

## *Free Not to Suffer*

*February 23, 2023*

You're free to spend the rest of the hour focusing on the breath, focusing on your mind, bringing the two together. Why would you want to do that? The Buddha explains an awful lot about why. Sometimes I've encountered people who just want to do the technique. They don't want to hear the theory behind it, but the question is: What kind of reality do we live in where you can do something like this and it's worthwhile, focusing on the breath, trying to see your mind in the present moment? A lot of the Buddha's teachings are there to explain exactly why we're here, what we're here to do, what we *can* do. That's really worth knowing.

He gives us the four noble truths to explain that we can put an end to suffering, because the suffering's something we're doing right now. There's the suffering in what are called the three characteristics, which basically consists of the fact that things change, the change comes about because they're conditioned, and the conditions are unstable. So, there's a stress there, especially if you're trying to find your happiness in those things.

Then there's the suffering and stress in the four noble truths, and that's the suffering and stress that comes from your own craving—which means there's something you can do about that. And, fortunately, *that's* the suffering that weighs the mind down. Without the craving, there would be no more cause for suffering in the mind no matter how things change outside. So we have to look directly at how craving arises in the mind. Only then can we put an end to it.

This is why when we meditate we're looking at the mind, trying to lasso the mind into the present moment—or a better analogy would be that we're luring the mind into the present moment by making the breath comfortable. Experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good right now: long, short, heavy, light, fast, slow, deep, or shallow. You could spend the whole hour focusing on just that issue, getting to know the body right now, to see what feels really good.

If you've found a way of breathing that feels good, think of that sense of comfort spreading through different parts of the body, seeping out all the way to the pores, so that it feels good just sitting here breathing in, breathing out, and the mind can settle in to see itself.

The breath is like a mirror. When the mind is irritated, you're going to breathe in one way. When it's fearful, you're going to breathe in another way. So, if you stay right here, you have a good chance of seeing your mind in action so that you can look into that issue of why it creates suffering.

And you're free to do that. This ties in with the Buddha's explanations about causality in general, which is that some things in the present moment are caused by past actions, but not everything. You have choices in the present moment, and the choices will make a difference in what you experience right now. You're putting together your experience out of the raw material from the past *with a purpose*, and you want to be able to see what that purpose is. The choices you're making right now don't have to be constrained by the past.

That's one level in which you're free.

There's another level. Think about the Buddha's second knowledge on the night of his awakening, when he saw beings dying and being reborn in line with their actions. The whole cosmic drama played out in his mind for eons and eons and eons, and he saw that the cosmos wasn't going anywhere. There was no over-arching plan or purpose to the thing, just a lot of beings acting—sometimes foolishly, sometimes wisely—trying to find happiness. The interaction of all their actions is what causes the cosmos to develop, to fall away, to degenerate and develop again, degenerate again. He realized that because there's no over-arching plan, you're free to choose your purpose in life.

That's good to keep in mind as well. Sometimes we're told that our suffering serves a larger purpose, so we have to be willing to put up with it, but the Buddha's saying No. You're free to put an end to your suffering without feeling that you're disobeying somebody you have to obey.

That means that you've got freedom of choice in the present *and* you have the freedom to exercise that freedom as best you see fit.

So, try to develop the qualities of mind that enable you to see what's going on. Getting the breath to be comfortable is just one of the things you've got to do. Meditation requires developing certain mental faculties as well.

The first is mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. As you're sitting here, remember what your purpose is, what to look for, how to recognize the things you want to encourage in the present moment and the things you *don't* want to encourage.

The role of mindfulness here is one of the reasons why it's good to know what the Buddha taught about how suffering comes about and how it can be solved. If mindfulness were simply a matter of being aware in the present moment, accepting whatever comes up in the present moment, you wouldn't have to know much. But the Buddha offers a lot of insights into what to look for, how to deal with unskillful mental states, how to encourage skillful mental states, and it's good to have that knowledge in mind. Don't carry the whole mass of knowledge all around all the time but try to keep in mind what's useful right now. That's one quality to develop.

Another quality is alertness: seeing exactly what you're doing right now and the results of what you're doing. Are your actions in line with what you're here for, or are they beginning to stray off?

This is where you bring in a third quality, which is ardency, the desire to do this well.

These three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, ardency—are the ones that strengthen mindfulness and create a foundation here in the present moment to get the mind into concentration. In Ajaan's Lee's explanation of the three qualities, ardency is the quality that embodies wisdom and discernment. In other words, you could remember all kinds of things about what the Buddha taught, and you could be watching yourself do all kinds of things in the present moment, and it would count as mindfulness and alertness. But if you're not ardent in trying to master these skills, your mindfulness and alertness would be neutral and wouldn't accomplish all that much. But when you try to take advantage of what you've learned from the past and what you're doing right now, the desire to do that well: That's wise.

And that's a desire you want to encourage. So if the mind is wandering off from the breath, you bring it right back. You try to figure out why it's wandering off if you can. Sometimes you don't have to figure anything out, just notice that it's wandered off and bring it right back. Other times, though, there's something pulling the mind, and you have to figure out what's pulling it, what's the allure. When you can see why the mind is wandering away, then you can remind yourself of the drawbacks of letting it wander. Here you're trying to understand the mind, and all it wants to do is just create more thought worlds and travel around in those thought worlds.

Actually, you want to see the process by which those thought worlds are constructed, and you can't see it from within those worlds. You have to see it from the frame of reference of the present moment.

