

Feelings of Grief & Joy

November 19, 2011

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about the causes for laziness and for diligence, or what he calls "aroused persistence" or "aroused energy." He gives eight examples, and in each case the reason for being lazy or for being diligent and energetic has nothing to do with outside circumstances. It has everything to do with your attitude. If you don't get enough to eat, then if you're lazy, you say, "Oh, I didn't get enough to eat today. I won't have the strength to practice." If you're diligent, you say, "When the body hasn't eaten so much, it's a lot lighter, less likely to fall asleep. This is a good opportunity to practice." Or if you're recovering from an illness, then if you're lazy, you say, "Oh, I'm still not strong enough yet. I'd better not practice." If you're diligent, you say, "I'm stronger than I was, and I don't know if I'm going to have a relapse, so here's an opportunity to practice." And the way all of this is presented is comical. It's totally arbitrary as to whether you're going to take a particular incident as a reason to be lazy or a reason to be diligent. It's easy for us to see the humor in these situations because we can recognize ourselves in the lazy rationalizations. We've been there before.

Now when it comes to feelings, especially mental feelings, the Buddha makes pretty much the same observation. Things can be going badly, and you can either take that as a reason for feeling grief or you can think about it in a way that gives rise to joy or equanimity. And although we can laugh at the monks who are lazy, it's hard to laugh in the case of your feelings. You tend to identify with them strongly. There's something very real about a feeling. In this modern world of ours, there are so many ideas floating around that we don't know whose ideas to take. We can be leery of even the ideas swimming around in our mind, as to where they came from or whether we really believe them. But our feelings seem to be really ours, and so we hold onto them, even in cases where they're blatantly causing us suffering.

So you can ask yourself: Do you want to continue holding on, or would you rather find the opportunity for some freedom? The key lies in realizing that your feelings are fabricated. This is one of the reasons why right view comes at the beginning of the path, because as the Buddha notes, we suffer around our feelings as one of the five clinging aggregates, and each of those aggregates is something fabricated. We put them together out of the raw material at hand. If we put them together in an unskillful way, we need to realize that they don't have to continue being that way. We can change our habits. We can learn how to put them together more skillfully.

For instance, when things aren't going well, when someone has died, you've suffered loss of one sort or another, then, as the Buddha said, you can feel householder grief, simply thinking, "I'm not getting what I wanted. This really hurts me. I feel lost." Or you can reflect on the fact that these things are inconstant. How could you expect a permanent happiness out of sights, sounds, smells, tactile sensations, which are the ways through which we know one another, the ways through which we experience the world. You reflect on the fact that there are people who have gone beyond their attachment to these things. This gives rise to what the Buddha calls renunciate grief: the desire, "Oh, when will I have that freedom as well?" This, he says, is better than householder grief, because if you simply follow householder grief, you end up looking for householder joy: "When is there going to be a pleasant sight, sound or taste, when can I find another relationship, when can I find something that will replace the loss?" And that, of course, leads you to look for happiness in things that are going to leave you again.

Ajaan Fuang once made the observation that when there's a sensual pleasure we really aspire to, it's a sign that we had it in the past, and we miss it—the past here being the past either in this lifetime or in a previous lifetime. He added that if you think about this for a minute, you give rise to a sense of dismay. You realize that you just keep going back for the same things and then you finally get them and then you're going to lose them again, and then you're going to miss them again. Then you're going to struggle to get them again, and again, and again. There's no end to that. There's only an again and an again and an again, and it's really depressing.

Whereas there's a way out if you find the joy that comes from letting go, from developing the path. That gives rise to a happiness or wellbeing that doesn't waver in any way at all.

So even though you may not have achieved that goal yet, and it may bother you that you haven't achieved it, that sense of being bothered is a lot better than just allowing yourself to wallow in the grief over things you've lost. The sense of being bothered—the renunciate grief—is what gives you the impetus to practice so that you'll taste renunciate joy: the joy at the end of the path.

What this means is learning how to think about things in a different way. Where are you going to get the strength to do that? From breath meditation. We give rise to a sense of strength in the body by the way we focus on the breath energy, a sense of wellbeing in the body that comes from the way we focus on the breath. The breath is one of the physical elements that enables you to step out of your thoughts and look at your mind, at the thoughts going on in your mind, and to realize that you have a choice: You can go with the habits that cause you to suffer, or you can go in another direction. If you can't think of what that other direction may be, you can read about what people in the past have done, how they've trained their minds to think in new ways.

There's the case of the woman who had lost her daughter, and she was mourning in the cemetery. The Buddha came past and said, "Do you realize you've lost 84,000 daughters, all buried in this cemetery?" And she later said that just thinking about that changed her attitude entirely, allowed her to let go of her grief.

