

## *Comfort Dhamma*

*September 20, 2014*

We were talking today about a Romantic thinker who said that you should believe whatever brings a sense of harmony and well-being to you. There are times in life, he said, when you want to believe that you have freedom of choice and free will. Other times in life, you might want to believe that you have no free will and that you're just acting under impulse. You can't help yourself. In other words, what you believe is chosen for its comfort value.

Now, it should come as no surprise that he also believed that your actions had no long long-term consequences anyhow. So outside, it didn't really matter what you did. The only thing that mattered was how you felt inside.

There are a lot of people even to this day who find those ideas comforting. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you feel comfortable with what you believe. And you can change your beliefs as you see fit. That's what they say.

The underlying assumption in all these cases is that the universe is one large, wonderful, harmonious totality. And whatever harm is done gets wiped away by the fact that life just keeps going on and on and on in its infinite fertility. That may be comforting, but it doesn't really do much to end suffering. It can soothe your suffering for a little while. But actually, if you hold to beliefs like that, you end up doing a lot of things that are going to lead you to suffer even more.

So just like comfort food, this kind of comfort Dhamma is not necessarily good for you. Now, the Buddha *does* offer comfort in his genuine teachings. There's the ultimate happiness of nibbana, and along the way in the practice there's the well-being of concentration.

This is what we're working on right now so that you have a sense of being at home in the present moment. You feel like you belong here. The mind fits with the breath; the breath fits with the body. Everything fits together.

You need this sense of comfort because a lot of the discernment teachings are going to be like medicine. They may be a little harsh and hard to take. But they're a lot easier to take if you've got a sense of well-being going in the mind, in the body. The Buddha's going to be handing us a lot of tools to take apart a lot of the things we believe—a lot of things that we hold to—and it's hard to let go of the things that we like to hold to. It's hard to pick up those tools and use them to take apart our wonderful ideas, our wonderful feelings, our emotions: all these other things that we cling to as being really good about ourselves.

Now, there are times when it's easy to see some of your tendencies are harmful. You don't like them, and you'd be happy to be rid of them. But there are other things in ourselves that we like. We're not going to let go of them even though it turns out that ultimately, if we want to stop suffering, we've got to let them go.

So first, we soothe the mind. We give it a sense of well-being here with the breath so that you feel at home in the present moment and nourished by the breath. We do this because the things we like are the things we feed on, and the Buddha wants you to have something better to feed on in their place. That way, when the time comes to take his tools and turn them on your favorite feelings, your favorite ideas, and your favorite ways of identifying yourself with this, that or the other thing, you'll be more willing to do it.

He gives you these tools not as something to believe in. This is something you sometimes hear, when you hear scholars describing the Dhamma, saying that right view is the goal of the path: to see that there are five aggregates, and what you are is just five aggregates—or whatever the scholar's favorite teaching might be. Your sense of who you are, or your identity as a being is just a conventional truth, they say, but the real truth is these ways of analyzing things: the five aggregates, the six sense spheres, the six properties. Those, they say, are ultimate truths.

The forest tradition doesn't teach that at all. For them, all these things are conventions. And some conventions are more useful than others for putting an end to suffering. If you hold on to your sense of who you are, you're going to keep on suffering. If you learn to use these tools of analysis—taking things apart in terms of where's the feeling, where's the perception, where's the thought construct, what's the bodily element in all these things, and sort them out—you begin to realize that there's not that much there that's really worth holding onto.

When you see things in that way, you let go. You not only let go of your old identity. Once you've used these tools, you put them down, too, because from the point of view of the forest tradition, the only thing that really is an ultimate truth is nibbana, release, the deathless, or whatever you want to call it.

This is why, when they talk about convention—the Thai word is *samut*—they pair it with *wimut*, which is release. They don't pair it with “ultimate truth” because after all, even these “ultimate truths” of the five aggregates and so forth are tools. They're conventions, too. They're like the vocabulary that tasters learn. Professional tasters need to have a really big vocabulary to describe all kinds of flavors. And they've found that the more words you have to describe flavors, the finer the distinctions you can detect.

It's the same way with learning to see things in terms of the five aggregates. They're tools. They help you see things and make distinctions you might not have

made otherwise. They are conventions, but they're useful conventions as opposed to the conventions that make us hold on and cling to our suffering. And seeing things just as five aggregates, or just as the six sense media, or analyzing your body into the 32 parts to overcome lust: These may be difficult because they're going to force you to pry loose your tight grip on things. But it's a lot easier to do when you have a sense of well-being.

This is genuine comfort food in the sense that it's also good for you. It's not just nice-tasting in the short term like a meat loaf with a lot of gravy where it goes into the body and leaves a lot of cholesterol in your bloodstream. This is food that may not taste good right now, but it's going to be good for you. And as you get to know it, you find that you really do prefer its taste. But even more so, you prefer the taste of what it can provide for you.

So again, we're not here to believe that there are five aggregates. And there's no question of saying, "Well, what about if there are six aggregates?" or "What about if there are just four?"—whatever. That's not the issue. The issue is: What's the most useful way of thinking about things and looking at things in body and mind. What are the most useful conventions for getting you to what really is the ultimate truth, which is release?

Sometimes it's hard to let go of your old way of looking at things, and the practice of concentration helps smooth the way because of some of the things you learn about yourself as you get the mind concentrated. One, you learn about your own stupidity in holding on to things; and two, you learn that you've been fooled. Of course, there's nobody out there fooling you; you're fooling yourself. It's like that story of the blind man who's given a dirty old rag and told by his friends, "Hey, this is a nice white piece of cloth. Take good care of it." So he takes very good care of it, thinking he's got something special. Then his relatives come and take him to a doctor who's able to cure him of his blindness. He looks at the cloth and realizes that he was deceived.

So on the one hand, it's unpleasant to realize that you've deceived yourself and that the things you used to cling to are really not worth it. But then beyond that, there's the sense of true well-being that comes from knowing you're not deceived any more. That's where the real comfort of the Dhamma lies.

As the Buddha said, the end of suffering isn't just a negative thing. If you think there's anything negative about it, you've got to change your conception because you're not going to be willing to let go of the stuff you've already got. You've got to realize that regardless of what you're holding onto, it's a lot better when you let go.

In the terms of analysis that the Buddha gives, the language of aggregates is just a set tools for helping us to pry loose our grip. And when the grip is no longer holding on to these things, you don't even need the tools. Everything gets let go. That's the ultimate truth—and the ultimate comfort.