

Grief & Regret

December 15, 2016

Ajaan Suwat would often comment on the need while you're meditating to have some respect for what you're doing, because this is an important skill that we're working on, and it's really good for the mind.

In the Buddha's words, you need to have some respect for concentration. That means several things. On the one hand, it means you have to make time every day to give the mind some time to be quiet. No matter how pressing the events of the world around you, there will always be a few little nooks and crannies in your schedule where you can get the mind to be still for a little bit. And even though it's just a little bit, have some respect for it. Because the mind does need to have a sense of being grounded.

Also, while you're meditating, if it doesn't go well, don't say, "The meditation's going poorly. I should be doing something else." The simple fact that you're trying to get the mind to settle down is a statement of value: that you value your mind, the state of your mind. And that's a value you have to hold on to, because the world's going to push you in all kinds of other directions. The mind needs to have the time to be still, to gather its strength, to heal its wounds.

As we go through life there are a lot of wounds: aging, illness, death, separation, as in that chant just now. Not just things that happen to us—things we do can wound the mind as well. So the mind needs time to lick its wounds, or to use the breath like a cream that you put, say, on a rash. You put the cream there, and the cream has to stay there for quite a while. You don't put the cream on and then wipe it off immediately. The mind takes some time, so you have to be patient with it. This is another aspect of respect: giving it patience.

So try to let the breath be as comfortable as possible. You can experiment with different kinds of breathing to see what's good for the mind, good for the body right now. And that reminds you: It gives you a very visceral sense that this is a good thing to be doing. You start out with a couple of good long deep in-breaths and deep out-breaths, both to establish where you feel the breathing process and to clear things out inside for a little bit. As long as deep breathing feels good, keep it up. When it doesn't feel so good, you can change. In long, out short; in short, out long; in short, out short; fast, heavy, slow, light: There are lots of different ways you can adjust the breathing.

That gives you something to be interested in right now. Otherwise, if there's no reason to be interested in the breath—if it's just in, out, in, out—the mind's

going to go thinking about something it finds more interesting. But here you're working with the breath energy in the body from the inside, and there's a lot to explore. As you explore it you find that it really does feel nourishing, it really does feel healing inside.

This helps the mind to withstand all the onslaughts of inconstancy, stress, not-self. Aging is a good lesson in inconstancy. It's constantly coming at us. It's interesting: It's inconstant but it's constant in its inconstancy. Illness is a good lesson in stress and suffering, pain. Death and separation are huge lessons in not-self.

There's an interesting passage where Ven. Sariputta comes out after meditating for a day and talks to the other monks. He tells them, "You know, I was reflecting today, 'Is there anyone in the world whose loss I would grieve over?'" And he realized that there was nobody. Ven. Ananda asked him, "Wait a minute. What if the Buddha died? Wouldn't you grieve over that?" And Sariputta said, "No. I'd reflect that he was a great person and it's a shame that someone who does so much good for the world would pass away, but that's just the way of the world." And Ananda makes an interesting comment, he says, "That's a sign you have no conceit."

Now, conceit here doesn't mean pride. It means a sense of defining yourself, who you are. And this is what a lot of grief is: You define yourself around somebody, and then when the relationship ends, either through death or separation... My mother once said—she was writing a novel as she neared death, and she had line in the novel that said, "Harder than the death of a loved one is the death of love." In Thai they call that separating alive as opposed to separating dead. When there's grief there, you've identified your relationship as a huge part of you; the other person has become part of you. This is why it's like a piece of your heart has been pulled out. So you have to remember that this is a big lesson in not-self.

And how do you deal with it? The Buddha gives two types of treatments. One is just reflecting on the fact, as that chant we had just now, "Aging, illness, and death are all normal, separation is normal." The passage that we chant is taken from a longer sutta that talks about how it's not just you: Everybody in the world suffers from these things. There are many cases in the Canon of people who are suffering from the loss of someone they loved, and the Buddha's way of helping them get over that is to remind them that this has happened many, many times to us before and it's happened to everybody else in the world. No matter where you go, it's going to happen. You'd think that would be even more depressing but it takes a lot of the sting out of your own personal loss.

