

Sensitive to Stress

July 2, 2020

During my early years as a monk, when I was living alone on a hill above Wat Dhammasathit, there was one day when a family from Bangkok came up the hill and exclaimed at how peaceful it was. Then they pulled out a boombox and turned it on full blast. That, for them, was peace: being able to listen to their music without any interfering sounds from traffic or other people's boomboxes.

Of course, for me, it was a lot of noise. Which makes the point that your idea of what's peaceful and quiet depends on how you've been living, what level of noise you've been subjected to.

The same applies to your sense of how much stress the mind is carrying around. If your life has been very stressful, simply sitting with your eyes closed and being in the present moment for a bit can be very peaceful. But someone who's more attuned to real peace will see that there's still a lot of disturbance in there. And because the disturbance in the mind, the stress in the mind, is directly related to the clinging—in fact, it *is* the clinging—if you're not sensitive to that stress, you don't see it. You don't realize how much clinging you're doing. And if you don't see your own clinging, you'll never really be free.

So the question, as we meditate, is how to become more and more sensitive to the stress that's actually going on in the mind. Over time, as the mind gets more and more quiet, your sense of what counts as stressful will change.

This is probably one of the reasons why the Buddha doesn't define stress, just as he doesn't define happiness. He doesn't even define the mind—because your sense of these things will develop as you practice.

But how do you develop that sensitivity? First, get the mind into concentration and be willing to *stay* there. Many people get very impatient. The mind gets quiet for a little bit and they say, "Well, what's next? When do we get to the insights?"

Well, a lot of the insight—if it's going to be genuine insight, not just the insights you've memorized from books—comes from developing your own sensitivity. And that sensitivity comes by learning how to be familiar with your mind in concentration. All too often, when you get into a state of peace in the concentration, it seems like there's nothing there. It's like

going into a very bright room. The light is blinding, so you don't see anything in the room at all. You think it's empty. But if you stay there long enough, your eyes adjust. You begin to see, why yes, there are things in the room.

The same holds true with the concentration. As the mind settles in, there will be little ups and downs, and at first you'll ignore them because you're trying to stay still, still, still. But when the mind is really settled in, then you can start asking yourself, when the level of stress goes up even just a little bit, "What did I just do?" When it goes down, "What did I just do?" You're looking for the cause of the stress. You can't abandon the stress itself, but you *can* abandon the cause. And usually what you did has to do with a perception or some little fabrication in the mind, so you want to be sensitive to that.

It's in this way that learning the different levels of concentration can be really useful for seeing how the mind fabricates things. Sensual thoughts fall away in the first jhana. Verbal fabrication falls away in the second jhana. Bodily fabrication falls away in the fourth.

Ajaan Lee's image is of smelting a piece of rock that has different types of ore in it. You get it to one temperature, the tin comes out. You get it to a higher temperature, the copper comes out. A higher temperature, the silver; a higher temperature still, the gold.

As the mind settles in, you'll see it dropping different types of fabrication and you get more and more sensitive. To do this requires not only concentration but also discernment, and this is where it's useful to think of the Buddha's knowledges on the night of his awakening. They were in different modes.

The first one, his knowledge of his previous lifetimes, was in the narrative mode, telling the stories of his many lives. The second was in a cosmological mode, telling the nature of the world: This is what happens all over the world; these are the principles by which things happen in the world. Then the final knowledge, the one that gave him awakening, was in a mode where he just saw events in the present moment without reference to stories or to worlds at all.

As you develop skills as a meditator, you want to learn how to move from one of these modes to another when it's appropriate. For instance, if you carry your narrative mode—"This is me, this is the person I've been all my life"—into your meditation, it gets in the way of your seeing the actions of the mind in the present moment.

The same with your views about the world: If you carry them into the present moment, everything gets all glommed together. You have to learn to put stories and worldviews aside. You just look at events: There's this event in the mind; there's that perception in the mind. If the

“you” is still in there, sometimes a perception comes up and it’ll spark a memory of something you did when you were a child, or something else that happened early in your life, or something about the world outside, and that will deflect your attention away.

So, you’ve got to learn how to think in the Buddha’s vocabulary: simply perceptions, feelings, fabrications. This is a vocabulary for seeing your disturbances clearly.

That’s not saying there’s no reality to narratives and worlds. It’s not that there’s an ultimate reality that’s just events, and everything else is just conventions. Even the language of events is a convention. The skill lies in learning how to use these different conventions properly, being subtle in moving back and forth.

Actually, when you’re looking simply at perceptions and fabrications and feelings without any you in there, you could call that a type of depersonalization. And psychologists say that depersonalization is bad. But what they mean by that is when someone gets stuck in a state of mind where they’re totally numb to their real emotions. They feel alienated from their emotions, and just stay stuck in that state. As a practitioner, though, you want to learn how to move back and forth. That’s why it’s important not to say that there’s the ultimate level of truth versus conventions. *All* these truths we’re using as right view are conventions. They’re conventions for different purposes. Even being in the present moment is a convention.

If you don’t see it that way, you’re going to be missing a lot of the stress you’re carrying around. Sometimes you hear it said that simply being in the present moment, there’s nothing to weigh the mind down. Let go of your sense of self. Let go of your sense of the world. Just be right here, and that’s it. Actually, that’s how you get into the present moment where you can do the work to get more sensitive to the stress. But if you stop just there, and say, “This is it, there’s no more stress weighing down the mind,” you’re missing a lot.

So, as you come into the present moment, remember the concepts to bring in to take the present moment apart, because after all, the present moment, too, is a fabrication. It’s shaped by the way you breathe, shaped by the way you talk to yourself, shaped by your perceptions and feelings. There’s a karma, there’s an intention that keeps the present moment going, and there’s a subtle stress that goes along with that.

Eventually, you want to get to see that too, but you have to see it as something separate, as the Buddha said: separate both in the sense that the intention is not the same thing as the perception, it’s not the same thing as feeling; and also in the sense that you don’t identify with it. You don’t bring the “you” into this. You don’t bring the world into this.

This is how you get sensitive to what's going on. You get more sensitive to your stress. That is, you develop this sensitivity as you start peeling things away. Upasika Kee talks of many levels of film in the mind, that you strip away, peel away. It's in developing this kind of sensitivity, both through your concentration and through your discernment, that you can get to what the Buddha's talking about. There is a state that is totally free of stress. It's the ending of karma, but it's found through skillful karma, i.e., the karma of concentration, the karma of discernment. It requires a sensitivity that can be developed.

So even though, as you start out, your mind sounds like a boombox in the middle of a wilderness that's otherwise peaceful and quiet, you'll ultimately get to the point where you can turn the boombox off, and understand what real peace and quiet is.