

## *Deconstructing Suffering*

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The mind is always active, always creating things. You see this clearly when you start to meditate. You're supposed to stay with the breath, and all of a sudden you find yourself thinking about other things, getting absorbed in other thought worlds. It doesn't take you too long to realize that you've created those thought worlds and then fallen for them, forgetting that they're creations, things you're making up right here in the present moments. You think about the past, and it seems very real. You speculate about the future, and it seems very real. You can get yourself really intrigued, really upset, totally involved in those thought worlds.

The problem is that doing this makes you suffer, either because you start imagining things that really are scary, upsetting, or because you imagine things that are really nice and then they start dissolving away. After a while, the question should become: Why keep creating these things? It comes down to the fact that the mind is afraid of what would happen if it weren't creating these things, either fear of boredom or a deeper fear of nothingness.

One of the things we have to do as we meditate is to learn how to overcome that fear. Otherwise you'd be continually lost, continually wandering around, and continually making yourself suffer.

The first thing the Buddha has you do is to create a good place here in the present moment. Right concentration is a creation. It's made out of directed thought and evaluation, which count as *sankharas*, or fabrications of the mind. Focused on the breath—which is a bodily fabrication—you're dealing with perceptions and feelings, which are mental fabrications.

What you're doing is taking this process of fabrication and turning it from a cause of suffering into a path to the end of suffering. How is that? To begin with, you create a state of mind that's as clear and as steady as you can make it. You find that by staying with the breath, you can create a sense of ease, you can create a sense of fullness, just by keeping your focus steady, just by adjusting the breath, paying careful attention to what the breath is doing, paying careful attention to what the mind is doing, and learning how to disband any thoughts that come up, either by not paying attention to them or by taking them apart.

One of the advantages of working with the breath until you get a sense of ease throughout the whole body, so that your awareness can spread through the whole body, is that you begin to see thought formations as they begin to take shape. There's a little stirring right around the border between what seems physical and

what seems mental, right there at the breath. Then you begin to see how the mind goes out and clamps a perception on it and says, "This is a thought about this, and this is a thought about that," and goes riding with it. You learn how you can stop that process, stop it in its tracks as soon as that little stirring or disturbance appears. Just breathe right through it and you can zap it. It can go away.

It's like a frog sitting on a lily pad or lotus leaf. As insects come in from any direction, the frog zaps the insects. That way, you create an insect-free environment around you, and there's a space in the mind free of anything that's going to form into a thought world. There may be little stirrings, but you catch them in time so that you don't lose your frame of reference.

Ultimately all that remains is the perception to maintain your state of concentration. The perception of breath is what you hold on to as you go through the various levels of jhana. As the breath gets more and more refined, finally settles down, grows still, and you get a sense of still breath energy filling the body, the mind is still enough so the breath grows still as well. In other words, the mind is still, the brain is using less oxygen, and the need for in-and-out breathing grows less and less. When the breath stops moving, then your sense of the body begins to turn into a mist. Nothing is moving, so each sensation can stay right where it is. You begin to perceive the body like a fog, little droplets of sensation floating here in space.

Then you realize that when you let go of the perception of form, it really alters how you experience the body sitting right here. You could apply a form to it if you wanted to, but you don't have to. It's up to you. You see that you've got a choice. The same holds true for all the different levels of formless meditation: infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception. Each is something you fabricate. You make up your mind to go there or not go there.

That's an important insight. Let that insight go really deep. Only after you've been with these things for a while, when you get very familiar with them, should you take them apart. If you take them apart before they're solid, it doesn't have much impact on the mind. But when you've learned how to depend on them, having a sense that you can go to the sense of, say, the still breath or space or consciousness with a great sense of ease, a sense of being at home: Only then is it effective to take it apart.

There are various ways of taking it apart. One is simply to see that it is fabricated. Another, as the Buddha said, is to see it as a state of emptiness. He teaches emptiness in two ways. One is learning how to appreciate each level of

concentration for the fact that it's empty, void of the disturbances that were present in the level of concentration just below it.

The image is one of settling down. In other words, when you move to space, it's free of the disturbances of form. You learn to appreciate that, and you learn to realize the reason you had those disturbances of form is because of the perception of form, and the perception was a choice. You can choose the way you perceive, as to the field of awareness you have here, the perception you apply to it. That's going to influence how much you feel a sense of disturbance or dis-ease, stress. That's an important insight. You experience stress because of a choice you made. That can lead to a sense of disenchantment with the whole thing.

Another way of using the teaching on emptiness is to realize that none of these things are really you or yours. After all, they're constructs. Then if they're not you or yours, what are they? Each level is just a state of absence or presence of stress, nothing more than that, nothing really romantic, nothing really intriguing, just stress coming, stress going, that's all.

Again, the purpose here is to induce disenchantment because when you get disenchanted with something, then you're less likely to keep creating it, continuing it, keeping it going. As the texts say, from disenchantment comes dispassion, because each of these states are created. Then when you feel dispassion for something, you stop creating it. What's why dispassion is coupled with cessation.

The image we usually have of letting go is holding something in our hand, and when we let go, we put it down. The thing is still there, just that our hand isn't carrying it around anymore. But a better image would be of the games you played as a child. When you get involved with them, when you're passionate for your game, the game can continue, the make-believe can continue. You build a little house out of the mind, and it really is a house as far as you're concerned. You can create all kinds of stories around it. Or you can engage in all kinds of make-believe. But as soon as you get disenchanted with it, you stop—and where is the make-believe? It's gone. If there's still a little mud thing there, it's not the house it used to be anymore, it is just a clump of mud, but you're released from the make-believe. That's the important part. As for the stories, they end, and when they end, they're gone.

This is why the experience of release teaches you a lot of things you wouldn't have suspected, because many things that seemed solid and real were there simply because you were making them up. When you stop making them up, they're gone. Even states of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness: Once you stop doing them, they're gone.

This is why the Buddha calls the experience of awakening the cessation of the six sense spheres, because when these things stop, you see what is there to see. Then when you return to the dimensions of space and time again, it's like that little mud house: It's there, but it's not a house anymore. The make-believe is gone. The suffering that comes from the make-believe is gone. This is why dispassion is coupled with cessation and release. You learn to see what you've been doing and you learn to stop.

This is what the practice of concentration is for, this is what the teachings on emptiness are for: to loosen up a lot of your associations that the things you perceive, the things that you experience as a given, are things you're actually responsible for. You begin to see where your responsibilities really lie, and how much you *are* responsible for your experience. It's because you're responsible for them: That's why you can gain release from them, from all the suffering that you've been creating.

You can see this as a process of deconstruction, but it's deconstruction with a specific purpose of putting an end to suffering, in particular the suffering that you've been creating. It's deconstruction handled skillfully. Like a hammer: Some people take the process of deconstruction and are like a little kid getting a new hammer. They take it and you bang everything in sight, break up everything in sight, which doesn't really help much. That's deconstruction for the purpose of destruction. But here it's used very precisely for a very specific, constructive purpose.

When the Buddha started his teaching career, he started with the four noble truths, and he really meant it. This is what he was going to be teaching for forty-five years. It boils down to two things: suffering and the end of suffering. All his tools are for that purpose. When we use them for that purpose, then we use them properly, and we'll get the benefit for which they were meant.