

Marshalling the Emotions

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

October 7, 2005

Meditation has to engage not only the thinking part of your mind, but also the emotional part. Otherwise it gets dry and doesn't totally train you. So it's good to think about the emotions that need to be involved in meditation for the training to be more complete.

The first emotion you're supposed to bring to the training is *samvega*. That's the emotion Prince Siddhartha felt on seeing the old person, the sick person, and the dead person. *Samvega* is a word that doesn't quite have an equivalent in English. It means a sense of shock, dismay, or urgency, and it's related to the adjective '*samvigga*,' or terrified. It's a chastened realization of what life is like: that the pleasures you've been pursuing are fleeting and never really provide satisfaction. Look at you yourself: *You're* fleeting as well. And the amount of suffering in life: Not only is life fleeting, but there's a lot of suffering before you fleet totally away.

There's that famous passage where the Buddha says that the waters of the ocean are less than the tears you've shed in all your many lifetimes. You've drunk more milk from your mother's breast, whether your mother was human or a dog or whatever, than there is water in the ocean. As the Buddha concludes, just thinking about these things should be enough to give you a sense of terror, dismay, and dispassion, enough to make you want to gain release.

Taken on its own, *samvega* can be a very depressing realization, which is why it has to be paired with *pasada*, or confidence: confidence that there is a way out. In the famous story about young Prince Siddhartha seeing the old person, the sick person, and the dead person, he also saw a forest mendicant. That was his fourth vision. His realization after seeing the forest mendicant was, "This must be the way out. If there's any way out, this is it." And so he pursued that conviction with a strong sense of clarity and confidence.

Ajaan Suwat, when led the meditation here at Metta, would often say, "Start with a sense of *pasada*, that this is your way out. Stick with the practice with that sense of conviction, confidence, desire. If you approach the meditation in a desultory way, you're going to get desultory results. You really have to be devoted to what you're doing here." Or as Ajaan Fuang would say, "You have to be crazy about the meditation if you want to meditate well." You have to get fully into the meditation so that it really engages your imagination. What can be done with the mind as you focus it on the breath? What can be done with the breath? How can you learn to relate to the breath in a way that allows you to settle down and see what's going on in the mind? Be curious. Find out.

When you meet up with obstacles, you need the sort of inquisitive mind that doesn't give up, that tries to find a way around the obstacles, with the conviction

that there *is* a way around. That's what the confidence is for. If you're lost in the woods convinced that there's no way out, there's *going* to be no way out. If you think there's a way out, at least you have a chance of finding it.

So, when you come up against issues in the meditation, be confident in using your ingenuity as much as you can. If you find yourself controlling the breath, it's natural that you're going to be controlling the breath. In fact, it's important to realize that that's happening. Many times they say, "Let the breath come in and out on its own. Don't control it." What happens then, though, is that you don't notice how you're controlling it. The controlling all goes underground. What we're doing here is bringing the issue of control out into the open. As long as you're controlling the breath anyway, try to do it consciously, skillfully.

And what is it that controls the breath? There's an intention and there's a perception. Can you be clear about your intentions and perceptions? Can you change your intention to be more sensitive to what the breath really needs? Can you change your perception of the breath so that the way you control it actually causes less stress, does less harm? What ways of thinking of the breath coming in and out of the body help to overcome the unhealthy or unskillful ways that you control the breath? What different kinds of breathing energy are there in the body? Look into that as well.

You'll find that different kinds of breath energy are helpful at different times. When you've got lower back problems, it's good to think of the breath energy coming up continually from the soles of your feet, giving more strength to the back as it goes up and then out the top of the head. If there's a tightness in the chest, think of the tightness dissipating out through the shoulders, the arms, and the fingers. In other words, use your ingenuity, so that you become more and more interested in staying in the present moment.

All too often we approach concentration practice as an exercise in forcing the mind to stay still: not to think, not to move, not to do anything. And of course as soon as you tell it not to move, it's going to start fidgeting around like a little kid told to sit still in a chair. But if you give the kid something to play with, something to explore, he can get still and very enthralled. He can sit in the chair for hours without complaining.

So try to engage your ingenuity as you practice. And always have the confident conviction that no matter what the problem in your meditation, there's a way around it. That confidence is going to help see you through. Of course, simply the confidence is not going to be enough. You have to use your ingenuity until you start seeing results as well. And when you start seeing results there will be a sense of ease, and finally a sense of rapture – a sense of fullness or refreshment.

When you've finally figured out how to be with the breath consciously and intentionally, and yet can allow the breath energy to feel full in every little cell in the body, rapture arises. You can maintain that rapture by learning how to maintain the right amount of pressure so that you're not squeezing the breath,

pushing it or pulling it—and some people experience this as a sensation of drowning. They're so used to breathing in a particular way, or having the mind's cartoon idea of what the breathing has to do as it comes in and out the body, that when they finally give up on that cartoon idea there's a sense of drowning. Some people find this really scary, but it's nothing to be scared of at all. Simply sit with it. If the breath is going to come in, it's going to come in. If it's not going to come in, don't worry about it. You're not going to die. The breath will have to come in at some point if it really has to. And maybe it won't have to. Maybe you're getting enough oxygen through your pores.

So allow the breath not to disturb anything that feels still. If you don't disturb the stillness, it grows a sense of fullness, and with it a sense of ease. You become a connoisseur of your breathing. You learn to really enjoy it. This amount of enjoyment is a necessary part of the path as well. It's the food of your meditation. As you learn to feed off that, you start looking at the other things the mind has been feeding on and realize that they're pretty miserable food. This is where the sense of *nibbida* comes in. It's sometimes translated as disenchantment, sometimes even as disgust or revulsion. What it means is a sense of having had enough of something and no longer being attracted to it, because you've got better food to feed on. Once you're used to good, wholesome food, you feel repelled by junk food. You don't crave it any more.

A lot of the preliminary work in discernment consists of learning how to maintain a sense of stillness, of being centered with a sense of fullness, and learning to adjust it as you need it: learning to gladden the mind when it needs to be gladdened, to release the mind when it needs to be released, to steady it when it needs to be steadied. And every time you catch it slipping off to feed on something else, ask yourself, "Why are you going there? What good do you get out of that kind of feeding?"

A lot of the discernment comes in seeing that the other things you've been feeding on all through your life really are not worth the effort. You've really got something much better here. Only when you've been able to use the concentration as a basis for overcoming passion, especially sensual passion, do you have to transcend the concentration itself. That's when your sense of *nibbida*, or disenchantment, can turn to the concentration, because you've discovered something in the mind that doesn't need to feed on anything anymore, even on the pleasure and the rapture, the equanimity of concentration. That's when *nibbida* and *viraga*, or dispassion, become total. That's when they can liberate the mind.

As you can see, the meditation involves a long series of different emotions. The Buddha sometimes talks about the grief and the joy of being on the path. Those get involved as well. The grief is simply the realization that there are a lot of dangers in life and you haven't reached the goal yet. But you learn how to use even the grief as a spur to your practice. At the same time, it should be combined with a sense of confidence, conviction, desire, leading to the joy that comes when

you can actually see yourself making progress. The mind can settle down more than it used to, has a greater sense of wellbeing, wholeness, and fullness than it had before. You can take joy in that.

So even though the path involves figuring things out intellectually, that's not all it is. It's also a matter of learning how to marshal these different emotions, some of which are normally regarded as negative: *samvega*, grief, disenchantment, disgust. But they have their uses, so learn how to cultivate them all along the way. Without these emotions, the practice doesn't go anywhere. With them, it can take you to release.