

Victory

September 12, 2015

There's a poem in the Sutta Nipata whose name is Victory. What's interesting about the poem is it's all about body contemplation, and particularly contemplating the body to see that there's nothing there to be proud about or to exalt yourself or disparage others – the kind of pride that comes, say, with racism or sexism. And overcoming that pride is the victory.

This, of course, fits in with the verses in the Dhammapada that talk about how victory over yourself is much more worthwhile than victory over other thousands of people, because victory outside leads to karma, in the sense that you win now but you're going to have to lose sometime down the line. It's all back and forth—and we fight over what?

Another sutta in the Sutta Nipata compares our battles to fish in a diminishing puddle of water. The fish are fighting over that last little gulp of water—for what? They're all going to die.

A couple of years back, I was up in British Columbia. We happened to stop by a stream during the spawning season and hordes of salmon were coming up the stream—just a little tiny stream, hardly deep enough for a salmon to be in it without sticking its head up above water. Lots of dead salmon were lying around in the stream, and live salmon were struggling to get up, up, up the stream so that they could have that last little gulp of water and then die. In the meantime, there were bears on either side of the stream, scooping up whatever salmon they could catch, and even before the salmon got to the stream there in the forest, they had to go through the stream on the beach where there were birds waiting on either side of the stream to pick out their eyes.

That's the Buddha's image of trying to find happiness in the world. We struggle and struggle and struggle and then what do we get? A gulp of water and then we die. In the meantime, we've picked up a lot of karma.

This is why he said that victory over yourself is better. And it's only when you gain victory over yourself that you gain true freedom. As long as you want something out of the world, you'll have to be a slave to the world. Other people have power over you to the extent that you want something out of them. So to be freed from that power, you have to turn around and look at yourself: What is it that you want? Why do you want it? Is it really worth wanting? Might there be something better to want inside?

This is one of the reasons why all of the Buddha's teachings point to this area inside your own awareness, the part that you don't share with anyone else: your feelings of pain; your feelings of pleasure. People can sympathize with those feelings, but they can't directly feel them—just as I can't get into your visual perception and see what green looks like to you, to see if your green looks like my green, or to see if sour tastes the same to you as it tastes to me. In the same way, we can't get into each other's awareness. I can't see your intentions. I can't see your

perceptions; your feelings; your thought constructs. I can't see your suffering. And you can't see mine.

It's on this internal level where all the important work is, because as the Buddha said, the causes for suffering are also on this level of awareness. But the solution lies here as well. It's work that you do inside. The suffering that weighs down the mind is not so much the suffering caused by the world, or the things that happen in the world. It's what you do with the input that comes in from the world as you experience it and as you relate to yourself and have your internal conversations and your own internal messages and plans, programs, and aspirations. There's something in the way each of us engages in these activities that leads to suffering, but we can also learn how to look at these activities more carefully to see how we can use them to get us out of the suffering.

Some people say that this is blaming the victim, but, no, it's empowering, because it's not just saying you're bad and leaving it at that. It's saying you've made some mistakes, but here's how you can undo the mistakes. Here are the tools you need.

This is why, as the Buddha said, admirable friendship is the whole of the path because admirable friends point us in this direction and help give us the tools to solve the problem of suffering. They can't do the work for us, but at least they point us in the right direction.

So when there's suffering, we learn how to look at the right spot. There may be pain coming in from outside, but the question of whether you're going to suffer over the pain is another issue entirely. That right there gives you some freedom, because you realize that the world outside doesn't have to be all that good for you to be happy. It doesn't have to be perfect out there before you find perfect happiness. Your happiness can be something independent.

So you want to explore this area inside you: your sense of the body from within; the sense of the mind from within. Get to know this area really well, because your lack of skill in dealing with it is what causes the suffering. But that lack of skill can be turned into skill if you bring the right knowledge. When the four noble truths talk about suffering, they're talking about this suffering, the suffering that's caused from within. So explore this area.

Like the body from within: How do you know the body from within? You know it through the breath. And the breath here is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs; it's also the sense of energy you feel as you inhabit the body from inside—how you feel your arms and legs, your torso, your head, from inside. There's that old Peanuts cartoon where Linus comes up to Lucy and says, "Feel my hands. See how cold they are." She touches them and says, "Yes, they really are cold." And then she asks, "But how do you know that they're cold when you're inside them?" Her feeling of his hands from the outside, that's her awareness of him. He's got a different awareness of his hands. That's where we focus our attention, that awareness from within. And for most of us, this is an area we're not all that familiar with. We don't have much of a vocabulary for this dimension in English.

