

Be Bigger Than Your Pains

September 7, 2010

Every evening we chant the chant on the sublime abidings—immeasurable goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—because for the most part, our goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity have measures. They have limits. We need practice in going beyond those limits.

The more limited, the more narrow our concerns are, the bigger the sufferings in life are going to seem, and the more overwhelming. If we're going to work on them, we have to make sure they don't seem so overwhelming. We have to make our mind larger than they are so they don't consume all our attention.

Think about other beings: They have their sufferings as well. They want happiness as well. So in one sense, we're all in this together, and you have to think about how your sufferings fit in with the rest of the sufferings of the world. To what extent are you actually causing other people to suffer? Also, remember that there are a lot of people out there who are suffering a lot more than you are right now. Even though you don't feel their sufferings, at least it's important to remember them to get a sense of perspective on where you are and what your problems are so that you can tackle them with more confidence—realizing as you're sitting here meditating, it's not just *your* issues that you're dealing with.

You're trying to find a happiness that doesn't impinge on others, doesn't take anything from them, doesn't cause them any suffering. So it's not just you sitting here. You're part of a larger world. And you want to do the responsible thing: to find a happiness that's harmless so that maybe you can have something to offer to other people when you've found that happiness.

As they say, an arahant is someone who lives without any debts to the world. When you're free of greed, aversion, and delusion, you're no one's debt at all, which means that everything you do, say, and think is a gift. That would be a really nice position to be in, instead of the way we are right now, constantly piling up karmic debts. We're beholden to this person for food, that person for shelter, this person for emotional support. We should learn how to depend on ourselves.

So, whatever problems you have, whatever issues you have, it's good to expand your mind so that the issues don't seem so large. They don't loom over you. They're just there in the mind, but your mind can be expanded to encompass a lot more than them.

So when you chant those phrases—“May all beings be happy”—make sure they're not just phrases. Think about what they mean. Try to get your head

around them. Like that character in *Through the Looking-Glass* who liked to think of a couple of impossible things every morning before breakfast, try to think about infinity at least once, twice, or three times a day to put your issues into perspective and remind yourself why you're here meditating. You're trying to find a true happiness. And the pursuit of happiness here is not just a hedonistic thing. You're looking for a happiness that requires wisdom. It requires compassion and purity. That's the skill we're working on as we focus on the breath: developing qualities of mind we're going to need to find that true happiness.

We start with mindfulness because it's a pretty simple mental faculty: just keeping something in mind, reminding yourself why you're here: that you want to act in a skillful way, think in a skillful way, speak in a skillful way. You want to hold that motivation and aspiration in mind so that you don't forget it. But that faculty needs a lot of training because we so easily forget. We're so easily distracted. The way the world is going right now, everything is built on keeping everybody distracted all the time. But for the sake of our true happiness, we've got to fight that tendency.

We can do that by trying to stay with the breath. The simple fact that the breath is coming in and out becomes your signal. It becomes your reminder—stay right here, stay right here—because right here is where all the important things are happening. Your intentions are happening right here, and the choice as to whether you're going to go with a particular intention is happening right here as well.

There are a lot of reasons why the Buddha has you stay focused on the breath as your primary object of meditation. It's free; it's going to be here as long as the body's alive; and it's something very intimate with the mind. It's the part of your awareness or the part of the world that's as close to the mind as you can get without actually being in the mind. And because there's only the present breath that you can watch, as long as you're with the breath you know you're in the present. When you're in the present, you can watch things in the mind without getting distracted and losing your frame of reference, going off into the past or the future.

You want to establish your frame of reference right here. So even though a thought may appear, make sure that it's like a little thought balloon. You don't go into the balloon. You watch it floating there. It appears in the mind for a minute, and then it disappears. You don't get into it; you stay here in the body. This is why, in the Buddha's meditation instructions, as soon as he has you sensitive to what long breathing feels like and what short breathing feels like, he tells you to be

aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. This helps to solidify the sense of being fully here in the present moment.

When your focus is full-body like this, it's a lot harder for the mind to go slipping off. The mind that goes into a thought balloon first has to turn itself into a little point, which is where it usually is—the very limited range that we're often focused on. That's why it's very easy to slip in and out of these little thought balloons. But here, you're trying to make your awareness as large as possible so that it can't slip into those little crevices and cracks. If you can't be aware of the whole body all at once or if you find that difficult, focus on "whole torso" all at once, then your torso and your arms, and then your torso and your arms and your legs.

Go through the body as you breathe in and breathe out, noticing how it feels in the different parts of the body. If you're focused on your arms, compare: Which arm has more tension? Sometimes you have more tension in the upper arm on the right side and more tension in the wrist on the left side. Well, just notice these things and then whichever side seems to have more tension, try to relax that side. It's the same as you go down the spine. Which side of the spine has more tension? Is it in the neck? In the thorax? Down in the lumbar region all the way down to the tailbone? Relax whichever side seems to be holding on to more tension in that part of the back. The more relaxed the body is, the more you sense a flow of energy going through it as you breathe in and as you breathe out.

This gives you a good foundation—a good, solid place to stay—so that when thoughts come up, they just go right through. They don't knock you off your frame of reference because your frame of reference is large.

Then you learn to stay here. Sometimes it means simply being very still right here. Other times, it means investigating things in the body—areas where the breath energy seems to be in knots or entangled in various ways and you try to sort out the tangles.

