without even thinking about it, without examining it, and it's causing me unnecessary suffering."

Learn to dig down and question those assumptions because they're holding you captive. Or, to be more precise, by holding onto them you're holding yourself captive. Learn how to question. Learn how to let go. Learn to turn things inside out. It's like turning your pockets inside out. You sometimes find interesting things that you didn't realize were there.

So we work with the breath to give ourselves a foundation where we can start asking questions like this: looking into the mind to see where the problems are and applying the categories of appropriate attention, the four noble truths. We remind ourselves that meditation is not just a single activity where you're just

mindful, or just accepting, or just nonreactive, or just anything. There are lots of different approaches you could apply to the present moment. Learning how to figure out which one is appropriate right now and learning how to master it as a skill: That's the meta-skill of the meditation. It's the line of thinking that can set you free.