

To Discern Suffering

December 26, 2006

We see suffering all around us: in ourselves, in other people, other animals. So what does it mean, “not to discern suffering,” in that chant just now?

It means that even though we see suffering, we don't see it clearly. Especially within ourselves: Something comes up that we don't like, something that's really oppressive, and we try to run away, we try to push it away. We don't really look at it to understand it, to comprehend it.

The Buddha said if you really comprehended it, there'd be dispassion, there'd be letting go. You'd understand it and be able to put an end to it.

So we see it but we don't discern it—because we don't understand what we're supposed to do with it.

And also because we're often not in a position where we can really do with it what we should. It's hard to comprehend suffering when you feel oppressed by it and surrounded by it, overwhelmed by it.

So one of the purposes of the practice is to put the mind in a position where it can look at its suffering and not feel threatened.

We start by working with the breath. Allow the mind to stay with just the sensation of breathing: breath coming in, breath going out. And notice how you can make it comfortable. You don't have to put any physical pressure on it. Just simply think: “What would longer breathing be like?” And the body will breathe a longer breath. Then you can observe to see how it feels.

You can try deeper breathing or shorter, more shallow. You can focus on the sensation of the breathing anywhere that's comfortable. You can explore different parts of the body to see where your comfortable spot is. Then ask yourself, “How can the breath be adjusted to *keep* this spot right here comfortable?” Learn how to maintain that sense of comfort while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, when things are relatively quiet and still. You may find yourself slipping off, but don't get discouraged. This is an important step in the meditation: learning how to put yourself back on the path again and again and again, without getting discouraged.

This is how any kind of skill is developed, realizing that this is something important that you've got to learn to master. And whether it's easy or not is not the issue. It's something you've got to master, because otherwise you're going to suffer. You'll see the suffering, you'll feel it, but you won't discern it. Which means you can't get beyond it.

So as you find yourself falling off, just pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get back with the breath. No matter how many times it takes.

At the same time, once you're with the breath, try to be as sensitive as

possible to how it feels. See if you can make it even more comfortable. And again, don't put physical pressure on it. Just ask yourself: What would be a better breath right now? What does the body need right now? What kind of breathing would be refreshing right now, or gratifying? And then allow the body to breathe in that way.

As you develop more and more a sense of this center and can maintain it more continually, it gives you a place where you can step outside of your thoughts.

Most of the time we're buffeted by our thoughts like strong winds coming from all kinds of directions. Anger comes from one direction. Greed comes from another. Sadness. They blow us around. What we need is a place where we can stand and get outside of our thoughts—which is what the breath provides. You can stay just with that physical sensation and think of the thoughts not as something that you're going to be in, or that you are thinking, but simply as events in the mind blowing past you as you hang onto the breath.

The more you're able to stay with the breath and not get blown away, the more you'll be able to discern suffering, as opposed to simply seeing it, feeling it, being overwhelmed by it.

You see how a thought comes. And you see that there's a moment of choice where you can choose to go with it or not. All too often when a thought comes into the mind we just go with it no matter what.

It's like someone driving up in a car and saying, "Jump in!" And you jump in before you ask, "Who are you? Where are you going?" It's only when you're in the car that you begin to realize that you've got some psychopathic monster driving the car and he's planning to drive off a cliff. If we lived our lives this way, we would have died a long time ago.

You have to be more choosy about which thoughts you go with. That's why you need this physical sensation, this sense of a center inside to provide you with a place to stand so that you can get outside your thoughts and can see them as events. They come from particular causes and they lead to particular results. You begin to get a sense of which trains of thoughts you want to hop onto and which ones you don't.

At the same time, when you're staying with the breath you change your relationship to physical pain as well. You've got your comfortable spot and if there's a pain in another part of the body, you don't have to go there. You hang out right here where it feels comfortable, where it feels refreshing. That means the physical pain is not as threatening as it used to be.

In fact, you can think of the physical sensation of ease, stillness, and fullness that you have with the breath radiating out to the part of the body where the pain is, so that you don't tense up around it, you don't latch onto it. And you can actually relieve a lot of the unnecessary tension and pain that you've built

up around the physical causes of the pain.

That gives you some understanding right there that the mind does often have a habit of taking a physical pain and making it worse by the way it reacts: through its fear, through its lack of understanding. Its desire to make the pain go away oftentimes makes the pain worse.

That's a good lesson to learn. It helps teach you not to identify with that desire and to identify more with the side of the mind that says, "What is this? What's going on here? Let's look into it. Let's try to understand it." And the concentration makes you strong enough to stick with that part of the mind.

This is when you can begin to discern suffering, to see exactly how the mind creates suffering around physical and mental pain, how it adds unnecessary burdens to itself by the way it reacts.

You begin to see how the suffering comes and goes. The pain might be there, and it comes and goes as well, but there's also the mental component that comes and goes. And it doesn't necessarily come and go in the same way that the physical pain does. Sometimes there's a lot of physical pain but the mind is perfectly fine. Other times, little tiny things set you off. Well, why is that?

It shows that there's no an automatic correlation between the physical pain and the mental suffering. Which means that the cause of mental pain is in the mind. You've got to look into how the mind is reacting, what it's doing, what it's saying, what its dialogue about the pain is.

And then you begin to notice: How does the level of suffering rise and fall with different events in the mind?

This is when you begin not only to discern suffering, but you also to see through it. You also see what choices you're making that make the pain worse. And then you can ask yourself, "Why choose to make the pain worse?" You've got the choice.

Once you see that you have the choice, then of course it's a lot easier to make it. Oftentimes we don't even see that there is choice. Everything seems automatic. It just happens. But as the mind gets more still, feels less threatened by the pain, and is more curious to understand the pain, you'll begin to see that things don't "just happen." There are choices you can make. You've been making the choices, but not very consciously, and often not very well. But now as you get more conscious of what's going on, you can make wiser choices.

So you're not just seeing the suffering. You're actually discerning the suffering. And you also begin to discern, as the chant says, "Where it totally stops without trace."

That's the whole point of the practice: to train the mind so that it doesn't create unnecessary suffering. And as you'll find, the unnecessary suffering is the only suffering that weighs down the mind. Once the mind doesn't burden

itself in this way, things outside can't come in and burden it.

Things may be inconstant, stressful, and not-self, but that's their business. As long as we don't make it our business, we're okay. And the only way you can see this distinction is by putting the mind in a position where it can comprehend suffering, where it can discern suffering, instead of just being pushed around by it.

So work at this skill. No matter how much time, energy, or determination it takes, it's time, energy, and determination well-spent.

As Ajaan Mun once said—I think it was his last sermon—“The one thing you never let go of is your determination not to come back and suffer. Always hold onto that in your meditation.” And as you go through daily life, whenever a choice comes up in the mind, especially when you're inclined to choose ways of thinking that are unskillful, think, “Is this helping or is it getting in the way of that determination not to come back and suffer?”

And keep holding onto that determination, because it's your friend.