

Antidotes for Narcissism

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It's easy to see why some people think that meditation encourages narcissism, a fascination with your own feelings, a fascination with your own thoughts, your own breath, as if that was all that mattered in the world. And it's not helped when the meditation is reduced to a certain formula, a certain technique, that again just focuses on what you're feeling, what you're sensing, as if that were all the world of the practice. It's easy for people to come to meditation, saying, "What's in it for me?" and not be challenged with much to discourage that attitude.

So it's important to reflect on a phrase in the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness, that when you're contemplating the body in and of itself, or feelings, mental qualities, states of mind, you do it both internally and externally. In other words, it's not just your body, feelings, mind states, mental qualities, but also the bodies, feelings, mind states, and mental qualities of other people, other beings. And in this contemplation, it's important to remember the original meaning of mindfulness. It's not awareness. If it were awareness, there'd be a problem: How could you be aware of other people's feelings? How could you be aware of their mental qualities? You'd have to be psychic. And even then, what use would that be?

Mindfulness doesn't mean awareness. It means keeping something in mind. As in that old phrase—to be ever mindful of the needs of others—you keep other people's needs in mind. It means you remember them. You hold them in mind. And the same with mindfulness practice. When you're focusing on the breath, you're mindful of the breath, which means you keep the breath in mind. The actual awareness of the mind comes under *sampajañña*, alertness. And even that is more focused than simple awareness: You're alert to what the mind is *doing*, and the results that coming from its doings.

So when you reflect on your body, it's also important to reflect on the bodies of others, to make comparisons—the right comparisons. The same with feelings and the other frames of reference. This is to counteract what are our usually very unskillful ways of making comparisons: such as thinking that we're better than other people in terms of our body, or worse than other people in terms of our body. They are more beautiful than we are, younger than we: That's being worse. Or the people who say, "I'm better than other people from another race, just because of the color of my skin": That's a very unskillful kind of comparison. "I've got a better mind than other people. I've got a worse mind than other people." These are forms of conceit that the Buddha says are unhelpful ways of comparing that make you either proud or discouraged, neither of which are useful emotions to bring to the path.

As you reflect on the different ways the Buddha has you think about other beings and compare their bodies and feelings and minds to yours, it's important to note that it's mainly the emotional reaction that you're aiming for, the attitude that develops as you learn how to make

useful comparisons—because you can develop some extremely important, very helpful emotions if you make comparisons in the right way.

For instance, in the very first set of reflections, on the body, there is a whole section where the Buddha has you reflect on the fact of the parts that you have in your body, starting from the hair of the head, hair the body, nails, teeth, skin, and all the way into the innards. Then has you reflect on other people's bodies, to realize that if you were to base your superiority on your body, exactly where is your liver superior to someone else's liver? Where is your skin superior to someone else's skin? It's all the same kind of stuff. As he once said, whoever on the basis of a body like this—considering all the things that are in the body, all the things that flow out of the body—whoever on the basis of a body like this, would exalt himself and disparage others, what is that if not blindness?

So that's one purpose of this reflection: to get a sense of dispassion. Or you can reflect on dead bodies. You realize that when you see a dead body in different stages of decomposition, you realize that that's the fate of this body as well. If it doesn't get cremated right after death, it's going to go through those stages too. That gives rise to two kinds of feelings: one is a sense of heedfulness, realizing that you don't know how much more time you have. You don't have all the time in the world for anything. You've got a limited amount of time, so you want to make the best use of it before this body, too, lies on the ground, like that one over there.

This reflection also gives rise to a sense of *samvega*: This is the fate of all bodies, no matter how much you might think you'd like to be reborn better looking, taller, stronger, whatever. Everybody eventually deteriorates in the same way.

So those are some feelings that arise when you compare your body with the bodies of others, or you contemplate the bodies of others, in a skillful way: a sense of dispassion, a sense of heedfulness, a sense of *samvega*.

There's a similar principle with feelings. As you trace over the feelings that go through your mind in the course of the day, you realize that there's a lot of pleasure, a lot of pain, a lot of ups and downs. Then reflect on the fact that other people have the same kinds of feelings—you like your pleasures, you hate your pains; they like their pleasures, they hate their pains—and as the Buddha said, when you reflect on that fact, one, you realize you wouldn't want to harm them in any way; and, two, you feel compassion for them, for all the suffering that they go through just like you do. It's something we all have in common. When you go through intense grief or intense disappointment, the Buddha has you reflect on the fact that other people have met with the same things: the same grief, the same disappointments. The world is not dumping a load on you and you alone. Think of all the people in the world who are losing their loved ones tonight, meeting with disappointment tonight. If you're suffering from that kind of loss, that kind of disappointment, it's helpful to reflect on the fact that you're not alone. It helps you get away from that particular grief, either with a sense of equanimity or with a sense of dispassion.

Or, as the Buddha says, it can spur you to replace the grief of the householder life with the grief of the renunciate life. The grief of the householder life is that you're disappointed in the things that are happening to you. You are upset about the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas you encounter. The grief of the renunciate life is that you realize that you haven't yet reached true happiness, you haven't yet reached nirvana, you haven't yet reached the goal. There's work to be done. The second grief is better, because at least it gives you a sense of direction, of how to get out of all of this. It helps to replace grief with *pasada*, a sense of conviction that there is a way out. Even though you haven't found that way out yet, or you haven't reached the end of the way, at least you're confident that there is the path.

