

## *Stress*

*May 24, 2021*

When we try to understand the Buddha's teachings, it's always good to put them into context. For example, the three perceptions are teachings on discernment, so they fall in the context of the questions that lie at the basis of discernment: "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? What's skillful? What's unskillful? What's blameless? What's blameworthy?" These questions put the issues of discernment in the context of the search for happiness.

If you're really discerning, that's the big question: "How do I find happiness, a happiness that's reliable, a happiness that's worth the effort that goes into trying to find it?" These questions reflect the Buddha's own search. He started out with very high standards for what was going to count as long-term welfare and happiness: a happiness that's deathless, free from aging, illness, death. In fact, the terms of that question, "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" reflect the Buddha's concern for aging, illness, and death. Think of Ven. Ratthapala talking to King Koravya. His example of aging fits in with inconstancy: If happiness is based on something that ages, it's not going to be long-term. It's changing all the time. Welfare and happiness: If something is stressful, it's not going to count as happiness. And if it's changing and stressful, why claim it as you or yours?

The examples that Ratthapala gave for inconstancy was aging. Stress was illness; not-self was death. So these teachings all form a cluster. They point us in the direction where we should want to take these teachings. For example, the perception on *dukkha*, stress or suffering: We look at the things that we do to find happiness. We look at the happiness that results. And the question is: Are we focusing our efforts in the right place? Is the happiness we're gaining what we want? The happiness we're finding: Is it really happiness? Is it really pleasant, or does it hold some stress? If it's got some stress in it, it's not really happiness, especially if you're measuring it against the Buddha's standards: something that's totally free from aging, illness, and death. You can use these perceptions as a gauge. You work at something, look at the results. If there's any stress in there, then you know you haven't reached the end.

Now, sometimes things that are stressful are part of the path. But again, the Buddha said that you can't rest content even with skillful qualities. You give rise

to the skillful qualities, you nurture them, but you have to keep trying to keep making them more and more skillful. This is reflected in one of the suttas where the Buddha talks about getting the mind into deeper and deeper stages of concentration by looking for the disturbance that's there in whatever concentration you've got. You work with the breath, think about the breath, adjust the breath. Once you've got something good, you try to maintain it. Once you've maintained it, you try to spread that comfortable sense of energy flowing freely through the body.

It's a fair amount of work. Think of the bathman having to knead the soap powder and the water all day, all day, all day for the people coming to get their baths. It's work. Ajaan Lee calls it concentration work: directed thought and evaluation.

There comes a point, though, where you've done enough. The breath is good enough to settle down with. That's the point where the directed thought and evaluation become superfluous. They are the disturbance at that point. So you let them go. You get into a more peaceful state of concentration. Try to maintain that. And then you notice, where's the disturbance there? You could take this process through concentration, layer by layer. You can even get to the point where the fact that you have to breathe in and breathe out seems laborious, where the breath energy is so full through the body that the breathing process becomes superfluous and no longer seems energizing, no longer seems refreshing.

It's like having had your fill of water, and then someone comes along and offers you two or three more glasses. It doesn't feel refreshing anymore. So you let the breath calm down. Then even the perception of having a body here: That becomes a disturbance. Then you can chase this line of questioning all the way through the different formless levels. In each case, there's an element that's stressful, a disturbance. And you're looking for something that's really, really still. Then you get to the ultimate level of concentration, and you realize, okay there's still disturbance there. You turn around look at what's going on in the mind.

It's like having a problem with your mattress. There are things that have gotten caught under the mattress and they poke up through. So you get them out, get them out, get them out. Finally you lie down and the mattress is really, really smooth, really, really comfortable. But then you realize you've got a body. And the body's got its own pains, regardless of how comfortable the mattress may be. In the same way, you turn around and look at what the mind is still doing in this process of fabricating a state of concentration that still feels burdensome, even though the concentration itself is extremely light in the sense of not requiring all that much effort. Still, there's a fair amount of fabrication going on.

