

Mental Movements

April 2002

The Buddha once said that he taught only two things: suffering and the end of suffering. As we approach the practice, we have to realize that these are the big issues in life.

In particular, the suffering we cause ourselves are *the* big issue. And when the Buddha talks in terms of the four noble truths, that's the suffering he's focusing on, where there's clinging to the five aggregates: clinging to your body or forms of any kind; clinging to feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs, consciousness. There's clinging only when there's craving.

So, these are the issues we have to watch out for. He says suffering is something you have to learn how to comprehend: understand why it's happening, how it's happening. To do that, you have to get the mind really still to watch it—because you're watching yourself, and watching yourself is very hard. The problem is created by the movements of the mind. We're *in* those movements, so it's hard for us to see them, to get a sense that there is something moving.

It's like being on planet Earth. It moves around the Sun, but we have the sense that it's standing still because its movement seems constant. Nevertheless, we're moving: moving, moving all the time.

When we're practicing, we want to get out of the mind's movements. This is why the practice of concentration is so important. We're used to staying in the movements of our minds so we can hardly see them. We hardly sense what's going on. We're chattering to ourselves all the time, so we can't hear what's going on. The mind is just filled with this chatter.

So we've got to get that chatter as still as possible and learn how to regard it with a good dose of suspicion. Otherwise, we tend to believe all these ideas that come popping into the head: "You should do this, you should do that. This is right, that's wrong." We have to learn how to step out of those opinions before we can see them at all, before we can see how much suffering they cause us.

This is why the Buddha talks about having respect for concentration. Even though it may seem dumb just sitting here making the mind still, still, still, still, still, nevertheless, it's a necessary prerequisite for seeing anything.

The problem is: Are we really seeing instead of having views?

This is what we have to work on as much as possible.

When you settle down in the body, find a place where you can stay comfortably. Even though there may be pain in some parts of the body, it's not everywhere in the body. If every cell of your body were in pain, you'd die. So as long as you're alive, there must be someplace where the mind can settle down.

Learn how to keep it there. However many months or years it may take, it's all time well-spent.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how he spent eight years with Ajaan Mun. A good part of that time was spent on concentration practice. It wasn't until toward the end that Ajaan Mun sort of gave him a kick and said, "Okay, now it's time to work on developing discernment."

Now, you do develop discernment to some extent as you're practicing concentration. You can't develop concentration without it. There's a certain level of discernment that's needed to get the mind to settle down: understanding how to sidestep the tricks of the mind, how to see through them, how to not get taken in by the voices that say, "Well, this is dumb," or, "You should do this," or, "You should do that."

But then there's another level of discernment that has to go beyond that. Ajaan Maha Boowa was a sharp person, very intelligent, well-educated. Yet, Ajaan Mun had him stay in concentration for years, perhaps because he knew that he'd need that much stillness in order to overcome the thoughts and opinions in his mind.

So you have to have respect for concentration. Keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. As for your other opinions, learn to view them with a jaundiced eye. Without that attitude, you'll never see through things.

Once you can get still enough to stand outside of your thoughts, then you can watch them. This is when you see how the mind creates suffering for itself.

If your focus, for instance, is on a physical pain, ask yourself, "Okay, which part here is the physical pain, and which part is mental pain?" If you can't see the distinction right away, use the breath to deal with it. If the way you breathe changes the pain, okay, that's the physical element in the pain.

But as you work with the pain, you also begin to notice your mental attitudes as well. When there's pain in the body, how does it affect the way you breathe? What kind of assumptions lie behind that?

Sometimes we try to isolate the pain, cut it off from the breathing process, and that just makes things worse. So consciously breathe through the pain.

Or you can focus on the pain itself and ask yourself, "Okay, what shape does the pain have in the mind?" It's all in the mind. Pains don't have shapes. But buried someplace in your mind there's this preconception about the shape of the pain.

