

Michael Stone
Week Four, *Finding Stability in Times of Turbulence*
November 21, 2016
“Healing from Trauma”



Welcome to week four. My name is Michael Stone, and today we're going to continue exploring the theme of finding stability in times of turbulence. Last week we looked at bringing mindfulness practice to thinking by acknowledging when our attention goes into the future and when it goes into the past.

There are some key insights that you can look out for in this practice. The first is that mental states and moods are not inherently fixed. Most of our moods don't last longer than about five or ten minutes. When moods last a long time it's because we inject into those moods narratives and stories about the future and the past. Part of our practice is to drop into a mood, feel that it's happening and connect with the body that's breathing, but to disentangle ourselves from the narrative of the mood. Again, one of the key insights of mindfulness is noticing that mental states and moods are not inherently fixed.

Secondly, you can start to notice how you can hold mind states more lightly. You can start to see planning, regret, and worry, as mental states rather than how things actually are. Then you can hold those mental states much more lightly. That's a second insight that you might want to explore, one you might start to see at the end of a meditation practice: if you can notice for yourself how mental states can be heavy, or intense, or turbulent. See if you can hold them in a more spacious, soothing, and gentle environment.

The third insight to pay attention to when you're looking at how mental states operate is that mental states are phenomena, they're not *who you are*. It feels sometimes that mental states are sticky, like they are stuck to your face. It may feel like there's rage, or there's jealousy, or there's envy, and all just stuck to your skin. Part of why we embody the breath is to create enough space and the conditions so we can start to see those mental states with a little more distance, so they're not right against your face.

As a meditation teacher, especially when I work with people over long periods of time, I find that over several months, or after many retreats, there are students who suffer from

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really intense mental states that are always right here, stuck to their face. Even though they connect with their breathing, they can't get any distance from those moods. That's usually when I talk to them about finding more support from their community, and also about exploring medication. In meditation practice communities, sometimes medication is frowned upon. When I see students who can't get any distance from the content that's arising in their minds over time, even though they've really put great energy into the technique, I often introduce the topic of medication, or talking to a psychiatrist, or their physician, about what medication options there might be. I've seen so many people who experience acute turbulence all the time and who are unable to stay with a meditative practice, or even a contemplative practice that's more general like walking meditation. They just can't stick with it because what they're experiencing is so painful and so disturbing. Sometimes medication is a path that can allow us to then meditate.

The last insight that I want to explore is sculpting your attitude. Your attitude in practice is so important. When you feel your breathing and you're not caught up in mental states your attitude begins to change. You become more interested in what's happening in your experience. You can forgive more easily because you're not obsessed with ruminating about your fantasies of the past. Also, you're more open to the future and have less fear because you're not constructing walls in your mind with so much gusto. Some of us identify so much with our moods. One of the things we learn with an embodied breathing practice is that our moods are not the whole of us. Actually, we're more interesting than our moods. You see, when our attention starts turning around in habitual thoughts, over time it's not just that we're distracted, it's that we're reinforcing a sense of self. That sense of self, which gets sculpted over time, becomes a source of our suffering because it's so narrow. If you're always looking out through a narrow sense of self, then that's how narrow the world is. Part of our practice is not just settling distractions, but settling distractions so we can open up to something much bigger than just a narrow sense of ourselves.

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The last topic I want to touch on in this four part series is trauma. One of the things we're learning about trauma is that it's much more prevalent in our culture than we've realized. A lot of us think of traumas as violent things that have happened to us, whether it's war, or physical abuse, or sexual abuse. Another form of trauma that's being investigated and acknowledged more deeply is the trauma of mis-attunement in early relationships, which I talked about earlier. It seems in my mediation experience, especially teaching on retreats, is that I'm meeting more and more students who are able to articulate that what they're experiencing has to do with trauma that has occurred in the past. Let's remember that when we keep coming back to our breath over and over again, it's a practice of uncovering. If we're engaged in a practice of uncovering, we're going to uncover all kinds of history, some of which may be really fascinating and joyful to look at, and some may be very unpleasant.

One of the first characteristics that's important to understand about trauma, is that trauma is when something has happened to the body, has happened to the sense organs, but it hasn't been processed yet. It's like an event has happened, but it hasn't been experienced. The event has happened to the eyes, the event has happened to the ears, the event has happened in our musculature, but it actually hasn't been digested or metabolized yet. Part of meditative practice is learning how to self-soothe, how to develop relationships with community, and hopefully with a good teacher, so that we can feel safe enough that we can start to bond back together some of these elements that have been split off in trauma. One of the first characteristics of trauma is fear. When we've had traumatic experiences happen, we're scared at some unconscious level that that experience might happen again. We're always on the lookout. We develop a really good radar, so that we don't get ourselves into those conditions that caused the trauma in the first place, even though those conditions may not give rise to that trauma anymore.

