

# *Concentration Through Samvega*

*August 21, 2012*

To get really skilled at anything you have to have a sense of two things. One is the dangers that come if you don't develop skill. And two is the advantages that come when you do. And the Buddha uses both sides of the equation when he's teaching meditation. On the one hand, he talks about getting the mind into concentration where you can have a sense of ease, well-being, rapture. There's a great solidity, a sense of refreshment that comes when you can settle down with the breath. And so he describes the stages of the breath where there's a lot of calming, gladdening the mind when it needs to be gladdened, steadying it, releasing it: All these things sound good, and they are. They're positive things toward which you can work.

But there's another approach to meditation as well, and that's focusing on the dangers of not getting the mind settled and concentrated. And often the Buddha would start with that. In his instructions to Rahula, when he's teaching him breath meditation, he starts out by giving a series of contemplations to engage in even before you get started with the breath meditation.

One of them is reflection on the fact that the aggregates are not self—that wherever you would look within the aggregates for happiness, something you could take as a real resting place, just doesn't exist. You can't really lay claim to these things. Another reflection is to contemplate the foulness of the body. In other words, by recommending these reflections, the Buddha is cutting off all the bridges that would lead on to things that you might get distracted by. When you think thoughts of lust well, what are you lusting for? That person's liver? That person's intestines? The sweat? The urine? The feces? Which part? He teaches you to think in these terms so that whenever your thought go wandering out in that direction you run into what you've been reflecting on. That turns you back in, toward the breath.

He has you think about the impermanence of all the happiness that can come from things outside that you could identify with, anything inside or outside you can identify with: It's all impermanent.

Then he adds that Rahula should make his mind like earth—that regardless of how bad things get, you should be steady and unperturbed, just like earth. You can throw horrible things on earth, and earth just doesn't react. You also shouldn't react to good things, pleasant things, because remember all those pleasant things outside have their drawbacks. Even the pleasant things in the meditation itself: You can't let yourself get worked up because it's like carrying something, say, a bowl full of oil and suddenly laughing. You're going to spill the oil. So you've got to get your mind unperturbed.

So as you meditate you have to ask yourself, which treatment does your mind need at any particular time? You need the sense of samvega that comes from reflecting on the foulness of the body, inconstancy, stress, non-self. We can think about those reflections that we chanted just now. Those are the ones that caused Rattapala—a wealthy young man from a family where everything was provided for him—to leave the family, to leave the wealth, and to go out and look for a better

happiness. Reflection on inconstancy: The world is swept away. It does not endure. Reflection on stress: The world offers no shelter. There's no one in charge, no one who can protect you from your illnesses. Doctors may be able to give you medicine, but there are many times when the medicine just doesn't work and the treatments don't work.

I was talking to a student this evening. There have been a lot of ups and downs in the news from him. First he found out he had cancer, and thought he was going to die very quickly. Then the doctor said, "No, it's not that bad. In fact we can actually save you." Now the latest news is, "Whoops, no, it's spread." Even the best medicine can't keep you from dying. Everybody is going to die at one point. In the meantime there's going to be pain and nobody else can come in and share out your pain. That's yours. You have to learn how to deal with it. Reflection on not-self: The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind.

And why do we go for this? We're a slave to craving. That's slavery, that's what it is. We think that when we can act on our desires and that that's our expression of freedom, but it's actually slavery.

So it can be really chastening to think in these ways. All the things you place your hopes on: Learn to realize that there's no real happiness to be found there. And think about that as much as you need to in order to bring the mind back in. A lot of these contemplations are thought to be vipassana, and they are, but they're the kind of vipassana that's required to lead the mind into really a solid concentration because you realize that there's nobody else, nowhere else, you can depend on. Nowhere else you can go and look for your happiness. This is all you've got.

And this is one of the reasons why monks go into the forest. When life is easy, food is good, and everything is convenient, you start getting complacent. You can get by, day by day, in relative comfort. Well, it's good to challenge that. Necessary to challenge that. What if things weren't comfortable? What if food was hard to come by? Good shelter was hard to come by? Could you still find happiness? This kind of thinking really throws you back into your inner resources.

So remember that the mind needs both kinds of treatment. Sometimes it needs to be chastened, to develop that sense of samvega., which you can translate as dismay, or even terror, realizing that all the places you look for happiness are on fire. As Sister Sumedha, one of the bhikkhunis in the Buddha's time, once said, the world is on fire, the world is blazing. No place you can look is safe. The only true safety is found inside, by developing the mind. Develop your concentration, getting the mind really centered here—mindful, alert, ardent to see where in here you can find where the real trouble is. Because the trouble ultimately is not with the things outside. The reason we have to focus on their drawbacks is because we're trying to latch on to them. Only then can you find what it is in the mind that causes it to go out and latch on like that. That tendency to latch on outside is what the Buddha calls an arrow. When you learn how to pull out that arrow, then everything becomes at peace, because you've found the happiness you need and you don't need to go around ransacking the place around you looking for happiness. You've found it inside.

So there are times when you need to be harsh with yourself, especially when you find going out, either you're worked up about

somebody you don't like, or something you don't like, or there's something you really like. You've got to look at the drawbacks of going out that way.

Other times, the mind needs gladdening because it needs that sense of rapture, well-being, ease, that comes from knowing how to settle in with the breath and how to use the breath to develop a sense of well-being wherever you need it. The mind needs both approaches. It needs both treatments if it's really going to develop this skill.