So when you reflect on the feelings of others, contemplate the feelings of others, keep the fact that other people have the same kinds of feelings you do. It helps give rise to a sense of compassion, a sense of equanimity: compassion for other people's feelings, equanimity toward your own.

With mind states, it's helpful to look at other people, say, if you're in the midst of really feeling angry. Keep in mind that other people are angry too. What are they like when they're angry? What stupid things do they do? How ugly do they look? When you think about how much you don't like the anger of others, it helps you to gain a little distance from your own. It gives rise to a sense of shame and compunction, that you don't want to give in to this anger. At the very least, you don't want it to come out in your words and deeds. You want to look for a way to help uproot it, so that you don't have to suffer from it inside.

When you're enjoying good mental states, especially the kind of mental states that come from following the path, it gives rise to a sense of joy. You think about other people who have been on the path, they've found this joy, too, and finally you're beginning to get some of the results that they did. And the Buddha has you appreciate that. Now, you don't want to get inflated. Don't compare yourself to people who haven't gotten there yet, saying that you're better than they are. But as the Buddha said, when you find good qualities developing in your mind, you might think about the devas. They too have those qualities. At the very least, you're beginning to get a little bit above your old level of mind, the old way you used to think, the old way you used to feel. You've raised the level of your mind to the deva level. And the Buddha said, that's something good to recollect, something good to think about. It encourages you to develop even more skillful qualities.

And a similar principle applies with mental qualities, such as the hindrances or the factors for awakening. When you see the hindrances stealing into your mind, the big problem is that you tend to side with them. You don't recognize them as hindrances. Desire comes into the mind and you see the object as really being desirable. Ill will comes to the mind, and the person you're angry about, the person you're upset about, really does seem to deserve to suffer. When you're feeling sleepy, you say, "Well, the body is telling me I need to sleep." When you're worrying, you feel you really *have* to worry. If you don't worry, then you're neglecting your

responsibility. And when you're feeling doubts, you say, "Yes, this really is a doubtful matter. My doubts are justified." In other words, you side with your hindrances.

One good way of counteracting that tendency is to think about other people who are siding with their hindrances over things that seem totally ridiculous to you—people who have desires that you don't identify with, that you find strange; people who are angry about people in situations where you don't see there's any need for the anger, and so on down the line. This helps pull you out of your own narrow perspective on things. You develop a sense of shame over the hindrances you've been giving in to, and a sense of joy as you develop the factors for awakening in their place. Those qualities that the famous ajans have developed, those qualities that all the noble disciples of the path have developed: At last you're beginning to get a taste of what took them to true release.

So these are some of the ways you can use reflection on other people's bodies, feelings, mind states, mental qualities—keeping these things in mind so that you get perspective on your own. As a result, you can develop skillful reactions, skillful attitudes, skillful emotions around them: heedfulness, *samvega*, dispassion, compassion, equanimity, a sense of shame over what's unskillful in your mind, a sense of joy over what is skillful.

Ultimately, all these qualities are meant to lead to a sense of disenchantment, dispassion, as you see that all bodies are equal and impermanent, all feelings are equal and impermanent, whether yours or somebody else's. The same holds true for mind states and mental qualities. No matter where you wander, no matter what you might crave or cling to, it all leads to these same things over and over again. And they're endless—unless you decide to find the way out.

And it's not just that you are suffering. In order to maintain an identity that has a body and feelings and so forth, you need to feed. That's the other great contemplation. "What is one? All beings subsist on food." Everybody's feeding on everybody else, physically, emotionally. This causes suffering both for the feeder and the fed upon. We tend to think that the person who is feeding is getting satisfaction, but it's a very precarious place to be when your existence requires that you constantly look for food. Where is there a totally stable, secure food source? They say that the food stores for the world right now—which used to be enough to last for a couple years in case there was famine and the crops failed—those have all been eaten up. There's very little in storage in case of a disastrous crop failure. The food chain that brings food to us is extremely tenuous. Our position as feeders is very insecure, and there's a lot of suffering right there. On top of that, there's also the suffering of the fed upon, both those who are fed upon physically and those fed upon emotionally.

So it's useful to think externally in these ways, because if you come to the meditation simply thinking, "What's in it for me?" you won't benefit much from the meditation. You've got to train yourself to say instead, "What's in it for the whole mass of beings? To what extent can my meditation help them too?" At the very least, it gets you out of that feeding system. There's at least one less mouth to be fed.

In the meantime, you can be an inspiration. You can take refuge in the Sangha. It's good to keep having members of the noble Sangha appearing in the world, so that it's not just a matter of some story way in the past, the time of the Buddha or over there in Asia. When there are members of the noble Sangha appearing right now, that's an inspiration to other meditators.

So we're not doing this just for ourselves. We're doing it for everybody. If we can get to the point where we have less greed, aversion, and delusion, we're not the only ones benefiting. Other people are suffering less from our greed, aversion, and delusion. If we get to the point where we don't have to feed at all, it takes a huge burden off of everyone else.

So instead of thinking about yourself as either better or worse than other people, try to compare yourself in a skillful way, so that you do develop healthy attitudes of dispassion, *samvega*, heedfulness, compassion, equanimity, shame, compunction, and joy. Because these are the attitudes that keep the path alive—and help to keep alive the possibility for true happiness for all beings as well.