So you come back. While you're here with the breath, try to be as sensitive as possible to any disturbance, any tension in the body, any disturbances in the mind. See if you can blow them away. The image they use in the Canon is of a goldsmith blowing away impurities from gold as he takes it out of the smelter. So if any thoughts grab hold of the mind, just blow them away. If any patterns of tension arise in the body, try to figure out where they're centered, what they hold on to, how they're connected, and where you can get them to let go.

As you develop these three qualities, you put the mind in a position where it can begin to understand what it's doing that's causing suffering. And, as the Buddha said, there are two kinds of causes. With some of the causes, all you have to do is

just watch them and they go away. In other words, those are the causes of suffering that can survive only because you're not paying attention. As soon as you pay attention to them, they shrivel up and die. It's because of them that some people think that just being non-reactive is enough to get rid of all unskillful things in the mind. You look at them, accept that they're there, and they go away. But then there are other causes for suffering that, no matter how much you simply look at them, they're going to stay.

With those the Buddha says you have to exert a fabrication, and there are three kinds of fabrication he's talking about here. The first is the breath: That's bodily fabrication. The second is what he calls directed thought and evaluation, his terms for the way you talk to yourself. That's verbal fabrication. Then there are perceptions and feelings. Perceptions are labels you hold in mind, images you hold in mind, or words that help you identify that this is this and that is that. Feelings are feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Those are mental fabrications.

So, when something unskillful comes up in the mind and simply looking at it doesn't make it go away, you have to ask yourself how you're fabricating it, and how to exert more skillful fabrications against the fabrications that fashion that unskillful mind state: How are you breathing around it? Can you change the way you breathe? Sometimes an unskillful thought or emotion comes into the mind and it has power because it's hijacked your breath. So, you want to take the breath back. Breathe in a way that's calming, refreshing, soothing, to counteract that thought, counteract that emotion.

Then look at how you're talking to yourself about the issue. Say you're angry: One, how do you talk to yourself about the object you're angry about? And two, how you talk to yourself about anger in general? What is your relationship to your anger? Part of the mind may not like it, but part of the mind must like it because otherwise it wouldn't go for it. So, what do you like about it? Is it worth it? And look at how you talk to yourself about the object. Is it really a true representation of what that person has done or what that situation is like?

The fact that you're angry sometimes tells you that something's wrong, and you're afraid that if you don't stay angry, you won't do anything about what's wrong. That's not the case. Often the anger gets in the way of seeing what the best solution would be. So, talk to yourself in new ways about it so that you can calm down the anger, and then look at the situation with new eyes to see what should be done right now or if your response has to wait. You have to keep reminding yourself that when anger takes over the mind, things may not be the way they seem.

Sometimes you think that something would be a good response and it turns out that it's precisely the thing that harms you. So, you've got to be careful.

Then look at the perceptions and feelings. What ways of perceiving the situation aggravate your anger? Could you find other perceptions—just as true, if not more true—that would calm the anger down?

As for feelings, the Buddha said these are of two sorts. There are the feelings that arise willy-nilly given the fact that we have our senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and ideation in the mind. Then there are the feelings we can create. The pain that comes with the desire to gain awakening, even though you know it's going to take a while, is actually a pain that the Buddha says you should encourage. And of course, there are the feelings that arise by the way you breathe, by the way you get the mind to settle down in concentration: feelings of pleasure, feelings of equanimity. You learn how to give rise to those so that the mind doesn't keep jumping at its emotions, looking for pleasure there. You can provide yourself with alternative sources of pleasure.

In this way, you're exerting what the Buddha calls a fabrication, three kinds of fabrications, to counteract whatever that source of suffering would be.

Both of these approaches—watching and fabricating, i.e., putting together a new way of approaching the situation—require mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. This is why these three qualities of mind are always useful: mindfulness so you can remember which teachings are relevant when you're dealing with that particular cause; alertness to see what's actually working, what's not working; and ardency, the desire to keep on doing it right. Even though you make a mistake, you come back and try to do it again. Make another mistake, you try to learn from that mistake and try a new approach.

This comes down to what the Buddha calls commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to doing the skillful thing, and then you reflect on how well you're doing. It's in this way that you take advantage of that freedom to choose in the present moment, to choose what you're going to do. Focus in on doing the most skillful thing possible, and that way you get sensitive to the mind. The mind is a lot easier to watch when you're trying to do skillful things than it is when you're trying to do unskillful things. It can calm down and see in a lot more detail, with a lot more refinement what exactly is going on in the mind that leads you to go for those causes of suffering to begin with.

And that sensitivity is what's going to lead to another kind of freedom eventually, the freedom where the mind doesn't have to depend on anything at all for its happiness because it's found something that lies outside of space, outside of time, that you find when you dig down deeper and deeper into the present moment

and out through the other side—something that's totally unconditioned, totally independent.

So, you realize that you're dealing with two main layers of freedom here: the freedom we have in the present moment to choose to do the skillful thing, the freedom we have to choose that we want to put an end to suffering. We learn how to use those levels of freedom so that we can find the ultimate freedom that's unconditioned.

It's hard to see what's not to like here. The people who say they just want the technique but not the theory behind it: They don't realize that the theory is there to help expand your understanding, expand your imagination as to what kind of freedoms are available and how you can get the most out of them. When the Buddha talks about what we should do, they're all shoulds that are aimed at our true happiness. You should try to comprehend suffering. You should try to abandon its cause. You should try to develop the path so that you can realize the end of suffering. These are all shoulds with your well-being in mind.

So, there's nothing onerous about what the Buddha has to say. It's simply up to us to learn how to make the most of it.