

What to Tolerate, What Not

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The Buddha calls the breath a type of bodily fabrication.

Which means two things. One is that the breath is what shapes your experience of the body, of the various properties of the body: breath; fire or the warmth; liquid, coolness; earth or solidity. The breath is your most immediate experience of the body. It's through the energy of the body that you actually experience the other properties.

It's also a type of fabrication in the sense that there's an intentional element to it. It's one of the few processes of the body that you can actually have some control over. So it's a good place to focus your attention, because it's right where the body and the mind meet, and where the mind actually has an impact on the body, something you can explore while you're sitting here.

It teaches you some important lessons. One is that what you experience is not just a given. Each present moment has lots of potentials, and it's up to you to decide how to focus on them, where to focus, what to do with them to actually shape them into an experience. Which means that you're not just on the receiving end of the present moment. You're actually creating it to some extent.

Now, there may be some limitations on the raw materials you have available at any one time. If the body is sick, you have to deal with the fact that the body is sick. If there are physical pains, you have to deal with those physical pains. If, as you go through the day, there's some negative speech coming your way, you have to learn how to deal with negative speech.

Those are some of the potentials that come from the past. But you don't have to suffer from them. You can learn how to process them, you can learn how to handle them in such a way that even though there may be some pain or some unpleasantness, deep down inside the mind doesn't have to suffer. That's an important skill. It's the skill that the Buddha teaches.

As he says, there's a difference between the stress that comes from the simple fact that things are inconstant, that they change, and the stress that comes from your craving.

The first is the stress in the three characteristics. You're not responsible for that. There's nothing you can do about it. That's just the way things are.

But the stress that comes from craving: That's the stress in the four noble truths, and that's where you can really focus your attention and make a difference. It comes from the activity of the mind. It comes from your ignorance and all the

other factors that lead up to craving. That's something you can do something about.

This is one of the basic principles of wisdom: figuring out what you're responsible for and what you're not, learning how to put aside the things you're not responsible for, the things that are not your duty, not your burden, and to focus on the things you do have responsibility for, the things you *can* change.

This is why, when the Buddha teaches patience, he makes a clear distinction. The things that you tolerate, that you have to accept are basically the externals, the raw materials you're presented with. There's physical pain? Okay, you accept the fact that there's physical pain. If there are harsh, unkind words coming your way, you accept that fact. You learn to tolerate these things. Don't let yourself get upset by them. Don't get worked up by them.

But as for unskillful states that come through the mind, unskillful fashioning or fabrication that goes on in the mind: That's something he says you don't want to tolerate. Greed, aversion and delusion come in: You don't want to tolerate them.

But to deal with them effectively, you have to study them. You can't just push them out and pretend they're not there. Otherwise, they'll turn into The Thing. They go underground and come shooting up someplace else in strange shapes.

This is why the Buddha made the distinction. You've got to comprehend your stress and suffering so that you can let go of the cause.

That means you have to sit with these things for a while and watch them. When greed comes, what is it like? When anger comes, what is it like? When delusion comes, how do you recognize that it's delusion? When you're clinging to something, you have to watch that: What is the clinging here? Why?

This is why we work on developing our mindfulness and alertness: so that we can see these things and deal with them not through aversion but through understanding.

So as you're sitting here with the breath, you want to figure out what will allow the mind to get settled in the present moment so that it can see things clearly and not be knocked off balance. You want to create your area of well-being in here.

Again, this is why we focus on the breath, this bodily fabrication. You can play a role in shaping how you experience your body. You can focus on the pains and magnify them and just sit in misery here for the hour. Or you can focus on the areas in the body where there's pleasure, a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. In the beginning, it may not be all that pronounced. But you find the areas that feel okay. When you breathe in, they feel okay; when you breathe out, they feel okay. Focus on those parts. xx

There are two ways you can do this. One is to find one small part in the body that feels good and stick with that. Make sure you can keep it feeling good all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Then you move around to other parts of the body and do the same. When you've been through the whole body, you can try to spread your awareness so that you're aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out.

Or you can start by developing that whole-body awareness right away. One of the ways you know that something is pleasant or unpleasant in the body is by how it feels in the context of the whole body, taking that larger frame of reference and watching the breath from that enlarged sense of being aware of the body all the way from the top of the head down to the soles of the feet.

When you look at your body in this way, how does the breathing feel? Do you notice things that you didn't see before? Areas of tension or tightness that you missed? Allow them to relax. As for the painful parts of the body, you don't have to focus on them right now. Focus on the pleasure.

