

Michael Stone
Week Two, *Finding Stability in Times of Turbulence*
November 7, 2016
“How to Self-Soothe”



Welcome to episode two in this Tricycle series, *Finding Stability in Times of Turbulence*. This week, what I'd like to explore is how to self-soothe when turbulence gets intense.

First of all, some psychological background: most of the time we're working during the day in the realm of the known. We move around thinking what we think. We take in information that we know already and when we sit down to meditate, we expect to know how it's going to go. Sometimes when we sit down, it's really uncomfortable, and sometimes when we sit down to meditate it's uncomfortable or anxiety-producing in ways that we don't really understand. That's why I want to talk to today about how to soothe yourself in times of distress even on the meditation cushion.

It's interesting because in meditation practice, we're settling the mind and settling the body, and often we have an idealized sense that it's going to reveal deep peace. If you talk to someone who has meditated for a long time, what they'll tell you is that if you stay connected to an embodied practice like mindfulness of breathing, for example, over time, on the current of the breathe, the practice will bring up all different mental states. Yes, you will become more intimate with peace. You will become more intimate with joy, but you will also become more intimate with boredom or stress or agitation. That's part of the practice that we're training in. Given that, sometimes we encounter states of discomfort that we can't really explain, and so I like to think of this as a self-soothing practice that has to do with healing some of the unexplained trauma or unexplained anxiety that can run through our ancestry.

One of the key insights of contemporary western psychology—because there is such a focus on the dynamic between therapist and client—is an understanding of how our habits manifest in relationships. I would say that that's also true for the relationship to our sitting meditation practice. All of the habits of attachment we find in our relationships will also show up in the body during our meditative practice.

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When we're young, we're bonded with our caregivers and for the most part our caregivers provide us with all of our needs. They can tune into our needs and they can meet our needs. As we get older, our caregivers can't meet all of our needs, or sometimes there is a gap between what the baby needs and what the caregiver can provide. Sometimes the caregiver is too attentive to the baby, and the baby doesn't know what he or she feels. Sometimes the caregiver is not present enough when a child is in need, and in that space of need the child has to understand or learn how to soothe him or herself when they're frustrated.

It's interesting, because this manifests in our meditation practice. In a way, what are we doing when we're meditating? We're learning how to be in states of frustration without having to satisfy our cravings. In a way, meditative practice is an elegy to frustration. Sometimes I like to think of meditation as a kind of re-parenting practice. I'm sure traditional meditation teachers would think that this is too reductionistic or too psychological, but I see time and time again that there is a relationship between people's inability to self-soothe and difficulty in maintaining a daily meditation practice. When you sit down to meditate, if you're a person who has difficulty knowing how to regulate emotions, then when anxiety comes up or if melancholy arises, or just irritability arises, you want to get off the cushion really fast, because you may not have the inner resources to manage the emotions that you're feeling.

In the first course in the first week, we explored how we need an anchor to ground ourselves in the present moment. The anchor I suggested was the breath. Today I want to refine that a little bit more and connect it to this process of self-soothing. In a lot of meditation language, you hear words like “witness” or “observe your experience.” When we're meditating on the breath, I'm going to suggest that instead of watching the breath or visualizing the breath that we take one step closer and we feel our breathing. For example, if I ask you to close your eyes and feel your breathing, it's likely that the first thing you're going to do is manipulate your breath a little bit. Start by just relaxing your

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breath as you're watching this video. See if you can trust that your body knows how to breathe. Secondly, if it's comfortable, I invite you to close your eyelids as you're feeling your breath. With your eyes closed, notice how there is a tendency to watch your breathing or observe your breath from a distance, almost like you're internally visualizing your breathing pattern.

When we talk about mindfulness of breathing, I'd like to suggest that feeling is a better technique. My opinion on the matter is that feeling is the *best* technique. What I want you to try is to feel your breathing. It sounds really simple, but you'll notice your mind will quickly start observing again rather than feeling. See if you can feel your breath, starting with the tiny sensations that make up the beginning of your inhale. Get so close to your breathing that there is no observer, there is just breathing, but nobody is breathing. You're breathing, but it's not happening to a “you” that's separate from your breath. The closer you get to your breath, the less personal it becomes.

Isn't this true of how intimacy works? The closer we get to anything, the less personal it becomes. The closer we get to another person, the less personal it is. The closer we get to our agitation, the less personal it is. Get close to the breathing so that *chitta* (your attention span) and the feeling of your breathing actually start to become one thing. It's almost like the breath becomes the awareness rather than an awareness that's watching the breath.

Then if you start to feel any sensations that are really uncomfortable—so for example, I talked about feeling like you just need to get off your cushion or you just want to jump out of your skin—see if you can find that experience of just feeling, breathing underneath language. It's like you're sitting deeper than your personality. In order to do this, you're soothing yourself. Once in a while, it might be gentle: "There, there. It's okay. There, there." Feeling your breath, and feeling your breath underneath your personality, means feeling the sensation of being alive in the present moment *underneath* all the ideas you

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have about what you should be doing right now or what you need to do with what's arising. This is a practice of kindness. It's a practice of gentleness. It's a practice of non-addiction, not being addicted to the habitual patterns of reactivity that keep us unregulated and in an agitated state.

Let's review. When you sit down to establish a regular practice, sometimes you're going to experience states of turbulence that you can't really explain. I feel sensitive to many of the insights from contemporary western psychology that suggest that a lot of the difficulty we have in regulating our emotions stems from patterns that were laid down early in childhood. I think it would be naïve to imagine that everybody who has trouble regulating their emotions could just sit still on a cushion. If you set just a 5-minute time where you're going to sit and feel your breath, again, not watching your breath but feeling your breath, then you can turn meditation practice into a physical practice. By turning it into a physical practice with an attitude of self-soothing, we can start to re-parent these ancestral or familiar grooves which in the Buddhist tradition are called *sanskaras*. The good news is that these old patterns are malleable. We can change them. We can sculpt them.

What I'd like to add to your practice this week is that when you're feeling your breath, you're not absorbing it. You're actually feeling it in an embodied way. Secondly, that your attitude in feeling the breath is one of self-soothing. You're using the breath to calm the fabrications of the body and mind. Thirdly, that if you have old patterns that you can't really explain, see if you can start by tuning to breathing rather than your explanations as they start to emerge. The last thing that I haven't mentioned, which is going to be your homework, is to use a timer. When you experience some turbulence or distress, set a timer for five minutes. Put the timer behind you and sit on a cushion or chair with an upright ego, not lying down is my suggestion. Feel what it's like to be upright when things are turbulent and then set the timer for five minutes. Let the timer become a

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container. The timer, the five minutes, is going to hold you along with the breath so that you can sooth yourself with whatever is arising.

If you find that sometimes your symptoms are so acute that it's really hard for you to sit still, then go for a vigorous walk, or dance around in your apartment, or go for a run, or do whatever you need to do to release some physical energy, and *then* do your sitting practice. I find this is really helpful for people who are in agitated state. Just get some physical energy out of your system and then move into stillness. The timer is really important: it's important to trust something other than your sense of when you want to sit and when you want to get up. If we only sit when we feel good we'll never train ourselves to sit through all the different landscapes that we're going to move through on our journey. I encourage you, set a timer for five minutes. Feel your breathing. Remind yourself that meditation practice is a physical practice. Lastly, know that if you have a hard time regulating your emotions, the feeling of the breath at a physical level can become a form of self-soothing and kindness that can help keep your sense of self intact even when times are turbulent.