

Calm & Insight into Pain

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Focus on your breath. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body.

It's good at the beginning of the meditation to breathe in a way that feels energizing, because you're going to be calming things down, and if you start out already calm and a little sluggish, calm breathing just makes you more sluggish. So deep in-breaths can energize you.

And then notice what kind of breathing feels good. If the deep breathing continues to feel good, keep up with it. If not, you can let it go more shallow, shorter. Adjust things so that they're just right.

We're doing this to develop both calm and insight. In the Buddha's breath instructions, he talks about becoming sensitive to how the breath affects your sense of the body, how it—in his terms—"fabricates" your sense of the body. And as you watch the breath, you begin to become more sensitive to the feelings in the body and feelings in the mind.

And the perceptions: in particular, the perception that lets you stay with the breath as you're trying to make it more and more comfortable. You have to figure out what kind of perception of the breathing is helpful in that regard.

I was talking the other day with someone who felt that as he breathed in it was like pumping air into a balloon, and he felt like it was going to burst. Well, if you have that perception, that there's a membrane around the body, that's going to build up pressure.

So think of the body as being wide open, like a sponge. The breath can come in and out all the pores of the sponge, all the pores of your skin. And you're here just simply being bathed by the breath as it flows through. You notice that it's the perception that makes the difference, both in how you breathe and also in how the experience of breathing has an impact on the mind.

So there you are, feelings, perceptions—what the Buddha calls mental fabrications.

And then, of course, you're talking to yourself as you do this: commenting on how comfortable the breath is and how comfortable the breath is not—and if it *is* comfortable, what you can do to spread that comfort around. That's verbal fabrication—in technical terms, directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath and your perceptions, and you evaluate how well they're calming things down.

So you've got three kinds of fabrication—bodily, verbal, and mental—and in each case you're trying to calm them down. To see things in terms of fabrication, that's insight. To see how you're shaping your experience is the insight side. And the calming is the tranquility side.

Sometimes you encounter meditation systems where they divide the two very sharply, but the Buddha himself doesn't. He says if you want to develop tranquility and insight, you've got to work on getting the mind into deep concentration. The concentration itself is calming, but the ability to understand your mind is what *allows* you to get into deeper concentration, and that's the insight. Then, once you've got deeper concentration, it develops even more tranquility and calm, and the ability to develop even subtler insights. The two go together.

And Ajaan Suwat would talk about this a lot, how as you're trying to get the mind calmer you're basically looking for where there are disturbances either in the breath, in your perceptions, in your feelings, or in what you're saying to yourself. Once you see those disturbances, you've got to calm them down. To get into deeper and deeper states of concentration requires that you become sensitive to disturbances in body and mind. You have to figure out what you're doing to cause those disturbances and then you can let that activity go. You don't let go of the disturbance, you let go of the cause. That's the insight.

There's so much in our range of experience that we're shaping, and yet we don't really realize what we're doing. So many of the things we experience we think have come to us ready-made and that we're simply on the receiving end, without realizing that we're part of the production.

This is particularly important to understand when you're dealing with feelings of pain. Nobody would want to create a feeling of pain, and there is some extent to which feelings of pain in the body are the results of past actions that you can't change right now. But the way you stitch them together in the present—with your perceptions, the things you pay attention to—can add extra pain and suffering on top of the pain. As the Buddha said, there are feelings that come simply from the act of alertness, what you're being alert to.

Mindfulness can play a role in this too, as you try to remember this pain this moment to stitch it together with the next moment. You can stitch things together in such a way that you've got a huge net of bands of tension all around the body, causing the pain to get stronger and stronger with time. And it's not because of the raw material. It's because of the way you've stitched these things together.

One of the terms the Buddha has for craving is the seamstress, what stitches things together in a way that creates suffering without our consciously wanting to. We don't want to add extra pain, but it's what we do. We're doing this in ignorance because we're paying attention to other things and so we let a subordinate part of the mind take care of business. And if it does a sloppy job, well, it's to be expected, because you're not giving it your full attention.

When you're multitasking, a lot of tasks may get done but they don't get done well. And normally the brain is multitasking all the time—dealing with issues in the body, issues in your digestion, issues outside—and so the breath gets left abandoned. The workings of your perceptions get left in the dark.

So now we're trying to do some monotasking, to learn how to do these things well.

Just be very carefully aware of how you're breathing, how the mind stays with the breath, and what feelings and perceptions come up as you do this. If there's a feeling of pain, you can ask yourself, "How am I stitching this together? What is the perception? What is the model I have in mind for what's actually going on here?"

Because that's what our perceptions are: They're models, sketches. We very rarely deal in total pictures of all aspects of reality all at once. It would be impossible. Overwhelming. So we make a sketch for the purpose of whatever we're doing. We get very good at certain kinds of sketches, not realizing that they may be useful for some purposes but can actually create a lot of suffering for the mind in other situations. So look at how you sketch your pains to yourself and how you stitch them together.

And ask yourself, "Could there be another way?" Here there's a disturbance in the mind: What are you doing to cause the disturbance? It's important to realize that wherever there is a disturbance, there's something going wrong.

All too often, we accept things simply as the way they are, thinking, well, *that's the way they've got to be*. Actually, they've got to be that way only because you're getting habituated to doing things that way.

This is why the meditation instructions aren't just about what to do. They're also about how to ask questions, what the Buddha calls appropriate attention. Ask yourself: Where is the disturbance? And then realize that there's got to be a cause and it's got to be optional. If anything is disturbing the mind, it's optional.

So as you can see, this quest to understand disturbance and to undercut it takes you through both the calming and tranquilizing parts of the meditation on the one hand, and the insight parts on the other. The two go together. The greater

the calm, the subtler the disturbances you'll see. And the subtler the disturbances you can see and undo, the greater the calm again.

So try to be conscious of the fact that you are stitching things together. And remember those three fabrications that the Buddha talked about: They're right next to ignorance and yet they're shaping everything else. If they're doing it in ignorance, there's going to be suffering.

If you can see how you're picturing pain to yourself, how you picture your body to yourself, how you picture the mind to yourself, and you can see where it's causing suffering, then tell yourself, "Maybe I can change the picture."

Now, you don't have to change pictures to pictures that lie, simply that there are other truthful ways of stitching things together. And it's possible to be with pain and not suffer. It's possible to be with intense physical pain and not suffer. It's all in this issue of fabrication. So try to bring some knowledge to the perceptions you're applying, particularly to the breath and to the pain, because they have a big impact on all the different kinds of fabrications.

Be sensitive to how they're creating disturbances and try to see ways in which you can catch the moments where you're not stitching things together that way. When you do that, you'll come to see the rise and fall in the level of disturbance, which will allow you to detect things you didn't see before, that were just part of the background noise. Well, watch out for the background noise, because that's where a lot of things get instigated.