

Dispassion Isn't Depression

December 3, 2018

Those five reflections that the Buddha recommends that we reflect on often are, in the beginning, pretty depressing. Aging, illness, death, separation: inescapable. But notice the Buddha doesn't leave you there. He goes on to the fifth reflection, on kamma. Kamma is the way out—if we master it.

It's important to keep that distinction in mind. Some people think that the Buddha's teachings end with aging, illness, death, inconstancy, stress, and not-self. And the message seems to be: Give up. There's nothing worth striving for, because it all falls apart. Some people equate that attitude with dispassion. But it's not dispassion, it's depression. You've been hoping for happiness and realize there was no happiness to be found anywhere, and so you give up. That kind of attitude would put the mind into severe depression.

But the Buddha doesn't leave you there. There is a way out. It's very much worth following because it leads to a true happiness—and it's through our *actions* that we can get those results. Particularly actions of the mind. This is why we meditate—and why, when we meditate, we focus on the mind. In other religions, they meditate on God or some abstract principle, but here we're meditating on what the mind is doing. Because what the mind is doing is going to make all the difference between suffering and not.

What you're doing right now is shaping your experience right now, and if you're not satisfied with what you're experiencing right now, as they say, "If you don't like the news, go out and make some of your own." If you don't like your experience now, you can change what you're doing to shape it. Try to detect what you're doing to shape your experience and change it for the better. This is why we meditate, because the source of all our actions, the source of all our experience, is the mind. And so you've got to look at your mind.

The best way to look at it is to get it into the present moment where it's acting. We use the breath as our topic because it's right next to the mind and it's our anchor in the present. As long as you're with the breath, you're in the present moment. You can't watch a past or future breath. The only breath you can watch is in the present. As you stay focused here, then you can watch the mind to see what it's doing to shape the present moment. Use it to settle down until you get the breath comfortable, and get the mind comfortable with the breath.

In the beginning, there has to be a fair amount of thought: Think of the image of the bathman, or the bathman's apprentice mixing water with soap powder to

make a soap dough, as they would use in those days. You have to take care to make the mixture just right, so that none of the soap powder is left unmoistened, and there's not too much water dripping out. In the same way, you get the breath just right, and then you think of ways of spreading that just-right feeling throughout the body to give the mind a good place to stay.

And don't throw it away when you leave the meditation. You've got to take it with you. We tend to blame the world outside for our lapses: There are so many other people, there are so many other things we have to think about and say and do, that we forget our meditation. But remember, those are choices we make: the choice to drop the meditation, drop the breath, and give all our attention to things outside. We have to overcome some old habits if we want to choose to maintain the sense of well-being inside.

We have to give it importance, because that's what all the Buddha's reflections give importance to: our actions. And so what are your actions in terms of looking after your mind, maintaining at least some sense of being with a comfortable breath, and some sense of having a good center inside? Don't allow it to be invaded by other people's energy—and don't send your energy out to them. Try to learn to be more self-contained, self-possessed. Your body should be *your* body, and shouldn't be invaded by other people's energies. And you have no business going around and invading theirs.

So an important part of the practice is not only what we're doing here as we have our eyes closed, but also what we're doing as we try to carry our alertness through the day, trying to maintain it and, if we've dropped it, trying to give rise to it again. We do that both for a sense of well-being, so that our actions come from a sense of well-being, and also for gaining some insight into what the mind goes for.

What are its strange assumptions? Our problem is that we don't see them as strange. We see them as normal—that is, our habits have become normal for us. An important part of the practice is staying with the breath long enough—with a sense of its usefulness in maintaining a sense of well-being—that you begin to see thoughts that go against it as strange. Then it's easier to let go of them and to stay with the breath both for a sense of well-being and for insight—and for increasing your mindfulness and alertness to see what it is that you're doing.

That covers three of the uses of concentration right there. A *pleasant abiding* for the purpose of developing *mindfulness and alertness* and for gaining the *insight* that helps you to see your defilements, to gain some detachment from them. As you get to know the present moment really well, you begin to see how

you're putting it together, and that it's always put together. This is why the present moment is never the goal—it's part of the path.

The fact that you put it together means you can put it together in a better way, and you can make a path out of it. The Buddha's discovery was that you could make it into a path to the end of suffering. Because we're all on a path of some kind or another already, willy-nilly. All too often, though we don't know what path we're on. We don't see down to the end of the path. All we see are the things that we like along the path—either on the path itself or on the side of the road—that keep us entertained. But the Buddha's warning is that some paths, even though they seem nice, lead to bad places.

