

The Skill of Not Suffering

August 4, 2015

I was talking to someone today who likes to get exercise by riding a bike. Recently a number of her acquaintances have had really bad bike accidents, and she was getting concerned. She's getting older now. And seeing how badly mangled her friends were, she was beginning to worry about herself, and thought maybe she should stop riding the bike. She had mentioned this to a friend of hers, and the friend said, "Oh no, don't think of accidents. We create our reality, so if you think about accidents, you'll make them happen; but if you don't think about accidents, they won't happen." Kind of a Barney-the-dinosaur approach to the world. If it were true, nobody would age, nobody would die. Most people who die are not thinking about death. Most people who get sick are not thinking about illness. These things happen because of karma.

We have all kinds of karma in our past, good and bad, and it's a combination of past karma and present karma that actually shapes our experience. If we could totally shape our present experience, who would suffer in this world? As the Buddha said, if we could get things just by wishing or praying, who in the world be old, who in the world would be sick, who in the world would be poor or ugly? We can't just wish our way or imagine our way into perfect health, youth, and continued life.

That's because we have our past actions and they're having an influence. We've already chosen to be born as human beings and maybe we didn't look at the fine print in the contract, but part of being a human being is that if you live long enough, you get old, you're going to get sick, and even if you don't live long, you're going to die for sure. Thinking about death doesn't make you die. The reason that the Buddha has you think about death is because you have to prepare, you have to be heedful. So even though you can't do anything about your past karma, you can do something about your present karma. That's why we meditate: The act of meditation is our present karma right now, and it's good karma.

You're here to focus on the present moment, and particularly, on the breath. Breathe in really deep a couple of times to see how it feels, so that you notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. When we talk of focusing on the breath, it's not so much the air coming in and out of lungs, it's more the sensation of the energy that flows through the body as you breathe in and out, because it's not just air coming through the nose and into the lungs. You can feel the energy

go all the way down through the torso. Your shoulders are involved, your chest muscles, your back muscles.

And as you get more and more sensitive to the breathing, you begin to realize that your whole nervous system, down to your toes, can be involved in the breathing. In fact, the more you let the sense of energy flow through all your nerves and all the muscles of the body, the more comfortable the breathing will be. You want it to be comfortable so that the mind will be inclined to want to stay in the present moment, where our work is. Because regardless of the fact that we can't do anything about our past karma, we're constantly creating present karma, so try to be always creating good karma in the present.

This distinction between past karma and present karma also relates to suffering.

There are two kinds of suffering. There's the suffering that comes from the simple fact that you're in a body that's going to change—it's going to age, grow ill, and die. Things all over the world are changing all the time. And because they're changing, there's stress in the change. A lot of this is out of your control. That's why it's said to be not-self. If it were your self, you could control it. But there are a lot of things you can't control, even in your own body. But there are some things you *can* control. What you're deciding to do in the present moment: That's under your control.

And that's related to a second kind of suffering, the suffering of the four noble truths. This suffering is optional; it doesn't have to be there. It comes from our own ignorance, from our own craving and clinging, and those things can be changed.

We bring our awareness to the present moment to minimize our ignorance. We try to look at our actions the present moment. We're always acting; the mind is an acting process. What are we doing? Why are we acting? What are we acting for? You want to be able to see these things clearly. One of the best ways to see them clearly is to focus on your breath and maintain that intention to stay with the breath—because intention is the action.

What are your intentions right now? "Stay with the breath. Stay with the breath. Try to make the breath comfortable." You notice when you set this intention in your mind, you might stir up some other intentions: to think about something else; worry about any pains you might feel in the body. You've got to say, "No, I am not going to go there," and think of those other intentions just dissolving away, dispersing, like air. Don't give them any more reality than they need to have. You want to give full attention to your intention to stay here.

It's only when you hold on to one intention that you begin to see how many other intentions slosh around in the mind and where they can be pulling you. You learn to say No to them. You strengthen that No by making your Yes stay with the breath, making the breath as interesting and comfortable as possible.

