

To Discern Suffering

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That phrase in the chant just now, “Those who don’t discern suffering”: It sounds strange. We all detect suffering in our lives. It’s a daily occurrence. Sometimes there’s a lot, sometimes there’s a little.

Some people, of course, deny that there’s any suffering in their lives. I knew a journalist in Bangkok one time who asked me, “Why is it the Buddha talks about suffering so much? I don’t suffer in my life.” I asked him, “Do you have any stress in your life?” “Oh, yes! Stress, lots of stress all the time.”

Well, that’s what he’s talking about. It’s the same sort of thing. And the big issue is not so much the stress that comes from outside, it’s the stress that we add that comes from within. This is the stress to which we’re often most blind. We just think that it’s just part of the way things are. Or we attribute it to things outside.

So when the Buddha said, “discerning suffering,” what he meant was really understanding what it is, where it comes from, what can be done about it—particularly the added suffering that’s totally unnecessary and yet is really the suffering that weighs the mind down. Without all that added stress, the mind would not suffer. There might be pain in the body but there’d be no pain in the mind, no sense of being burdened by the pain in the body.

So it’s not a question of detecting suffering, it’s a question of understanding it, comprehending it. This requires that we be willing to sit with it for a while. And to sit with it the mind needs strength. That’s why we develop concentration and mindfulness.

Actually, there are five strengths that the Buddha talks about. The first is conviction: The conviction that if we’re going to get past this suffering, we have to understand it, i.e., it’s our own duty, it’s something we have to do on our own. Now, we *can* get help from other people who explain things to us. In fact, without that help, we’d be totally lost. But still, we’re the ones who have to do the actual work. And having conviction in that—that our decisions and our choices really do make a difference: That’s a strength right there.

Then you’re persistent. You stick with it. Keep watching to see what it is that you’re adding to the situation. If you notice that you’re adding anything unskillful, you try to figure it out. “Exactly where is this unnecessary? Why do I believe it’s necessary? What would the world be like if I didn’t do this? What would my life be like if I didn’t do this?”

You'll notice this, for instance, when you're sitting and tensing up around the pain. Say, you have a pain in your knee, a pain in your back, a pain in your hips: You tend to tense up around it. Part of you believes that you have to do this to protect yourself from the pain spreading to different parts of the body. But the question is, does it really keep things under control?

A lot of these attitudes and reactions that we have around pain come from way back, from the time when we didn't understand anything at all. We didn't even understand language. We had pain and we had to deal with it. The baby coming out of the womb dealing with pain has no way of comprehending it but will try out different ways of fending it off. If something seems to work, that becomes a habit. Some of these habits go way back to that time even before we understood language.

This is why when you ask questions about physical pain, sometimes it's good to ask questions that sound very strange. Which side of the pain are you on? Exactly which pattern of tension is keeping the pain within limits? And what would happen if you let go of that tension? Oftentimes you find that you've added an awful lot of extra stuff that was really not necessary at all.

So you want to stick with this investigation. But in order to have the resilience to keep coming back to this requires the next two strengths: mindfulness and concentration.

Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. Here it's keeping in mind the fact that you want to understand the pain—and it's not so much the physical pain of course, but the pain in the mind, the tension, the stress, the constant pressure that you're putting on yourself one way or another. Here again, you run into that attitude, "If I didn't put pressure on myself, this wouldn't get done, that wouldn't get done." But maybe it could get done but without the pressure. This is an important point to keep in mind.

You also want to see: Exactly where is this particular stress in the mind coming from? Is it coming from the body? Is it coming from feelings? Is it coming from mind states? You want to learn how to notice these things on their own level.

This is why the frames of reference for mindfulness are that: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind states, mental qualities in and of themselves. We tend not to see them in and of themselves. We tend to see them in terms of a larger story. If there's a feeling, it's a feeling about something. If there's a mind state, it's directed at something. We don't really look at the feeling or the mind state in and of itself.

So we start with looking at the breath in and of itself. And you'd be amazed how many stories you can build up even around that. If you have trouble sitting

down with the breath, one of the immediate stories is, “I’m no good at this. I can’t do this. Something’s wrong with me.” Or: “The meditation doesn’t work,” or whatever. Those are the first set of hurdles you have to get past.

Then you run into more and more subtle hurdles: the different stories the mind throws up about the past, the future, whatever. You’ve got to keep reminding yourself: Just get out of that framework.

It’s like finding yourself in a really bad dream, and suddenly there’s something inside you that remembers, “Hey, wait a minute. This is a dream. I’m asleep.” You can wake up and you’re out of it. A lot of the attitudes we have about our suffering are that: They’re like bad dreams that we’ve got involved in and we need to wake up.

It’s good to keep this in mind. Staying with the body in and of itself is a good way of recognizing the dreams as they come. You begin to see there are things you add to the experience of the present moment that are totally unnecessary and not all that useful.