Or watch the movements of the pain, its comings and goings. Why does it come? Why does it go? Are the causes all physical or are some of them mental? If you can catch a mental cause, then you're really getting somewhere. You see that as soon as the pain flares up there's also a particular act of labelling or a particular thought-construct that comes into the mind: What happens if you drop it?

There are lots of different approaches for dealing with pain. But the basic element there is to see: Can you catch the movements of the mind? Sometimes it's almost as if you see them out of the corner of your eye as part of the mind is involved in the movement. That's the part that can't see its own movement. You want to develop an awareness that's separate from the thoughts, that doesn't get pulled in with them. In other words, the thought can move, but you don't move with it.

All too often, you're like a person standing by the side of the road. Cars come pulling up and the drivers say, "Come on in! Come on in!" And you just jump in without asking, "Where are you going? Who are you?" You just jump in.

You want to pull away from that habit. If a car comes up and invites you to jump in, say, "Who are you? Where are you going? What's the trip planned here?"

If it's something really worth thinking about, you go ahead and think about it. But you'll find that most of the thoughts that come running into your mind are just vagrant people from who-knows-where coming to offer you a joyride.

You have to learn how to step out of your thoughts, step out of those movements of the mind, so that you can see them for what they are. Then you notice the ones that cause stress, pain, and suffering. Then you can learn how to drop them.

The same principle applies with mental pain. The attitudes that cause you to suffer as you carry things around—"This has to be that way, that has to be this way"—all the stuff we carry around with us in the mind: You have to realize it's not necessary to carry it around. You don't lose anything by dropping it.

Many times we carry old grudges around. We feel that there's some value in carrying them around. If we put them aside, we think we're losing out somehow. We're not going to get justice. We're not going to get our revenge.

Well, that doesn't accomplish anything at all. You have to trust in the principle of karma. You don't have to go out settling scores. Your main duty is to watch out for the ways the mind creates suffering for itself. Because otherwise, you just burn yourself up.

And again, it's these movements of the mind, this act of carrying this around, carrying that around: You're so used to doing it that it becomes sort of the background. Once something gets hidden in the background like that, it's really hard to see. You've got to pull it out to see: What are the attitudes that cause you to carry these things around? What do you get out of it? At the same time, what suffering do you cause yourself?

When the mind is really still and really sensitive, it'll see these things. And once you see that they're unnecessary, then you can drop them. That's the

important element in all discernment.

Often we realize we're suffering, we're suffering, but we don't realize how unnecessary it is. Something in us thinks, "Well, this is the way the mind has to run itself, this is the way we have to think, we can't think in any other way." So we keep on carrying that suffering around.

But when you realize that those attitudes, those burdens you carry, the things you cling to, the things you crave, are really not necessary: Then who would carry them around?

To see that, though, you've got to put the mind in a position of strength, a position of solidity. Again, this is what the concentration is for. It gives you the strength, it gives you a sense of nourishment so that you're not always going out trying to feed on things that'll make you sick.

This is why we feel these sufferings are so necessary: We feed on them and think this is where we get our nourishment, this is where we gain our sustenance. But it's pretty miserable nourishment, pretty miserable sustenance. Isn't there anything better than that?

This is what the meditation offers: a better place to feed, a better place to gain your sustenance. Once the mind feels strong and well-fed like this, then you look at your old feeding places—the old garbage cans and other places where you used to pick around and find this and find that—and you realize, "I don't have to do that anymore."

That's when the mind is freed.

So, work at keeping the mind well-focused, well-established within, so that it can see these movements for what they are. If you don't see them yet, that means your concentration isn't strong enough, isn't solid enough to get really, really still so that these movements can come out of the background and become apparent.

Watch for which ones cause stress and suffering, and learn how to see that they're not necessary. Then you can drop them.

Then, when you drop them, the Buddha's finished with you. He has nothing more to teach you once everything is dropped.

But until that point is reached, we all have a lot of work to do. So, don't waste your time on other issues. This is the one issue that really matters.