If you have an injury in one part of the body, think of the breath energy going right through the injured part. Notice where the breath energy seems to be cut off or blocked, and see if you can find ways through or around the blockage. It's like coming down a city street and discovering a big accident in the route you were planning to take. Well, you take an alternative route. You find you can get around it. Or to change the image, you see if you can make your awareness really refined so you can slip right through.

There's a lot to explore here—if the mind wants to explore. When it's had enough exploring, just sit and be very still with the breath. Allow your awareness to be totally surrounded by the breath so that the sense of the breath and the

awareness become one. If you can maintain that focus, stay right there. If you find that you can't, then go back to surveying the body again. The important thing is that you stay within the frame of the body right here because this is your anchor in the present moment.

And while you're here, you can't help but see mental events happening and feelings of pleasure or pain coming. There are all kinds of things coming in and out of the present moment—all the different frames of reference that you could choose—but it's good to stick with the body as long as you can. If a thought comes in, simply notice: How does it affect the breath energy in the body? Is there any part of the body that tenses up when the thought appears? What happens if you release that tension?

In other words, keep the body as your primary frame of reference. It's like holding something in your fist. Other things may come and brush against the back of the fist, but you don't turn around and try to hold on to them. You've got something valuable right here. It's not the case that other things are not valuable, but for the time being, you really want to learn to hold on to this because you've got to strengthen the faculty of mindfulness. You've got to strengthen your alertness.

You develop a sense of ease while you're here. The breath feels calm. If you're relaxed, it feels calming. If you're feeling tense, it's relaxing. If you're feeling low, then the breath can give you more energy. Learn to explore these variations so that you can take advantage of them. You're trying to give the mind a good foundation, and it's going to need various ways of maintaining its balance. Sometimes it gets discouraged, so you need a way to energize it—to gladden it, as the Buddha said. Other times, it gets carried away with its exploring, and you need to steady it. It burdens itself with various things. You need to learn how to put those burdens down.

So there are a lot of skills you need to develop here. It's not just one skill. The Buddha didn't teach any Johnny One-Note meditations, because when issues come up in the mind, they're not one-note issues. They don't all come up in the same way. You're going to need different approaches and different strategies for dealing with them. And one of those strategies is developing a sense of spaciousness in the breath and the body here. It's very similar to developing thoughts of immeasurable goodwill. It gives you a larger perspective so that the pains in the body don't seem so overwhelming. Whatever emotional issues come up, they don't seem so overwhelming either. You're bigger than they are, more expansive than they are. They don't seem so intimidating.

When pains do come up, you're in a better position to look at them because that's the duty the Buddha assigns to pain and suffering: to comprehend it. There's no virtue in just sitting there and suffering. You want to try to understand the pain, so you need to develop a place where you can watch it. You see, "Oh, this is how the pain begins. And this is how it's inconstant; it comes and goes and comes back again, goes again and moves around." It's the same with mental pain. It flares up for a while and then it goes away. Then it comes back again and goes away. You can dig up issues from the past, things you've forgotten for a long time, and really torment yourself here if you want to. But you realize it doesn't accomplish anything. Try to see why the mind likes to create suffering for itself. It has its reasons.

As the Buddha said, if there weren't some pleasure in the aggregates, we wouldn't fall for them. Remember the aggregates are not things; they're activities. They're certain ways of thinking, ways of feeling. And even in the painful ones, there's a certain amount of pleasure. That's why we indulge in them. So you've got to look for that pleasure and then compare it with the pain. This requires having the mind in a really good place so that it doesn't feel so overwhelmed by these things that all it can think about is trying to get rid of the pain, rid of the pain, rid of the pain. If you have a sense that you're larger than the pain, then it doesn't seem so overwhelming. You can sit with it more easily and not feel so threatened by it.

You may think, "Well, this isn't my style of meditation. I'd like to do something that's a little bit more pleasant." But it doesn't work that way. It's not the sort of thing that you can choose or not choose. The Buddha's noble truths are universal truths. They apply across the board. The duties he applies here are universal duties—if you want to put an end to suffering. If you're not interested, the Buddha's not going to force you to follow them. But if you've had enough suffering, this is what you've got to do. It's just the way things are.

You've got to comprehend the suffering until you can see what's causing it. Then you can let go of the cause. And you've got to develop the mental skills and mental space, the mental strengths that can allow you to comprehend the suffering and abandon its cause. That's what we're working on right now: developing those skills—the mindfulness, the concentration, and the discernment.

This larger state of mind allows you to be bigger than your sufferings, bigger than your pains, so try to keep this enlarged perspective in mind. One of the Buddha's terms for the mind in concentration is *mahaggatam cittam*, the expanded mind or the enlarged mind. You can see things from a larger perspective and not

be so intimidated by whatever problems come up. This is why, in so many of the Buddha's reflections, he keeps reminding you that whatever you're suffering, other people are suffering. And whatever they're suffering from, you have the potential for suffering from that as well if you don't get your act together. We're all in this together.

This perspective helps to get rid of the line of thinking that says, "Why me?" You look around and there's nobody who's exempt—except for people who train their minds. So there's an out, and the out is right here. Learn to get really acquainted with right here. Develop the skills you need to get acquainted with right here, and you'll find it.