

Michael Stone
Week Three, *Finding Stability in Times of Turbulence*
November 14, 2016
“Rest Stops for a Distracted Mind”



Hi. I'm Michael Stone. Welcome back to this *Tricycle* series on finding stability in times of turbulence. In the first episode, we explored why it's important to find an object of meditation, especially when there's a lot of rumination in your mind. I chose the topic of rumination because hidden inside of anxiety, hidden inside of melancholy, is this thread of rumination that's really hard to catch. We need a practice where we have an object to come back to again and again so we can de-center from the momentum of the kind of thinking that gets us into trouble.

Sometimes I like to imagine that meditation practice is like taking a dead end sign from the end of a cul-de-sac and bringing it forward to the beginning of the road. It's like you're heading down a main road and you turn down the dead end street but you don't realize you're at the dead end until you see the sign. By that time it's too late and we're already caught in the vortex of rumination. Mindfulness practice, when we train in it everyday, starts to bring the dead end sign closer to the beginning of the turn so that as we're heading down the street, if we start to turn into that dead end street, the sign is right there. This takes training, just like playing a piano or learning a new language.

In the second week, I explored two things. Firstly, starting to soothe ourselves with practice by feeling our breathing rather than watching our breathing. Secondly, the importance of timing the meditation practice for five minutes so that we learn how to sit with whatever's arising for a predictable period of time. In this episode, I want to unpack that a little and look closely at how thinking can control our perception.

When you're feeling your breathing, one of the things you'll notice, as we all do, is that when attention starts time traveling into the future and into the past, we tend to think in ways that are very repetitive. In the Buddhist tradition, this is often called samsara, which gets translated as "conditioned existence." From a more psychological perspective, I would say that samsara is more like meaninglessness. It's the experience of a mind that's going around in repetitive ways, a mind that is constantly rehearsing the same thoughts

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again and again. It's the experience of a lack of meaning, disorientation, and a lack of depth.

Also, because we're in a world of interruption technologies, like computers and phones, and our nervous systems are unregulated, it seems our arousal levels are so high that rumination is actually encouraged through the distraction of social media and texting. I notice in my own life that if I'm returning email, when it's time to shut it down for the day and I pick up a magazine like *Tricycle* or my favorite book, I try to read and my eyes end up all over the place like I'm looking at a computer screen. It takes a while for my eyes to settle into the flow of reading. Lately, I've even been telling myself not to go straight from the computer to a book. I need a little time between the two so that the sense organs themselves can settle.

If we're really distracted all the time, our bodies can get used to that at a cost, at a metabolic cost. We need rest stops. The problem is most of us are not taking the rest stops. If you're at work and you're really busy and very distracted or even concentrated in a heightened way, when it's time to take a break, most people—since they don't smoke anymore—go take out their telephone and they start scrolling. In a way, our attention never gets a break and we stay very, very distracted for longer and longer periods of time.

If you're really distracted most of the time, your emotions become less and less stable because your reactivity increases. If you feel something and your reactivity is at an agitated level, then you'll be quicker to be unskillful, whether internally or externally, because emotions are more distractible and unstable. It's really important, especially in this era of social media and interruption technologies, to have a practice where we learn how to calm down and how to settle.

One of the areas that is very hard to settle is the mind. As I was saying earlier, noticing our distractions is like watching time travel. When there's a lot of thinking, there are two

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really great practices that you can explore to settle the ruminative mind. The first is embodying your breathing, feeling as you're breathing that the whole body is breathing and that there's nobody doing the breathing. It's just breathing that's happening in the natural world without a separate self that's breathing. That's why when I teach meditation I try not to use the term "witness" or "observation" and instead I try and use words like "touching," "feeling," "embodying," so that we can get closer to the breath and not reinforce the self that's back here just watching. In a way, part of the existential problem of our era is that everybody is watching their own experience, as if their experience is happening on a television screen. Instead, our practice is to get closer, to become more intimate with what's happening, but in a way that is not reactionary or amped up.

The first point is that self-soothing requires embodied breathing. The second point that I want to add to that this week is labeling practice. When you're feeling breathing and you start to get settled into the breath, when the attention goes off into the future and the mind starts thinking, then you can say to yourself, "future, future." If the attention goes into the past, let's say you're having a regret or you're replaying a conversation that you had, then you can say to yourself, "past, past." It's important to double the label so you really acknowledge it.

There's something really profound about labeling or saying something. I've just come here from officiating a wedding ceremony. During the ceremony, there's a point where one person says to the other, "I do," or "I vow," or "I commit to this." There's something about acknowledging something, especially in the presence of others. In meditation, it's the presence of the present moment that allows us to recognize what's happening and interrupt any other motivations or distractions.

Let's review. We're inhaling and exhaling. The attention drifts. As it drifts, catch it. Mindfulness is almost like rushing. You rush to the distraction, you catch it, and then say, "future, future." If the thinking starts going into the past, catch it, "past, past," and come

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back to your breathing. It's important that when you label "future, future" or you label "past, past" that the labeling process is soft. You don't want to hard label. You want to just label "future, future," "past, past," without being on top of it. This is really important.

It's kind of the paradox of these techniques, which is you're trying to use a technique to undo other techniques. You're trying to use a practice that you're controlling in order to lose control, so to speak. What we're doing is we're creating the conditions for something to emerge that wasn't there before. In the space of turbulence, we're looking for stability to emerge. We can't just pop stability into turbulence. Instead, we open up to the turbulence and we start to notice that one of the characteristics of turbulence is rumination.

One of the characteristics of rumination is attention going into the future. Catch it. Come back to embodied breathing. Attention goes into the past, "past, past", come back to the breath. Imagine the label "future, future," just softly coming up like a whisper or like the energy inside your inhale. Just as you're breathing, there is a label that emerges, "future, future," and then you come back again to the present moment, rather than the habit of "future, future," bad mediator, come back to the present. Instead, it's so gentle. Notice the attention goes off and just before it starts to loop. "Future, future," come back to breathing.

Here's your homework: increase the time of your daily meditation practice from five minutes to eight minutes. Set a timer, put it in a place where you can't see it. Try and sit at the same time everyday so you have a rhythm where your body gets used to not just the eight minutes, but the time of the day that you're practicing stillness. Then feel your breathing. If it's difficult to stay connected with your breath, try and feel the sensations that make up the very beginning of your inhale, and then try and follow the inhale and exhale and stay with four breaths at a time. That might be your practice. If you can stay with four breaths, then just keep going, keep feeling your breathing, and let go of the

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counting of the four breaths. Just feel breathing. That's the second technique we worked with.

Now the third technique: while we're feeling our breath, if thinking becomes dominant, then notice the thinking. But instead of investing in the thinking, instead of getting into the content of the thoughts, just label "future, future," "past, past," and come back to gentle breathing for eight minutes. That's your practice, and I'll be doing it with you everyday. Thank you very much.