

Three Ways to Deal with Problems

Ajahn Chandako

The Buddha taught that there are many angles from which we can effectively approach difficult issues. Any single technique can never be suitable for every person in every situation. In fact, in the Buddha's Dhamma we find a considerably wide range of methods of meditation and perceptual adjustment appropriate for a broad spectrum of personality types and stages of development. Three examples of different and mutually supportive approaches are mindfulness of breathing, analytical contemplation and awareness of knowing.

First, let's take a look at the classic technique of mindfulness of breathing (anapanasati). It is easy to underestimate the profound potential offered by watching our breath with full awareness. 'How is just sitting and looking at my breath going to help beyond the superficial? That might offer some soothing calm, but how can it help when dealing with deeply held issues? How is it going to lead to any real understanding, to wisdom, to Awakening?'

Many of our most deeply rooted fears, painful emotional patterns, anxieties and harmful behavioral issues stem from conditioning that was formed in early stages of childhood development or from trauma that has affected us on a non-verbal level of the mind. We often refer to such personality traits as 'hard-wired', as if they are intractably just who we are. In actual fact, no matter how deep or reinforced the habitual conditioning is, there is nothing that cannot be transformed and no behavior that is not possible to change. However, because the roots of these recurring issues thrive in a non-conceptual area of the mind, intelligent analysis can be very limited in its ability to modify the underlying perceptions leading to our behavior. Such conditioning needs to be addressed on a similar or deeper level as it was created, and mindfulness of breathing is uniquely effective in this regard.

Although the instructions for mindfulness of breathing are generally simple and straightforward, mastery can take a lifetime (or longer) and lead to full enlightenment. Even if we can't fully see the process at work or verbalize many of the specific effects, this exercise can address deeply held, or so-called 'subconscious' issues in a way that the intellect cannot. As we breathe, we might be aware of tensions or release of tension in various parts of the body and mind; or we might be aware of general mental feelings of anxiety, sadness or joy being present without clearly knowing what their cause is.

With the mindfulness of breathing approach, it is not actually necessary, and in fact may be impossible, to know the exact causes of the feelings and emotions that manifest on the surface of our awareness. However, the meditator's job is simply to pay close attention to this process, approaching each breath with curiosity, without expecting it to be a particular way, appreciating its uniqueness, while acknowledging and accepting whatever mental states arise in the process. When obstacles or tensions seem to block or distract our attention, this may be an indication that mental defilements are being challenged below the surface. Especially at

these times it's important that our effort remains relaxed and persistent. Check to make sure that the knowing of the breath is not tainted by desires for, or wanting to get rid of, something. After a while we may simply notice that we feel lighter, as if a burden has been set down, although we may not know exactly what. This gradually builds confidence that mindfulness of breathing is able to work through deeply held attachments and insecurities, laying a foundation of stable peace and increasingly profound insights.

Some people, however, find that their minds won't settle down enough to even begin to have some continuity of awareness with their breathing. So another way of approaching issues that rob our hearts of peace is to directly investigate the thoughts and feelings that manifest on the surface of the mind. If we are suffering, if we are angry, if we are fearful or tense, then we must be holding onto something. What is it? Ask yourself, for example, why you are angry. The initial response may attribute the problem to another person or situation. 'I'm angry because of what he did or what she said.' But don't stop there. Challenge that superficial understanding. 'And why does that make me angry?' Even if you don't get an immediate response, just drop the question into the mind and watch. When an answer does arise, then keep investigating, 'And where is that coming from? What's causing that?' See if you can trace the frustration back to its source.

When you can pin down and be fully conscious of the underlying reason for the anger, this can radically transform your understanding of the situation. It may become clear that your over-reactions stem from a particular fear. Or you might find that the reason for your anger is so petty that you just laugh it off. Or you may realize that the causes of your dissatisfaction are not unique to you alone but are inherit in all human existence—that it's just about coming into this world with a body and a deluded mind—not about some personal flaw or unfair treatment from others.

