Michael Stone
Week One, *Finding Stability in Times of Turbulence*
October 31, 2016
"Overcoming Circular Thinking"

Hi, my name is Michael Stone. Welcome to this online video series, *Finding Stability in Times of Turbulence*. My own practice comes from the Buddhist traditions of Vipassana and Zen. I've also studied Western psychology and psychotherapy. I'm interested in how these traditions dovetail and also where they don't meet. Some of the space where they don't meet becomes an area of interest not only in my own practice but also in my teaching. Hopefully I can help translate these different traditions into a language that can help you during times of stress and times of great turbulence. Welcome to the first episode in *Finding Stability in Times of Turbulence*.

Many of us come to meditation practice because there's some degree of suffering, or distraction, or stress, or distress that's causing us to make poor decisions or consume forms of false nourishment that really don't satisfy us. Maybe a relationship has fallen apart and we realize we've been repeating that same kind of falling apart many times over. In this exploration we're going to balance an understanding of symptoms that arise with methods we can use to work with those symptoms. For example, two common symptoms that bring people into meditation these days are anxiety and depression. Of course both exist on a spectrum. There can be mild depression and there can be acute depression that keeps us in bed or suffering for many years. There can also be a quiet anxiety in the background or there can be debilitating anxiety that can sometimes last for months or even years.

One of the things we know about both depression and anxiety is they both have the characteristic of rumination. Sometimes we think about somebody who is depressed and we think they're a sad person. But when you start to listen to the quality of somebody's voice who is depressed and you start to listen to the way they're thinking, you might notice that a lot of their thinking turns in circles. The circles form a kind of vortex that goes round and round: the center of this vortex is a negative experience of themselves. One of the key insights that Freud had almost a century ago now is that there's a difference between mourning and melancholy. This was one of his great insights: that

when someone's experiencing mourning or grief they feel like they've lost something outside of themselves, and when someone's experiencing melancholy or depression they feel that they've lost something inside of themselves.

One of the interesting things about depression is not so much that someone is experiencing sadness or that they are showing tears, but rather that there's this rumination in the background. They may think: "I am bad," or "There's something deeply wrong with my life," or "I've lost something internally that I'm mourning and can't seem to find." In a way, this is very similar to anxiety. When you speak with someone who's anxious you'll notice that they think very, very quickly, that there's a lot of distraction in their thinking, and that it's hard to follow thoughts all the way through in a logical or imaginative way. When we think of imagination we think we can come up with many different ideas but somebody who's anxious is actually not that imaginative. They tend to be in a superficial imagination, which I'm calling rumination, and which the Buddha called *vikalpa*.

In the yoga tradition you find a similar description of looping around in thoughts, which is *chitta vritti*: in this, the *chitta*, or your attention span, moves through *vritti*, which is a circle or a turning. Chitta vritti or vikalpa is when our attention starts turning in on itself and going around in circles. This is one of the characteristics of both anxiety and depression. Now let's think about how that works, let's reflect on how that happens in our moment-to-moment reality. When you're inhaling and exhaling, especially when you're sitting still or if you've been given instruction to pay attention to your breathing—which we'll talk about in a minute—you'll notice that your attention, chitta, wanders off and then it starts to loop and turn in a circle.

First it wanders, and it'll stick to anything. It doesn't matter if it's an image from the past or the future. Once it's there it will start to circle around and loop in on itself. I like to call this "time travel" because your attention goes into the future and starts looping there in

the form of planning, for example, or worrying. The attention drifts into the past and starts to loop there. As it loops it creates a story. That story becomes a belief system and then, over time, that circular belief system congeals into a sense of self that gets reinforced every time you get distracted in that way. This is a really interesting thing. When you look at distraction through the lens of anxiety or through the lens of depression, what you start to see is that rumination tends to be the glue that holds the symptoms of melancholy and anxiety in the present and reinforces them.

