

## A Meditator is a Good Friend to Have

April 16, 2012

Take some long deep in-and-out breaths. Have the sense that the breath is sweeping through your whole body, from the top of the head down to the tips of your toes. Try to notice where there are any patterns of tension in the body. Allow them to relax and let the breath sweep right through them. Then allow the breath to find a rhythm that feels really comfortable. You can experiment for a while, to see what kind of breathing feels most refreshing. Sometimes shorter breathing is what the body needs, sometimes longer, sometimes deeper, more shallow, heavier or lighter, faster or slower. Try to keep on top of whatever the body needs. As for any other thoughts that may come into your awareness, just let them go.

We're trying to sensitize ourselves to what's going on in the body and to how the breath can help. It's an area of our awareness that we tend to ignore because we're too interested with things outside to notice what we're doing inside.

When they talk about things being unconscious or subconscious, it's not that there's a basement in the mind where whatever happens has to be unconscious and in the dark. It's simply that we're not paying attention. Thoughts go flitting through the mind and then leave an imprint on the body. Or events in the body can have an impact on the mind. All too often, if we're not aware of this, the tension builds up and results in a sense of being burdened, being weighed down. The Buddha's essential insight is that much of that being burdened or weighed down is totally unnecessary. In fact, none of it is necessary. There may be stress in the body, but it doesn't need to have an impact on the mind.

As the Buddha says, when people are in physical pain, it's as if they were shot by an arrow. And then they shoot themselves again with another arrow: the sense of being burdened or victimized by the pain. That image has always struck me as a little too weak. We don't shoot ourselves with just one extra arrow. We shoot ourselves with many more arrows, a whole quiver of arrows. And of course the act of shooting ourselves with those arrows makes the original pain even worse, to say nothing of all the pain of the extra arrows. So no wonder we feel burdened all the time. No wonder we feel victimized, or at the very least that something is wrong.

So what we do when we meditate is that, instead of looking for the answer outside, we look for the answer inside. "What are we doing here that's adding all that unnecessary pain?" This is not a selfish question. If you can stop adding that extra pain to your own mind, you're less burdened and you're less of a burden on others. You can actually start paying attention to how other people are getting along. This part of the practice tends to be under-appreciated, but meditators are really good friends to have, precisely because they've learned how not to weigh themselves down all the time. When they're not weighed down, they can actually be of more help to others.

When pain comes along, whether it's physical or mental, they realize that they don't have to take it personally. There's a passage in the Canon where the monks are talking, and one of them, Ven. Sariputta, says, "You know, I was thinking today: Is there anything in the world whose change would cause me grief? I couldn't think of anything at all." And Ven. Ananda, another one of the monks, says, "But what if something happened to the Buddha? Wouldn't that cause you grief?" And Sariputta replies, "No, I'd reflect on the fact that he was a great human being and had been very helpful to many, and it's a sad thing he couldn't live on. But I wouldn't feel any personal grief around that." And Ananda says, "That's a sign that your conceit has gone"—"conceit" here meaning not necessarily pride, or arrogance, but more a sense of who you are and how you take things personally. If you can be in a difficult situation and not take the loss or change personally, you're actually more helpful to others than you would be otherwise.

I've seen many cases where people are crying over someone who is about to die. And a lot of the crying has to do with how much they're going to miss that person, how much grief they feel. That's not all that helpful to the person who's dying. The best gift you can give to

someone else who is in trouble is that you've taken care of your habit of personalizing the grief, of focusing on how much you're going to feel the loss, how much you're going to feel deprived. Once you've gotten past those issues, you can look more carefully: What does this person need? How can I be of help?

We were talking today about helping someone who's dying. The first thing the Buddha said is to try to make sure that the person isn't worried. There are two cases in the Canon. One is of a woman whose husband seems to be on his deathbed. So she goes and tells him, "Don't worry about me. I'll be able to take care of myself when you're gone. Don't worry about my financial situation. Don't worry about my turning away from the Dhamma. In fact, I'll be going to the monastery even more now. So put your mind at rest."

And it turns out that the husband doesn't die, at least not then. He recovers and he goes to tell the Buddha what his wife told him. The Buddha replies, "Do you realize how fortunate you are that you have such a wise wife who has your best interest in mind?"

There's a similar case where one of the Buddha's cousins, Mahanama, learns that the Buddha's going to go away at the end of the rains retreat. So he asks the Buddha what to do, what to say, if anybody is dying while he's gone. "What should I tell him?" And the Buddha says, "The first thing to tell him is to not worry about his family: 'Regardless of the situation, the fact that you're worried now isn't going to help anybody. So drop those thoughts from your mind.'" But the Buddha doesn't just leave the person there. He then tells Mahanama to ask, "Are you worried also about the sensual pleasures you're going to be leaving?" If the person says Yes, then Mahanama should say, "Try to set your mind on higher levels of being where the sensual pleasures are more refined." In this way, he should keep advising the person to take his thoughts all the way through even higher and higher levels, until he gets to the Brahma world, where the pleasure is the same pleasure we gain from a really concentrated mind. If the person can keep that up, then the Buddha says to tell him to let go even of that type of pleasure. That, too, is impermanent. The sense of identity you would build around that is impermanent, too. Let go of it. If the person can follow you all that way, then he or she can gain total release from all kinds of suffering. That's a huge gift you can give to someone who's dying.

It's not always the case that the person dying can follow you that far. It generally would require someone who's got a good meditative background, but you never know. Still, your first duty always is to try to pull that person away from any worries and then advise them to set their minds on something good. It could be the good things they've done in the past—which doesn't mean the good times they've had, because that gets people sentimental and that can get them really upset.

Instead, have them think about the times they were generous, the times they were virtuous. If they have any meditative background, try to remind them of that. Give them something good to hold onto. This means that you're not putting your own sense of loss in the way of really helping them.

This is why a meditator can be a really good friend: someone who really is concerned with your welfare, who is not only thinking of his or her own sense of loss, or sense of pain, and who is not being burdened by those extra arrows.

In my own case, many of the people in my family wondered what good it was to have a monk in the family. But then one year my father went through a severe depression. I was in Thailand and only after several months was I able to make my way back home. Within a couple of weeks, after talking to my father and letting him talk, he was out of the depression. This was after my brothers had been trying for months to help him. That's when one of my brothers said, "You know, it really is good to have a Buddhist monk in the family." Of course, you don't have to be a monk: Anyone who has trained his or her own mind is a good person to have in the family, a good person to have as a friend.

So as you're meditating here remind yourselves: It's not just for us that we're doing this. We're doing this so we can also be a help to others. The less we burden ourselves with our own sufferings, the stronger we'll be. If we're not carrying huge loads around, then when we find somebody else carrying a heavy load, we have free hands to help them put their burden down. In that way, your training in good friendship can continue. As the Buddha says, you

try to look for good friends, people you can rely on—not only so that you can gain their help, but also so that you can learn from them what it means to be a good friend. In that way you can pass on the gift.