At the very least, such intelligent contemplation can clarify the real issue. The problem is not another person or external situation, but our own grasping, fear or insecurity—and this is our responsibility to deal with. Recognizing this can be both frustrating and a relief. It is far easier to blame others. It's humbling to have to admit our own part in it. It can be painful to realize that our responsibility is not to change somebody else, but to transform our own deluded perceptions. At the same time, it is empowering to see that this *is* within our ability and that no matter what situation we find ourselves in, this is where we can find some freedom and peace.

This type of investigative inquiry makes use of the conventions of I, me and mine ('my' anger, 'my' fear), but at the same time understands that these are merely conventional ways of speaking or thinking. Strongly identifying with feelings and memories will reinforce the underlying cause for unwise emotional reactions. In actual fact, there is simply anger arising from causes, associated with memories, compounded with excessive identification, which fuels projected perceptions.

A third approach to dealing with issues is to simply know what is presently occurring at the sense doors and be aware of the part of the mind which is knowing it. The mind which is aware of our external and internal environment can be taken as an object of awareness in and of itself. It's like mentally taking a step back and looking at the awareness that is watching, hearing, sensing and knowing. It means to notice the awareness itself.

We can practice, for example, with seeing. Seeing is merely seeing: the natural result of a functioning eye, light, an external object and being conscious. No matter what we are looking at, seeing is merely seeing. Try placing half of your attention on being aware that you are seeing, and only half the attention on the object that is being seen. The same can be done with hearing. Whatever sound is within our field of awareness, place the attention on the awareness of hearing more than the actual sound itself. Is this awareness impartial? Is it tainted by a desire to grasp the pleasant or a wish to get rid of the unpleasant? What is the experience of awareness that acknowledges what is present, just as it is? This practice becomes increasingly interesting and powerful when we apply it to the mind. Thoughts, memories and emotions are also the natural effects of a functioning brain and consciousness. Just as we can focus more on seeing rather than on *what* we are seeing, we can notice the awareness of a mental state rather than being drawn into the state itself.

Mindfulness attempts to know things just as they are, without adding layers of interpretation on top of them. A thought is just a thought, rather than *my* thought. An opinion is just an opinion, not *my* opinion. Our perceptions of other people or of ourselves are simply perceptions—not necessarily the truth. Likewise, an unpleasant physical sensation is just a sensation arising naturally from causes, essentially no better or worse than a pleasant one for developing mindfulness. Painful emotional feelings are also just that, arising from causes, a natural result of the workings of kamma. This mental function of knowing is itself neutral, but it can quickly be colored by attraction, aversion, judgment and identification. When we do notice that we are identifying with feelings or thoughts, then we can simply acknowledge the identification without compounding the issue further. Responding to the mind in this way leads to understanding and undermines blind reactivity. No matter what it is that we are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking or emoting, it can be used as a means for developing continuity of mindfulness. This then gives our wisdom the opportunity to understand what is presently occurring and respond appropriately.

These three types of meditation are by no means mutually exclusive. They overlap and intertwine with mutual support. Although it is useful to have one main type of meditation that is gradually mastered, other supporting techniques can be incorporated to create a well-rounded approach. For example, the calm that results from mindfulness of breathing naturally leads to seeing things more clearly, and when analytical contemplation is then practiced with a calm and clear mind, the insights go far deeper. Insightful contemplation, meanwhile, leads to greater understanding and letting go of grasping. This brings tranquility, and paying attention to the breath then becomes increasingly feasible and pleasant. So no matter which approach is adopted, the result is peace.

Each of these meditations is designed to lead to the point where there is merely the knowing and the known, to the insight of non-self (*anatta*). Mindfulness of breathing culminates in relinquishing identification, simply knowing the breath and the part of the mind that is watching it. Similarly, when analytical contemplation achieves depth, what remains is just the knowing and the known: wisdom understands the perfection of the impersonal law of cause and effect functioning within every thought, word and action. Whatever we experience, whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, exciting or infuriating, there is awareness of knowing and the known. Through whatever means insight into non-self is developed, the obstacles created by our attachment to who we think we are begin to dissolve. Situations simply arise naturally according to causes and conditions, and even referring to them as 'problems' complicates life unnecessarily. When we think of them as '*my*' problems, that increasingly ties the mind in

knots. There is simply the knowing and the known. Perceiving reality in this clear and direct way, is there any situation in life that we could not face with balance and equanimity?