Another one of the reasons why we work with the breath energy throughout the whole body is because once the breath becomes comfortable, there's a tendency to drift off if your range of awareness is narrow. But if your range of awareness is broad, covering the whole body from the top of the head to the tips of the toes—that's the range that you are aware of, down to your feet, down to your hands, every part of your body: When you're fully occupying the body, you're much less likely to drift off. When your range of awareness is all-around like this, you can begin to see things happening in your mind that you didn't notice before.

That's because you've got a diffuse light that spreads throughout the body, instead of one little spotlight focused on one little spot. When a spotlight is in one spot, everything else is put in the darkness. But here you've got a diffuse light that spreads throughout the body, so that if any thoughts come up in the mind—any intentions, any questions, any comments, any complaints—you're going to see them. And you have to learn how *not* to run with them. You see them and think of them going right through the mind, like a breeze going through a screen on a window: The breeze doesn't move the screen; the screen doesn't stop the breeze.

In the same way, thoughts can go right through the mind, but you stay with your main intention, which is to stay right here with the breath. There are lessons to be learned by staying here. Once you see a thought beginning to come up, instead of following your usual tendency, which is to jump in any thought that comes and ride with it, you learn to question it: Where is this thought going? Where is it coming from?

With many thoughts, you don't have to ask very much. You can tell right away: "This thought is going to lead to suffering; this thought is going to lead to harm"—especially the thoughts that have a lot of craving and clinging. As when you're sick and you have thoughts, "I wish I weren't sick": Well, what is that thought going to do? It makes you miserable. Instead, you can say, "Okay, given the fact that I'm sick right now, how do I deal with it so that I don't have to suffer from it?"

If you learn not to identify with thoughts that involve suffering—they're there, but you don't take them on as you or yours—that helps protect you from the suffering. You can say No to thoughts like that because you've got the breath here that you're saying Yes to. You've got this sense of just being aware in the

present moment that doesn't have to be colored by the things that it knows or sees.

All too often our mind is like water. You put a little bit of green dye in a glassful of water and all of a sudden the whole glass is green; or a little bit of red and the whole glass becomes red. In other words, a thought or an idea or an emotion comes into the mind and all of a sudden it possesses the whole mind.

That's a habit that you've got to unlearn. A thought can be there but it doesn't have to have an impact on the mind. Your first step in that direction is to stay with the breath, stay with the sensation of breathing throughout the body. Let your awareness be dyed by that instead. Anything else can come and just slip past, come and just slip past.

It's like living in a world where you know there are snakes. You could sit here worried about all the snakes in the world. Or you can say, "If I meet a snake, I'm not going to pick it up" or "If I meet a snake, I'm not going to provoke it." When you know how to handle the snakes that you encounter, then you can live in world where there are snakes and yet not get bitten by the snakes.

It's the same way we live in our human body. It's the result of our past karma. That's something you can't change. That's the suffering that's just a natural part of living in this conditioned world. But that suffering doesn't have to impinge on the mind. The suffering that weighs the mind down is the suffering that comes from what you're doing right now. You want to learn to do it differently so that you don't suffer. You have the freedom to change, so that your actions in the present moment are done not with ignorance but with knowledge. That way, you can free yourself from the suffering that you would otherwise feel if you weren't skillful.

We're working on a skill: how to know our minds in the present moment. Even though we can't change everything we want to change, at the very least we can use that knowledge of the mind to make the best of what we've got. In particular, we can learn that we don't have to suffer at all. That's the Buddha's message.

This puts a lot of power in your hands. You may not be able to prevent accidents or deaths, but you can prevent yourself from the unskillful habits that make you suffer, and you can learn new, skillful habits in their place. Working with the breath, getting sensitive to how the breath feels in the body, learning how to make it more comfortable, so that it becomes a good home for the mind in the present moment: That's one of the important first steps in the skill of not suffering.