You look at some of the suttas where they talk about all the different things going on even in subtle levels of concentration. There's an act of will, for instance, in addition to the regular factors of concentration. So you learn how to let go of it. You learn how to detect it first. This is why the three characteristics are lined up the way they are. You detect it first because of its inconstancy: There's an unevenness in the concentration. The level of stress goes up. The level of stress goes down. You have to ask yourself, "When it goes up, what did you just do? What perception appeared to the mind that you held on to? Can you let it go?" Then you let it go because you can see that it's inherently stressful.

Now, you remember, when the Buddha talks about *dukkha* or stress, that there are two kinds. There's the stress in the three perceptions, and there's the stress in the four noble truths. The stress in the three perceptions has to do with the raw material from which you're trying to create a state of happiness, create a state of well-being, realizing that the raw material is the raw material for that purpose. But it's like trying to build a house out of paper. You get lots of paper, and you can get pretty thick walls made out of the paper, but the house is not going to last. You've got the wrong materials. As for the stress in the four noble truths, that's the stress that comes from craving. That's the stress that in wanting to build houses out of paper or whatever. So you realize that you've got two things going here. There are your raw materials, which are inadequate, and then there's this drive in the mind that comes from craving. That, too, is stressful.

As you keep looking around inside, there will come a point where you realize that you can stay where you are and there's going to be stress. You move someplace else, and it's going to be stressful, too. That's when the mind looks for another alternative, which is tricky because what's the alternative between staying and moving? You find out, but it's not what you expect. But you get there by holding to really high standards as to what you're going to accept as a really peaceful, really comfortable, really pleasant state of happiness, state of well-being.

There are some people who translate the word *dukkha* as unsatisfactory, which is not a very satisfactory translation. Things in and of themselves are not unsatisfactory. They become unsatisfactory only if we try to use them for a purpose, and they don't meet that purpose. But they *are* stressful in and of themselves, and that's what the word *dukkha* means. There's an element of stress. There's an element of pain. When they talk about *dukkha-vedana*, they're not talking about unsatisfactory feelings. They're talking about painful feelings, unpleasant feelings. And there's a sense that the mind is being weighed down by these things. That's because you're looking for an ultimate happiness, which is why things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self are unsatisfactory. They

don't come up to your standards. It's a value judgment, and it's a value judgment you can make only if you hold to really high standards.

You want the kind of happiness the Buddha wanted. And you have to find it the way he found it—by being very, very picky about what you're going to accept as good enough, pleasant enough. You do your best to get the mind to settle down and then you try to maintain it. Being picky doesn't mean that you throw it away if it's not up to your standards. You first have to develop the factors of the path. In the very early stages, they're not going to be all that impressive, but you hold on to them. You stick with them.

Remember, deep states of concentration start out as ordinary states of concentration, simply that you stitch them together. As you stitch them together, they go deeper and deeper and deeper until they really do become more and more and more satisfying, closer and closer to being satisfying. But you always have to think: There must be something better.

But you have to be like the wise, experienced cow. You don't go jumping for what you think might be better. First you consolidate what you've got, and only when it's solid can you start analyzing it, saying, "What's better than this? Where's the disturbance here?" You move to something new. Settle in. It's like working your way up a corporate ladder. There are people who get a job, and then they get a raise, get a new position, and their first thought is, "How do I move to the next position?" That kind of person can't be trusted. What you want is somebody who moves into a new position and wants to show that they deserve the new position by doing it well. Of course, it's because they're doing it well that the boss might think, "Okay, maybe we can get this person to do something even better."

So you do what you're doing well as you get the mind to settle in, and then you start looking for the disturbance. When you see it, you drop whatever's causing it, and move up, or move deeper—whichever way you visualize this to yourself.

That's how you approach the step-by-step nature of the practice. You don't just go running up and down the steps. You move in, settle in, and then settle in deeper. And then settle in deeper. That's how you use these perceptions to take you to the happiness the Buddha's talking about, the happiness he found—and the happiness that we can find, too, as we follow his teachings, follow his example, looking very carefully at what we're doing, and learning to do it really well.