Another characteristic of trauma is dissociation. We tend to start focusing our attention on ways of splitting off. Again, this happens at an unconscious level, so that we don't

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have to feel what we're feeling. This is often called numbing. The problem with numbing is that when you numb uncomfortable feelings, or emotions, or sensations, you also end up numbing the positive ones. Numbing is numbing. If you've taught yourself how to numb, you'll end up numbing both the negative and the positive. A third characteristic of trauma is shame, a sense that “I'm bad.” Guilt is a little bit like shame, which is feeling bad, but in shame there's a sense not just that you *feel* bad, but that you *are* bad. Shame is form of rumination. This takes us back to some of the first topics we were exploring. Again, just to review, when someone's been traumatized, their world is completely different than before the trauma happened. They live in a new world, and that world is often characterized by fear, by dissociation, and by shame.

In meditation practice, we need practices that work in an embodied way. You can't heal emotional trauma just by thinking about it, just by cognition. It's not that easy. We can heal emotional trauma through the body and through relationship. In this course I've talked a lot about feeling breathing, but one of the things I haven't spoken a lot about is the important of sangha or community, and also the importance of the relationship with a good teacher, or teachers. Building relationships can really heal trauma and settle turbulence because relationships help us gain enough trust to know that it's okay to be in our body. I remember, for example, having a hard time once on a meditation retreat, and the teacher just said, "Let's sit and let's breathe together." Just sitting and breathing with her was so profound, because it was almost like an assisted meditation, like she was there to just help me digest some of the emotions that were dominating my experience. On that retreat they were dominating my experience for days and days. Then after just sitting with her and breathing I felt like I could relax.

Sometimes learning what we need creates the conditions for safety so we can relax into a practice that can help us heal fear, teaching us how to trust ourselves. It begins with your breathing. If you've had a lot of trauma or unprocessed grief, it's hard to trust that your body knows how to breathe, because you're always sculpting your breath a little bit. Don't

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skip over that technique, you want to master that technique. Trusting that your body knows how to breathe starts to give trust back to a body, and a relationship with a body, where maybe there was some brokenness. Secondly, there's dissociation. The Buddha said that, "When things get difficult, sometimes there's a craving for non-becoming." That's a spectrum, non-becoming. One end of that spectrum is just getting distracted. The middle of that spectrum is dissociation, which is unconsciously numbing ourselves to what's happening in the body, or what's happening in our environment. The far end of that spectrum of course, is suicide, which is not wanting to exist. Slowly, practice is teaching us how to trust the body, trust the present moment, and know that all the states we're experiencing are not inherently fixed, and not actually who we are. They're just what's happening in this moment, and they're impermanent.

Shame, when we feel shame, when we think we're bad, let's start to see that as just another rumination, not actually who we are. Many Buddhist traditions have different theories of who we are at bottom. It's my experience that who we are is really just what's happening in the present moment, and then it changes. Some theories suggest there is a true self, or we have Buddha-nature. That's not really my experience. My experience is not that Buddha-nature is a thing, it's that Buddha-nature is our capacity for imagination. Buddha-nature is our capacity to respond to the present moment, without the weight of the past owning our reactivity. Buddha-nature is our capacity for responsiveness and our capacity for love. The reason why I'm ending this four part series introducing you to the topic of trauma, is because to some extent, we all have these three characteristics of emotional trauma running through us when we start going deeper in practice. Fear, dissociation, and shame, are very common in our culture.

Through this basic practice of starting to trust a breathing body, starting to develop the container in which to practice—whether that's a community, finding a teacher, or even just timing our meditation practice—we start to develop the trust that's necessary to let go of the habitual patterns that keep us stuck in the past, or stuck in rumination. I encourage

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you to develop a daily practice. How long you sit for is important when you're maturing a practice, but at start, the most important thing is the quality of your practice. If you can only sit for five to ten minutes, it's more important that you sit every day, so you can train yourself to know what it's like to find stability in the midst of turbulence. Too often we identify so much with moods and mental states that are turbulent. I hope that you'll learn through these practices how to trust yourself, how to feel the body breathing, and how to wake up to something deeper than what you know already. Thank you very much. I encourage you to keep practicing. Be well.