So this is part of dealing with these feelings as they come up. When we read about feelings as a frame of reference, we tend to think of simply watching feelings as they come and go. It sounds pretty random—what's going to come and what's going to go—and you just sit there with the randomness. But you have to remember that feelings are fabricated—we take a potential for a feeling and shape it into an actual feeling—and that in developing mindfulness, one of the key factors is ardency, and ardency means trying to be skillful in how you fabricate things. That includes feelings. As the Buddha points out, there is skillful joy and unskillful joy, skillful grief and unskillful grief, skillful equanimity and unskillful equanimity. We already are cultivating these things. We tend not to think about it consciously as "cultivating," but we do tend to cultivate certain types of grief, certain types of joy, certain types of equanimity, because we like them—or at least we can't think of any better way of fabricating them. Sometimes the things we like are skillful, but that's not always the case.

This is where you have to see: "What effect does it have on the mind if I think in these ways, if I cultivate these particular emotions?" For instance with joy: We tend to think that joy is a good thing, regardless. Well, not necessarily. Certain types of joy are really harmful for the mind because they depend on your doing unskillful things in order to maintain the causes of that joy. They can make you very weak if you need to have things in a particular way in order to be happy. You get very unreliable. People can prey on your fears. This is a lot of what politics is all about. They want to make you afraid so they can influence you to do what they want. But if you learn how to develop a joy that comes from how you breathe, how you focus the mind, how you develop qualities of mindfulness, ardency, alertness, concentration, discernment—what the Buddha calls joy or pleasure not of the flesh, rapture not of the flesh, based on concentration: That kind of joy actually strengthens the mind. It's a joy not touched by events outside. It'll put you in a position where you can look at events outside and think about them in a new way, so that regardless of how well or poorly they're going, you can maintain an inner sense of stable wellbeing. You won't fall prey to fears when things threaten to change.

So remember, we're going around cultivating feelings all the time, so we might as well cultivate skillful ones. And because they're fabricated, it's not the case that you're not being true to your deeper nature when you try to change a particular feeling. You're just learning new habits, new feeling-fabricating habits. This is where the qualities we develop through breath meditation can help. You become more mindful, more alert, less attached to the views expressed in your mind, the views that go into making a feeling. Sometimes there's a belief that the feeling comes first and then the thoughts develop around it, but that's not necessarily the case. A lot of your thinking can give rise to feelings, too.

So it's good to be able to step back from your feelings, to watch them from the point of view of the breath.

Notice how the breath tightens up around certain feelings. Notice how you can consciously breathe through that tightness. This allows you to separate yourself out from them for a bit and to ask yourself, “Okay, is this a particularly skillful or unskillful kind of feeling here? Is this something I want to cultivate or something I want to abandon?” Reflect on the tools you have at your disposal to dismantle unskillful feelings and build skillful ones in their place.

This is what’s involved in taking feelings as a frame of reference. It has to be done with right view, the view that reminds you that these things are fabricated. If a particular feeling seems natural, it’s simply that it’s habitual. You have habitual ways of focusing on a particular type of feeling, indulging in it—which doesn’t mean that it’s truly you. It’s simply a habit that’s taken you over. Of course nobody’s forcing you to get out of those feelings. The Buddha’s simply offering you the *opportunity* to get out, and these are the tools for doing that.

When you’ve suffered a loss, there’s an extent to which expressing grief is appropriate. There was the case of King Pasenadi, who learned that Queen Mallika, his favorite queen, had died. He was in the midst of a conversation with the Buddha when one of his aides came and whispered this in his ear. He broke down and cried. So the Buddha said, “When did you ever think that something that is born could last forever?” Sounds a little harsh, but then the Buddha went on to say that when eulogies and remembrances are serving a purpose—and they do have a purpose—go ahead and engage in them. In other words, give expression to your grief when you feel that it’s serving a good purpose. But when you realize that it’s simply getting indulgent, that you’re getting deeper and deeper into an unskillful state of mind, then remind yourself that you’ve got to get beyond this. You’ve got to learn how to think in new ways.

King Pasenadi’s problem was that he wasn’t much of a meditator, but here we are meditating. We’re learning the skills: how to deal with the breath, how to deal with the body, how to deal with events in the mind so that you can step back from them a little bit and watch them, realizing that you have the tools to remake them when they’re unskillful. The role of mindfulness is to remember that, to keep that in mind, so that whatever comes up, you don’t forget that you’ve got the tools that can help prevent you from suffering. This is one of the Buddha’s greatest gifts.