The Buddha talks about four elements, and to us it sounds like a kind of primitive chemistry. Actually, it's a description of how you feel the body from within—the different properties it has. There's the fire property, i.e., warmth; the earth property, solidity. The water property is coolness and the wind or breath property is the feeling of energy. Now the breath energy may flow back and forth, it may be still, or it may go around in circles. There's all kinds of things this energy can do in the body. Some if it's related to the flow of the blood through the blood vessels. Some of it's related to the flow of energy through the nerves. But the fact that you're sitting here with your eyes closed and you know where the body is, you know how the different limbs are placed: That's because you feel the breath from within.

So as an exercise, you can focus on a part of the body that you don't normally associate with the breath. Just stay there as you breathe in and as you breathe out, and notice: When you breathe in and out, is there any difference in the energy field in that part of the body? Stay there until you notice, "Oh, there is something."

One way to improve this sense of energy flow is to survey through the body and see if there are any patterns of tension, any ribbons or knots of tension, and see what happens when you relax them. You may go down the spine. Ask yourself, "Okay, which side of the back is tighter than the other side?" Compare your hips. Which hip is tighter than the other hip? Then do the same with the thighs, the knees, the calves, the ankles, the feet. Then work with your shoulders, down through the different parts of your arms. If you can see that one side of the body is holding more tension than the other, consciously relax that side. See if you can keep it relaxed all the way through the in breath, all the way through the out. Then move on to the next area that you can compare. It's through making comparisons like this that you get more sensitive to what's going on.

It's like learning a language. They teach you how to pronounce a vowel or a consonant, and you think you're doing it right. But then the teacher actually imitates you and says, "This is what you're doing. And this is what it's supposed to sound like." When you hear the comparison that clearly, you say, "Oh." You have something to work with. And it's the same with the breath energy. Compare different parts of the body. It can be either left or right, or the higher parts of the body with lower ones, but the left-and-right comparison seems to be the easiest. As you work back and forth, relaxing the different sides, you begin to notice that as you breathe in, there is a sense of flow. Before it was blocked by all those barriers of tension. As you're more relaxed, while keeping your spine straight and keeping your posture good, you get more and more aware of this part of the body; this part of your awareness.

Some people have had traumatic experiences when they were younger and they tend to stay away from this inner part of their awareness. In that case, you have to approach this exercise a little bit more cautiously, but at the same time you do want to have a sense that there are parts of the body where you feel safe, and then gradually expand those.

Other people are not sensitive to their body simply because they're in their head so much. If that's the case, think of yourself backing into the body, letting it envelope you, reclaiming this area as yours—because this inner awareness here is where all the issues are: all the four noble truths, dependent co-arising—all the factors are right here—the four establishings of mindfulness, the areas where you pay attention to body, feelings, mind states, dhammas. These are all in this area of your awareness. So you want to sensitize yourself to this area of awareness and see what you're doing with it.

It's not just a given. There is, as the Buddha said, some fabrication going on. You have your ways of shaping this experience and if you're not paying careful attention to what you're doing, middle-level management takes over—in other words, your old habits. You can find yourself tensing up over a little pain here and there without even realizing that it's happening. It's almost like somebody else is giving the orders. Part of your brain, part of your mind, is giving the orders, but you're not paying full attention.

So you're trying to sensitize yourself in here. As the Buddha said, this is where the victory is won: inside, not outside. And when you've decided that the victory you want is inside, you're more in control. This is something you really can achieve and it really does accomplish something—not like victory out in the world: that last little gulp of water after you've fought the other fish off. What does it really matter if you're just going to die—and die with a lot of karma for having fought these people off? Here's a victory inside that harms no one and really accomplishes something. You develop good qualities of mind. You carry those good qualities with you. This is all good karma. This is all for your direct benefit. And as you get deeper and deeper into this area of your awareness, and more and more sensitive to it, you find that there are some victories that, once they're gained, are never lost.

So sensitize yourself to what's going on inside, what you feel directly, and some day that victory will be yours.