Last night we talked about how unreal our thoughts can be. They seem to have a huge reality, but there’s no way that a thought can really correspond to the reality out there. The idea that truth is an issue of total correspondence is reminds me of a friend I had in high school. He told me that when he was a little kid, he’d get a map and take a magnifying glass and look at the map to see if he could see the little houses and the trees and everything that really existed in the place that the map portrayed. And of course he was disappointed: There were no houses and trees. There were just the lines of the roads on a white background. Could you say the map was inaccurate? It was an accurate map if its purpose was to give you directions when you want to drive. But there are lots of other maps that you could draw of the same place for other purposes.

It’s like that atlas we have of Saskatchewan that they printed for the millennium. They have a map for almost everything, and the maps are all very different. There are the maps of where this or that bird is located, or where this or that mineral is found or what geological formation lies underground.

Each map is accurate, but it’s only a partial picture. It’s accurate for a particular purpose. When you want to find out about the birds, you don’t necessarily want to know about human population locations or patterns. You look for the particular map that’s good for that purpose.

This something you’ve got to keep in mind with the ideas that come to your mind around a particular topic: What purpose do they serve? If they seem to serve only the purpose of giving rise to more stress, those are the ideas you want to get rid of, just let go. Whatever their truth-value, they’re not useful right now.

The Buddha once said that he would speak only things that were true, beneficial, and timely. The same principle should apply to your thoughts. If you find a thought coming up in the mind, the first question is: Is it true? If it's not, drop it. But even if it's true, it's not necessarily what you need to be thinking about right now. It's like a map. You may have the wrong map. It's perfectly accurate for describing where the northern warbler is located, but that's not what you need. If you're looking for uranium, you want another map.

So the next question is, "Is it beneficial?" And then, "Is this the right thought for right now?" These questions help to clear away a lot of the extra things that we habitually add to our experience in the present that get in the way of understanding: Exactly what is this process? Where are we adding unnecessary suffering?

The strength that really enables us to do all this is the strength of concentration, the ability to give the mind a place where it can rest. If you've been thinking about things too much and analyzing things too much, you can say, "Okay, for the time being, I'm just going to sit here and be very, very still." Whatever comes up, you treat it simply as an issue of: "Does this contribute to your stillness? Or does it get in the way?" Let go of the things that get in the way and make use of the things that contribute.

There may be some issues that need to be figured out, but if the mind needs to rest right now, you say, "I've got to just let that pass for the time being." Note that there's an issue that still is unresolved, and then just let it go. Figure out what you're able to handle right now and what has to wait for later.

And whatever parts of the mind say, "This is stupid, just being very still here," don't listen to them. They're getting in the way. If there's one that says, "I'm bored," question it: "Who am 'I'?" Why do you immediately identify with the "I" in that thought rather than the "I" in, "I want to stay with the breath"? You have lots of different "I"s and you can really choose among them.

So for the time being if the mind needs to rest, if it needs to gather its strength in that way: Whatever else comes up, whatever gets in the way of that, you have to realize this is totally superfluous. You don't need it. Just let it go.

Whether this requires looking at the drawbacks of that thought or ignoring it or simply relaxing around it or whatever, you do whatever is needed to keep the mind still.

But discernment itself is also a form of strength, in the sense that if you see through a problem, you don't have to just exert force of will to stay still in the face of something difficult.

Ajaan Fuang had a student one time, a woman had a really bad problem with

cancer. She had a cancer in this part of the body, they'd take that out and then the cancer would have spread to something else, and they'd take that out.

There was one time she was undergoing radiation treatment for cancer, and they discovered that she was allergic to the anesthetic. She asked if she could try it without the anesthetic. They told her, "It's going to be very painful." "I'm a meditator," she told them, "let me give it a try."

And so they did. She was able to endure it, but when she came out of the treatment she said she was totally exhausted, just trying to fight off the tendency of the mind to go to the pain, to identify with the pain. She was just fighting, fighting, fighting all the way, trying to use her powers of stillness not to move in the face of it.

Ajaan Fuang went to visit her after the treatment and asked her how it went. She told him what had happened and he said, "It's a lot more efficient if you can use your discernment. Realize that the awareness is one thing, the pain is something else, and just hold that understanding in mind."

She said that from that point on, it was a lot easier to go through the treatments. They didn't require so much force of will.

This how discernment is a strength. It sees through a problem in a way that requires less energy on your part.

And this is what it means to discern suffering: to see which part of the suffering comes from unnecessary activities that you're engaging in, and all you have to do is stop.

Of course it's not as simple as that, but that's the basic shape of the solution. Learning how to see exactly what you're doing and where it's unnecessary: That's what makes it simple.

Once you've reached that point, it's simple. But to see that it's unnecessary: That takes a lot of understanding, a lot of patience, a lot of trying to figure things out.

That's because so many of the things that go on in our lives are things that we totally take for granted: "It's got to be this way, it's got to be that way. When this happens, I have to do this. When that happens, this has to go along with it." We just assume that that's the way it is without really looking into it.

What meditation does is to give you the strength and the opportunity to really look into what you're doing to add unnecessary stress to your life. To recognize that, yes, you're doing it, and two, it's unnecessary. Once those two things are fully understood, it takes a huge burden off the mind.