Ajaan Lee compares it to choosing your friends. You can choose fools for your friends or you can choose wise people, and it's going to make a huge difference. So here you have the choice. Think of the pains in the body as the fools and the comfortable sections as the wise people. You can hang out with them for the time being because they strengthen the mind. They give the mind a firm foundation where it can deal with pain and not get thrown off balance. You have your part of the body here that's your safe place, your haven.

Having this haven also helps you develop more of the patience and tolerance that you need to deal with the other difficulties in life. You've got your place where you can go to. You have a place that nobody else can penetrate unless you let them in. Otherwise, it's yours.

If you can keep this full-body awareness going, it helps keep you awake. One of the problems when people meditate is that things get quiet and peaceful and still and calm and their range of awareness just shrinks and shrinks and shrinks... and then disappears. They doze off. Or you go into a sort of undefined state where you feel fine, things feel okay, but when you come out of it, it's hard to say where you were. Where were you focused? You don't know. Were you awake? Well, not really. Were you asleep? Not really. That kind of concentration doesn't accomplish anything. You want to be clearly aware.

One of the ways of making sure that you don't slip off into what Ajaan Lee calls delusion concentration is to try to keep your awareness of the body as full as possible. Spread it right from the beginning of the session and then adjust the breath from that perspective.

This gives you a foundation from which you can watch things, from which you can look at pain, you can look at stress, and not feel threatened by it. That allows you to comprehend it. When you can comprehend, you can see which is the stress that's just there—it's part of the three characteristics—and which is the stress you're adding. And when you can see that you're adding it, what are you doing? What happened?

It'll come and go. It's inconstant. It comes when there's craving, and when that particular craving passes away, that particular instance of stress passes away. This is why we look at inconstancy: not just to say, "Oh, yes, things arise and pass away. What else is new?" We're looking to see what arises with it, especially what arises with the stress. And when the stress went away, what went away as well? What stopped? What were the movements in the mind that arose and passed away together with that stress? That's when you begin to see what's causing it. And that's when you can really do something about it.

Otherwise, we're like the person in the leaky boat who just keeps bailing the boat out but without trying to figure out: Where's the leak? You keep bailing and bailing and bailing but the water keeps coming in, coming in, coming in. You get frustrated and discouraged after a while. There seems to be no end to it.

It's because you're attacking the problem at the wrong place. You want to figure out, "Where's the cause?" Once you deal with the cause, then the problem becomes not a problem anymore.

So it's important that you realize the Buddha's distinction here between what you tolerate and what you don't tolerate. You tolerate the things that are beyond your control. The things that are unskillful that are within your control you don't tolerate. But you do have to examine them; you have to educate yourself about them. Reading books helps, but the real education comes from looking at what's going on in the mind, developing the skills you need in terms of concentration, mindfulness, and discernment to see these things clearly. Because they can be undercut, they can be uprooted.

That way, even though there may be stress in your experience, it doesn't weigh on the mind. The stress in the four noble truths is the only thing that really weighs on the mind. The stress in the three characteristics is not a problem if you don't pull it in. Clinging and craving pull it in, make it weigh the mind down.

So as we meditate, we're exploring this area of our present experience, the present moment here, to figure out which is which: Which is the part that you are responsible for and which is the part you're not. Where can you make a change, where can you not?

The only way you can learn that lesson is by pushing things here, nudging them

there: in other words, working with the breath, working with the way you think about the breath, working with the way you evaluate the breath. You experiment. That's how you learn about things. That's how you can understand exactly where the causes are and where the effects are, which things you can have an impact on, and which things are impervious to your impact.

It comes from poking things, nudging them. Making a change here, making a change there. Change your breathing: See what that's like. Change your point of focus: See what that's like.

When an issue comes up in the mind and you see there's a lot of stress around it, ask yourself, "Can I think about this in a different way?"

That's why the Buddha teaches about developing goodwill, developing compassion: all those techniques for changing the way you perceive things, the way you think. They help give you a handle on this question, "What are you responsible for? What are you not? What do you have to tolerate? What do you not have to tolerate?"

When you understand this distinction and can actually learn where the real line lies through your own experimentation: That's when the meditation gives you real knowledge, when it makes a real difference in your life. You take care of what you're responsible for—and as for everything else, you just leave it behind, leave it alone. That way you and the world around you can be at peace.