

Dissolving Narratives

January 30, 2012

We have those chants before the meditation every evening as a way of establishing some perspective on what we're doing. Otherwise, we carry our normal narratives from the day right into the meditation. They can have a lot of force, making it very hard for the mind to settle down and be in the present moment.

Sometimes these narratives are simply a tally of the day, and sometimes the tally goes further back. So it's good to get a larger perspective. Sometimes your stories have to do either with unskillful things you did to somebody else or with unskillful things that other people did to you. And not to deny the harm that was done, but you have to be able to get past that kind of narrative. Otherwise, it's very hard to settle down.

This is why we have those reflections like the one, "All living beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions, born of their actions, related through their actions, and live dependent on their actions." Or "have their actions as their arbitrator" is another translation of that last phrase. Try to think of those truths as covering the whole universe, going way back in time, and you realize that the stories of our lives have no real beginning. And unless we find awakening, they have no real end. Samsara is just a back-and-forth sloshing around.

If you trace back why someone mistreated you, you find that maybe sometime in the past you mistreated somebody else. Well, why did you mistreat somebody back then? There's a karmic explanation that goes even further back—back and forth, back and forth—and as the Buddha said, you can't really trace all the way back to the beginning point. There's no point where you can say, "Okay, this was the first person to do wrong," because a lot of times, it's "Well, he did wrong; therefore, I did something in response. But I was justified in doing that because he was the first to do it." But who knows who really was the first?

Try to open your mind to the immenseness of all that. The purpose of this is to dissolve away all the significance we give to those events and to realize that without this path to the end of suffering, there's no closure at all. Things are just going to keep going on and on and on: causing ourselves suffering, causing other people suffering, and other people making us miserable. You want to develop a sense of dispassion toward the whole thing, and a sense of *samvega*, dismay over the pointlessness of the whole thing. There really is only one thing that has a real point, and that's learning how to stop creating suffering and get out of the whole

back and forth. When you can think in those terms, it's a lot easier to settle down, because every time the mind starts to leave the breath again, you run into that same big, immense body of pointlessness.

We're here; we have a point. There's a purpose. We're trying to train the mind, realizing that the only way out of that whole mass of suffering is to understand why we're creating it. What's the ignorance, as the Buddha said, that gives rise to the craving that makes us forget that a lot of our actions are causing suffering? We focus on other things, have other agendas, and start creating other narratives, but the real issue is: Why are you making yourself suffer? When you make yourself suffer, it's very easy to spread out and start making other people suffer, too. And when you make yourself suffer, the actions of other people can give you grist for your mill for making yourself suffer even more.

So here's the way out. It's better to bring the mind to the present moment. Put aside the issues of who you are, what your personal past is, and what your personal narrative is. If you have any narratives at all, think of it as a narrative that says, "After all that suffering, you finally were able to learn how to bring an end to it." That's a good narrative. That's the narrative that brings you into the present moment.

So use the breath as an anchor to stay here. When you're with the breath, you know you're in the present, because you can't watch any past breaths and you can't watch any future breaths—just this one right here, right now. And if you're going to stay here, you want to make the breath comfortable. That involves experimenting with the way you're breathing, and also experimenting with the way you're thinking about the breath.

Think of the breath as energy flow. It's not the air you're squeezing out through the nose and pulling in through the nose. It's an energy flow that can flow through the body in all directions, coming in and out through every pore. Think for a minute: every pore, all around you. When you breathe in, it should be coming in from every direction.

When the energy comes in, does it feel like there's a conflict? Are there a lot of eddies and whirlpools, or is it more coordinated? If you find any places where there seems to be discomfort, patterns of tension, tightness or blockage, just think of them dissolving away. Think of every part of the body, every cell in the body, being nourished by the breath energy.

This is called singleness of preoccupation. You're trying to fill your body with one perception, the perception of breath energy coming in, going out. And by enlarging your sense of awareness of the body, you make it easier to stay in the present moment. If you're just on one little spot, it's very easy to get knocked off.

But if your frame of reference covers the whole body, then you can hear sounds, and they just go right through the range of your awareness, but they don't have to knock you off balance because you've got a large foundation here.

Thoughts can come through and, as long as they don't make you lose your larger frame of reference, they're not going to do any damage. They can just go passing right through. You don't have to get involved with them. You don't have to find out what they're about or identify them—what kind of thought it is—and above all, you don't need to tie up the loose ends.

