

The Search for Something of Substance

May 10, 2013

Listening to the chant we had just now on aging, illness, death, and separation, you can understand why Buddhism got a reputation for being pessimistic. If you take it out of context, it sounds pretty bleak. But if you put it *in* context, it has a very different message.

Part of that context is the fifth reflection. We may not be able to depend on our bodies that are subject to aging, illness, and death, and on all the other things in life that are subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. But we can learn how to depend on our actions, and our actions can make a difference.

The Buddha found that if you act with enough skill—training your mind with enough skill—you can actually find something that's not subject to aging, illness, death, or separation. As he said, he had reflected on his life. All the things that he was looking for, searching for, to find happiness were subject to aging, illness, and death just like him, and he decided that that was not a noble use of his life. A noble search, he decided, would be one that would look for something that's not subject to aging, illness, or death.

Where could that be found? It had to be found inside. As he discovered, it could be found by training the mind—this mind that's filled with lots of things that are temporary and changing. But you can bring the qualities of the mind to a threshold that opens up to something that really is *other*—that provides real security. That, he said, is something of real substance. And anything you do in life that leads there is related to that. In fact, anything in life at all, to the extent that it has some substance, is that it leads there, to that release he said is not subject to any change.

So that's what we're looking for as we practice here: something inside that's really reliable. Because you look at life, and there's so much that's way beyond your control. And the more you try to lay claim to things that are beyond your control, the more you're going to suffer. You look at yourself; you look at your own mind. Things in society could change very drastically. Think about climate change or about the fact that all kinds of social disruptions could happen. Can you trust yourself to behave in an honorable way if everything around you started falling apart?

When you realize you can't even trust yourself to this extent, you look around at the things outside. They're even less trustworthy. So what we're doing as we train the mind is to find something inside that's not going to be touched by

change, something that's not going to be undercut by change, even by the fact of our own aging, our own illness, our own death. *This* will still be there. That's what we're looking for.

So this practice of meditation is something that is more than just stress reduction; it's more than just a nice way to spend a Friday evening. It answers a lot of really deep questions inside: What kind of life is worth living? What kinds of goals are worth having? To what extent is there anything of substance in life? You think of all the different things you do, whatever mark you could leave in the world, yet when the sun goes nova, that's going to be it.

I was talking to an artist a while back. She was saying she hoped that maybe by moving things around, changing things around, then when everything turns back into primordial soup, a few atoms would be in a different place even then from what they would have been if she hadn't rearranged them. That's pretty sad.

You want to find something that really is of value, that can't be touched by time or the changes in space. That's what we're looking for deep in the mind.

So regard this as an honorable activity we're doing here, something with dignity, and it should be given more respect than just ordinary pastimes. It requires that you be really honest with yourself. You look in the mind, and you see that there are lots of things that would pull you away from the qualities of mind that are needed to assemble the path to find something that's really honorable and of substance. Here we are working on concentration, but you find that there are parts of the mind that don't want to be bothered. You try to get the mind to settle down. You try to get the mind to be mindful and alert. There are parts of the mind that thrive on lack of mindfulness and lack of alertness. They're going to push you, so it's a struggle. But it's worth it.

If you want to simply enjoy the present moment, you can say, "Okay, there are no goals. There's nothing to do. Everything is perfectly okay." But there's no substance to that. It's just feeling good in the present moment—and that's it—which is not what we're here for. We're here for something deeper, something we can really rely on inside, and to find that, we have to make ourselves more reliable. When you tell yourself you're going to stay with the breath, you really do stay with the breath. When you tell yourself you're not going to follow any random thoughts that come in that would pull you away from the breath, you really do have to stick with that determination. Now, that requires a certain amount of ingenuity. How do you make the breath interesting enough so that you can withstand the pull of whatever else that could come barging in?

Think of the breath as not just as an in-and-out movement, but as the energy that keeps you alive. Then it only stands to reason that the quality of that energy

should have an important effect on the health of the mind, the health of the body. So look at the breath with interest. We know that it's a means to an end. But you don't sit here with one eye on the breath and one eye further down the path to see, "Well, when are all the great things going to happen?" It's by focusing full attention on the breath—really getting involved with it—that you get fully involved in the present moment, and the mind settles down. And the qualities you want will get developed.

So even though this is a means to a higher end, and the extent to which it has substance depends on where it will take you, you have to give your full attention right now to learning how to train the mind to stay here and to develop a sense of well-being, a sense of feeling at home with the breath. After all, when you're with the breath, you're in the present moment. And when you're going to observe the movements of the mind to figure out what's skillful and what's not, you want to feel at home in the present and not get easily knocked off.

So work with the breath in a way that allows you to feel that you really like being here. That means you get to choose whichever way to breathe that you want to breathe, whichever way you want to conceive of the breath. Think of breath coming in through the pores of the skin. After all, it is an energy. It's not air; it's energy. Energy can go anywhere. Where do you feel the need for energy right now? What quality of energy would you like?

We're playing with the breath, and we're working with the breath: playing in the sense we're learning to enjoy it, and working with it in the sense that this does serve a serious purpose. It's not a grim purpose, but a serious one—the mind's need for something it can really rely on. We sense that our lives do have a noble purpose, that they do have substance. That's what we're here for, so give it the attention it deserves.