And then the second reflection – it’s kind of ironic: Again it’s another story involving Ananda, Sariputta, and the Buddha. It turns out that Sariputta died before the Buddha did. Ananda takes the news to the Buddha, and as he’s telling the Buddha that Sariputta’s passed away, he says, “It’s as if all the directions got dark, I lost my bearings, hearing of Sariputta’s death.” And the Buddha asked him, “Well, when Sariputta died, did he take virtue with him? Did he take concentration? Did he take discernment? Did he take release?” No. These things are still there, the good things of the world are still there. So it’s good to reflect on that. There are a lot of good things still in the world. And it’s good to take stock of them to remind yourself that all is not lost. In fact, the best things in the world are still here. Because these are the things you can really depend on.

The life of the body is short. The life of the mind is even shorter. As the Buddha said, it changes so quickly—especially the untrained mind can change so quickly—that even he couldn’t think of a good analogy for how quick it would be to change. The flash of an eye was too long. And when your happiness depends on something really changeable like that, you’re setting yourself up for a fall. You have to realize that there are better ways of finding happiness in the world, more reliable. This is why we practice.

As for the regret that often comes when there’s separation: The Buddha says to take stock, think about the things you did wrong, the mistakes you made, and then resolve not to repeat them. Because that’s the best you can ask of any human being. We can’t know ahead of time how things are going to happen.

Kierkegaard had a line one time where he said, “We live going forward but we understand backward.” In other words, we understand only after things have happened. We try to make plans for the future but we really understand things only after the decisions have been made. That puts us in a really precarious position. It’s normal that we’re going to make mistakes. But we can learn from them. After all, there are patterns in life that we should look for. You recognize the pattern, okay, you made this kind of mistake, you resolve not to repeat it.

And then the Buddha says something interesting. After you’ve resolved not to repeat the mistake, he says to develop goodwill, goodwill in all directions, including yourself—all the brahmaviharas: goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. Because these thoughts help get you past any desire to punish yourself or punish the other person or punish anybody at all. They reinforce your desire not to make mistakes that are harmful. And they give you a much larger perspective on things. Those brahmaviharas are for everybody. As the Buddha said, they should be immeasurable. Because when the weight of your own loss weighs down on you, it’s good to think of the Universe as a whole. And this is one

tiny little event—well, there are lots of events like this. That way, it doesn't weigh so heavily on you.

And thoughts of goodwill are healing. There was a time when the Buddha was injured. Devadatta rolled a stone down the mountain, and a rock on the mountain deflected the stone, but a sliver went through the Buddha's foot. It was very painful. They had to take the rock sliver out, and the Buddha had to lie down and rest for several days. Mara in one scene comes in to see the Buddha and taunts him, saying, "Are you moping? Are you miserable?" And the Buddha says, "No. I'm engaged in developing sympathy for all." Because that is a healing practice. It keeps the mind from being focused on its own pains. And it's strengthening to be able to have goodwill. It's something that makes you strong.

So these are some of the ways for dealing with loss. They all come down to having this foundation with concentration. Goodwill does lead to concentration—it's one of the topics that leads the mind to be still—so try to make sure that every day is a day that you have some time for concentration, when the mind can gather itself together and be its own self for a time and get a perspective on what's going on—time to gain strength, time to heal the wounds: both self-inflicted wounds and wounds inflicted by the world. And it provides a good foundation for the discernment that enables us to go beyond all of this. There's a dimension in the mind that's free from aging, illness, death, and separation, and that can be attained through the practice.

So these are reasons why we should have respect for concentration, to give it our full attention while we're doing it, and make as much time as we can in our lives to keep this practice going.