One of *the* main lessons in the practice is that there are lots of loose ends in the world that can never get tied up. You just learn how to accept that. A good way is to learn how to leave a few loose ends around in your mind. This is not a question of being irresponsible, but simply realizing there are a lot of things that can never reach closure. A good way of getting some hands-on practice with that is allowing your thoughts to remain “untied up”—*not* neatly folded up and tucked away. A thought comes through, and you may have a vague idea of what it's about. Well, leave it vague. Or if it's a story that seems to be going someplace, let it dissolve into space. Just leave it unfinished. The work you do want to get finished is learning how to get the mind here in the present moment. That's the issue that really counts.

So try to stay in the present moment with a sense of spaciousness, but also a sense of being grounded. This is one of the issues you'll have to learn how to bring into balance. Sometimes when the body feels heavy, you want to develop a sense of lightness with the energy that's coming in and going out. Other times, when the mind feels scattered or wired, you need to give it some grounding. So learn how to bring things into balance so that it feels right being here. It feels just right being right here.

When the breath energy feels generally good, you may want to go through the body section by section to investigate how it's going in specific parts of the body. Are there little places where you can straighten it out even more—or allow it to straighten itself out even more? Just give it some steady attention and see what that does for the breathing there.

You might start at the navel, come up the front of the torso, up through the head, then down the back, out to the legs and out to the tips of the toes. Then focusing on the back of the neck, go down through the shoulders, out to the tips of the fingers. Then go down the back and out the legs. Get really acquainted with the body right here, because it's right here that you're going to learn how to see the movements of the mind clearly if you maintain this frame of reference.

If you get knocked off, you'll see little bits and pieces of the story of what's going on in the present, but it won't be complete. You'll make up your own connections in the stories, which may or may not be true. But the fact that you've made them up leaves them still questionable. If you really want to see what's going on, you have to be here continually.

When you do, you start seeing cause and effect, and this is important because certain things going on in the mind are the conditions causing suffering, but there are other conditions you can develop in the mind that can put an end to the suffering. You want to see those connections and learn how to replace the first kind of cause with the second kind of cause, the good ones. But if you don't look at things continually, it's just a story that you've made up for yourself or that you heard from somebody else. You actually want to see real things in real time. It means you've got to stay here continually, and not let yourself wander off.

So do what you can to make the present moment interesting to yourself in terms of the energy in the body. If you have any frequent or recurring illnesses, this is a good way to learn how to use the energy in the body to help heal those problems or at least make them easier to bear. That's one motivation you can bring to help make this more interesting. If you know you have a habit of dredging up thoughts that make you miserable, this is a good place to stay in order to watch that happen to see what you seem to be getting out of bringing those things back. Why is the mind feeding on those things? Why would it *want* to feed on those things? Here's something a lot better to feed on. Regardless of the thought that comes up, you want to see it as an event in the present moment.

In the beginning, you don't want to get too involved. In fact, the less involved you are with your thoughts, the better. It's inevitable that things will come up, but you have to learn how to deal with them quickly. So whenever a thought comes up, if it's a painful thought, just think of goodwill for everybody involved: yourself, the other people: "May we all find a way out of that unskillful behavior." Then get back to the breath. Whether they're going to find the way out or not, it's basically up to them to train their minds. But the only way *you're* going to find a way out is to keep coming back and training your mind.

It's in this way that we can start to dissolve a lot of those old narratives. And to dissolve our fascination and our interest in feeding on them, we give ourselves something better, but we also give ourselves a larger framework. There's that story of the woman who had lost her child, and she was grieving for the child in the cemetery. The child's name was Jiva or "Life." The Buddha saw her and called out, "Do you realize that you've buried 84,000 children all named Jiva in this cemetery? Which one are you grieving for?" And it's strange, grieving and

realizing that you've lost 84,000 children is a lot easier to bear than realizing you've just lost one. It's the larger context, the immense context, that helps to dissolve the narrative away.

That's a temporary solution. The permanent solution is when you learn how to dissolve things away through really understanding what the mind is doing in the present moment, and training it to overcome the ignorance that keeps you going back to the narratives and creating new ones all the time.

The solvent is right here: the mindfulness, the alertness, the ardency you bring to being with this breath energy of the body right here, right now. So give this your full attention.