

Question & Probe

November 5, 2013

Years back, when I was a layperson but was already meditating, I was involved in a psychology experiment. They had a bucket of ice water. They told me to put my right hand in the water and think of the coldness of the hand going over to the left hand, and the warmth of the left hand going into the right hand. Then they told me to see how long I could keep my hand in the bucket. I had it there for a good 10 minutes when they finally told me I could stop because I was breaking the curve.

It turned out that the experiment had divided people into three groups. The first group was told simply to put a hand in the bucket, and when they couldn't stand it any longer, to pull it out. The second group was told to put the hand in the bucket of water and to try to keep it there as long as possible. The third group was the one that was given a technique for dealing with the coldness of the water.

And the results, of course, were that the people in the third group were able to keep their hands in the water much longer than the other two groups. Now, I'd been meditating prior to that for at least a year, which was why I was able to keep my hand in for so long. I was good at thinking of energies in one part of the body going to another part of the body.

But the lesson applies across the board, that if you're given a technique for dealing with pain—for dealing with difficult situations or dealing with emotional or physical pain—you can handle it a lot more easily than if you're not given a technique. If you feel you have something you can use to defend yourself from the pain, or even better, if you feel you can take a more active or proactive approach toward it so that you're not simply on the receiving end—that you're actually shaping the experience—you can handle things a lot more easily. You feel less oppressed or threatened by them.

This is one of the things we learn as we're working with the breath in the body. We're learning how to fabricate the breath energy in such a way that we can create a sense of well-being in spite of other conditions around us, in spite of other things going on in the body or mind. So it's important that you learn how to protect this space you create here, because it's so easily overrun, especially when you're first working on this skill. When you can develop and maintain it, it becomes your safe place.

The mind needs a safe place—and not only a safe place, but also a range of weapons or tools: skills that you can use to deal with situations as they arise so

that you're not afraid of them. Especially when you're dealing with emotional pain, one of the least helpful pieces of advice I hear—and I keep on hearing it—is to simply to sit with the pain, sit with your difficult emotions. And that's it. You're not given any help as to how not to get overwhelmed by the emotion, or how not to end up feeling trapped or trying to run away from it?

Remember, the Buddha taught three types of fabrication. First is bodily fabrication, the in-and-out breath. You work with the breath in the body so that even though there may be difficult emotions going on in the mind, you're here with a sense of well-being, physically at least. And the difficult emotions are not working their way into the body through the breath. The breath forms a cocoon around the body.

Then, when you're coming from that sense of well-being, you can exercise those other forms of fabrication. For instance, verbal fabrication: You can ask yourself questions about what's going on here. The Buddha has you ask questions about two types of phenomena. One, right away, is to ask "Where's the stress here? And what's causing it?" Try to step back and just ask those questions. The whole point here is that you're not simply on the receiving end, but you're taking a more proactive approach.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about dealing with physical pain by asking different questions about it. Our normal reaction to physical pain is that we want it to go away or that we could get away from it. But his approach was something else entirely: Once the mind had a certain foundation in concentration, you start probing, asking questions about it. Where is the sharpest point of the pain right now? What shape does the pain have? What color does the pain have? Does it have the intention to hurt you? Where is it? Is it the same thing as the part of the body that's pained, or is it something else? After all, pain is not part of the aggregate of form. It comes under the aggregate of feeling. The body comes under the aggregate of form. So there must be something different between the pain and the body. What is the difference?

And as he noted many times, the questions you ask today might gain good results today, but the same questions might not get the same good results tomorrow. So you've got to come up with new questions every day—which means that the mind has to be constantly on the offensive. And the fact that you're on the offensive like this keeps you from being a stationary target for the pain.

The same principle applies with the mind. When some emotions are painful, you can ask yourself, "Well, what's the assumption behind this emotion?" Where do you feel it? When does it come? When does it go?" Start asking questions about it. And if you're coming from a place of well-being in the breath, it's a lot

easier to ask those questions. And in asking the questions, you're setting yourself apart from the pain so that you can observe it clearly.

Ultimately, the Buddha has you question a second type of phenomena—your sources of comfort—as well. Whatever attitudes you may tend to fall back on that give you a sense of well-being, there are times when you have to question them because maybe you're hiding something from yourself behind them. That kind of questioning can feel threatening unless you've got a sense in the body, in the breath, of an ease and fullness you can fall back on.

In other words, you realize that a comforting assumption is not all that reliable and you've got to question it. You know that you'll still have a source of nourishment, a source of well-being inside even if you'll eventually have to let go of that comfortable assumption.

So this foundation we're developing here with the breath is something that's really worth protecting. It's our defense, our safe space from which we can start asking the questions that will free us from a lot of our self-inflicted pains. You're not sitting here defenseless. You've got your tools, so protect them. Look after them. And then use them.

It's only in developing concentration, and in learning how to ask the right questions about where there's pain in the body and pain in the mind, what's causing it, and what can be done to let it go: It's only through those questions supported by concentration that you're going to develop the discernment that takes you to release.

Discernment isn't something you just copy from what you've heard in the books. It comes from probing and questioning. And the concentration is what gives you the foundation that allows you to probe without fear.