One of the keys of meditation practice is that we need an object to come back to that's not the habitual way we think. It's really important to choose an object. When I work with people who are experienced meditators we use traditional objects like feeling the breath in your belly, or feeling the breath at the tip of the nostrils, or feeling the breath behind your navel. When I work with people who are very anxious it tends to be difficult for them to feel the breath in those traditional places, because when they go into those places it can increase the anxiety because they're aware of how the breath isn't moving in the way it's supposed to, or the breath is really shallow, or the breath is uncomfortable. So usually I say to people when they're starting a meditation practice that you need to choose an object so you have an anchor point that's embodied and that you can come back to whenever the rumination begins.

I'm going to suggest if you're working with the turbulence of rumination that a good object to begin with is breathing anywhere in your body that you can feel it. Go into the body right now and notice where you're breathing. For me at this moment the easiest place to feel my breath is actually in my chest. Tune in right now and feel where do you notice breathing. If there's a lot of anxiety or worry or discomfort present, notice somewhere in your body where it's easy to feel your breath and where there's some pleasure in your breath. Maybe you need to discern, is it an inhale or an exhale? Sometimes people enjoy the feeling of the inhale more than the exhale. See if that's true for you.

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The first question is, where is it easiest to feel your breath? The second question is, is it more pleasurable to tune into your breath during the beginning, the middle, or the top of your inhale? Or it is easier to feel your breath somewhere on the arch of the exhale pattern? As I'm speaking, tune into the feeling of your breath and try and keep attuned to the breath in that location. If somebody's experiencing a lot of discomfort or anxiety, I will suggest to them, and I'm going to suggest to you, that a really good place to begin is noticing four breaths at a time, and this is going to be your homework.

As you're inhaling and exhaling, feel your breath in the area that's best for you, and see if you can feel four breaths at a time. You're going to inhale and exhale with as natural a breath as possible, meaning it's an unsculpted breath, trusting that your body knows how to breathe. See if you can feel one inhale and exhale, and then a second inhale and exhale, and then once you feel four breaths let your attention drift. You can let your body move a little bit if you need to, and then after about five or ten seconds come back again to your breathing. That's the practice.

Let's review. Anxiety and depression are characterized by rumination. One of the things we need to do to interrupt the habit and the momentum of rumination is to come back to an object of meditation that's in the present moment, that's embodied, and that's always available. You can choose where in your body you want to feel your breath. You can choose what part of the breath you want to focus on. Then, just go four breaths at a time. After four breaths take a five or ten second break and then come back again to breathing.

One of the definitions of the term mindfulness, which in Sanskrit is *smriti* or in Pali is *sati*, is 'to remember'—which basically means that when your attention drifts off you want to remember the object of meditation. This, I find, is a helpful definition of mindfulness in the context of rumination. When the attention starts going off, the most important thing is that you can disentangle from the habits of thinking, the habits of

ruminating, whether they're images or full-fledged stories, and come back to the present moment again. That coming back again is the practice of mindfulness. We come back again, and again, and again. I'm going to encourage you as homework to sit for five minutes once a day and during the sitting practice to see if you can feel four breaths with your whole body, and then let yourself get distracted for five or ten seconds.

The reason why this is a good training is that it trains us to let ourselves get distracted and come back again, to let ourselves get distracted and come back again. One of the things you might notice is that even though you can let yourself get distracted, over time it becomes harder and harder to do as you start to feel the flavor or the pleasure of staying with breathing. If you find it's hard to stay with a whole inhale and exhale, then really tune into one half of that arch. Just the inhale or just the exhale will get one hundred percent of your focus.

The last thing I want to say before we finish is that it's really important to practice meditation during times of the day where you don't feel the symptoms that we're describing here, anxiety or melancholy, at their height. Pick a time of day where you're fairly comfortable and meditate at that time of day. For example, sometimes the morning is really good for people because the body is settled and the mind is fairly clear. Pick a time where you can train in the process of coming back again and again and again, so that during the day when you encounter the turbulence that we're going to unpack over this course, you have resources to work with it right away. At the end of the day, meditative practice is a training in responsiveness, how to respond to what's happening in the moment in an unrehearsed, spontaneous, and creative way. Thank you very much. Good luck with your homework and we'll see you next week.