So you look at your actions, you weigh them against how he defines the different paths that there are, and make up your mind to follow the path that leads to the best destination, to a happiness that doesn't have to be subject to aging, illness, and death.

And it is a *happiness*. It's not a *nothing*.

There are some strange views out there. I was talking with someone this evening who said that he was at a retreat recently where a monk was saying that we're here to arrive at right view, and right view is basically realizing everything is inconstant, stressful, not-self. Therefore, you just accept that and basically give up. He didn't use the phrase, "give up," but that's what he was saying. Nibbana wasn't happiness, the monk said, it was equanimity, acceptance. At the end of it all, there's nothing. Basically a sad end to a bad story—but that's not what the Buddha taught.

The Buddha was not defeatist. He called the noble eightfold path "unexcelled victory in battle." It's victory over our unskillful habits, a victory in the search for true happiness, a search that's well worth the effort. It's always important to keep that in mind. The reflection on aging, illness, and death is to remind us there is something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die. And the contemplations of these things, as they motivate you to practice, are meant to get you to the point where you do see the deathless.

In other words, you realize that you're shaping the present moment out of the raw materials that come from your past actions. But your shaping of these materials actually comes prior to receiving the materials. You already have the skills or lack of skills that are going to determine, when you get the raw materials, what you're going to do with them and how much suffering or lack of suffering you'll experience.

And so here, as part of the path, we're developing better skills. We're becoming more sensitive to how we fabricate things. We fabricate them into a

state of concentration and then we try to keep maintaining that state of concentration. Of course, in doing that we can learn a lot.

It's like the Army Corps of Engineers trying to keep the Mississippi River in its channel: Over the course of the many years that they've been trying to do this, they've learned an awful lot about the Mississippi. In the same way with your mind, as you try to keep the mind in concentration while you're sitting here and as you go through the day, you learn an awful lot about what the mind is doing.

In particular, you see the extent to which you are shaping your experience and how you can do it in a better way. Ultimately, you get to the point where the mind doesn't fabricate anything: Its sensitivity gets greater and greater until you realize that any kind of fabrication, even skillful fabrication, has stress. It's inconstant. So you ask yourself, "Why do I keep engaging in this?"

And when your sensitivity is developed properly, then you can see that there is an escape. The fact that your fabrication comes prior to the input from the senses means that when that fabrication ends, you can find something that's outside of the senses, outside of time, outside of space. As the Buddha said, it is the ultimate happiness, the ultimate well-being, bliss—however you want to translate the word *sukha*. And it is a state of *knowing*—there is an awareness there. You're not blanking out, you're not going to nothingness, and it's a happiness that doesn't change, because it's not known through anything fabricated.

So this is what that fifth reflection leads to. On the one hand we have all the other things that we might go for, and one of the reasons the Buddha has you look at the drawbacks of all of our regular pleasures is that if you satisfy yourself with those pleasures you're not going to be looking for anything better. You have to see that they have their drawbacks. You have to want something better, and you'll find it through your own actions: meditating to become sensitive to your own actions as you learn to become more and more skillful in what you do, say, and think.

And when you can create a good state of mind through your actions, be careful to maintain it. Ajaan Fuang had some students who were complaining one time that they'd been meditating with him and had gotten into a really nice state of mind, but then they went back home, they started talking with some friends, and as they were gossiping about other people that great state of mind just dissipated, disappeared. So they went back to complain to Ajaan Fuang: Why didn't it stay? He replied, "Well, you were the ones who took gold and exchanged it for shit." Pretty blunt, but it gets the message across.

Your ability to maintain a good state of mind really is gold. Make that your gold standard. As you go through the day, you want to maintain the sense of well-

being in the body, maintain the sense of well-being in the mind, so that you have a better and better foundation for acting in skillful ways, and a better foundation for seeing the subtle things the mind does to destroy its happiness. And you don't blame it on situations outside. You say, "This was my choice, to be mindless, not alert. But mindfulness and alertness are qualities that I can develop." Remind yourself of that again and again. There are so many things in the world where the effort you put into it isn't worth it, doesn't really give you many results, but that's not the case with the Buddha's path. It's eminently worth it. All your efforts on the path are well repaid.