

All for the Sake of Freedom

June 21, 2018

When you start meditating, make a survey of the body as you feel it from within. You can start with the tips of the fingers and the tips of the toes, and work on up to the head, or start with the head and go down the body. This is the territory you're going to try to inhabit right now—the body as you feel it from within—focusing particularly on the breath energy as it flows in the body. When you breathe in, where do you feel the breath? What does the breath feel like?

Here we're not talking just about just the air coming in and out of the nose, but the sense of energy flow in the body. Where does that energy flow start? And how does it move through the body? Does it feel good, or does it feel tight and constricted in some parts? Wherever it feels tight and constricted, think of loosening it up. And try to keep your mind right in this territory.

Outside of this territory right now, the Buddha said, is the realm of Mara. But this is *your* realm here, right now. Try to get to know this realm really well. Any thoughts that go outside, just tell yourself, "Not this time. Not right now; maybe later," because the mind will keep churning out thoughts for a bit. Some of them will be useful, and some of them not. But anything that's not related to this sense of the body as you feel it from within right now is not in line with the duty for which you've set aside this time and this place.

You're trying to train the mind. Why is that? Because the mind, when it's untrained, can cause a lot of suffering. There's a passage where the Buddha says that we gain our conviction in the path from the fact of suffering. He goes through the different stages in the series of dependent co-arising, from ignorance all the way up to suffering and stress. And then he moves on. He says, "From suffering and stress comes conviction." How is that? Well, our normal response to suffering is one of two things: Either we're bewildered by it or we look for someone who can teach us a way out of it. We've tried lots of different ways and listened to lots of different people. The most hopeless ones out there, of course, are the ones who tell us that suffering is something that can't be solved, or that we've got to depend on somebody else to solve it for us.

After having tried some of these alternatives, we finally get around to the idea that maybe we can do something about it ourselves. Maybe we have the resources within us to put an end to the suffering. That's the beginning of conviction—because conviction here means conviction in the Buddha's awakening. And what does that mean for us? It means that a human being has found a way to put an end

to suffering, he taught it to others, and it's worked for a couple of thousands of years. Maybe it might work for us. So we're willing to give it a chance.

That's why we have that chant before we meditate: We're subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation, all of which are pretty miserable thoughts. But then we have our actions, and it's through our actions that we can find the way out. That's the opposite of miserable: It's the thought that gives us hope, that we can change our actions in the right direction. And where do our actions come from? They come from the mind. So we're going to train the mind.

The emphasis on suffering is meant to keep reminding us that there's work to be done. We're here meditating because there are things that need to be done in the mind. If we don't do them, the mind's just going to go for its old ways, creating more suffering for itself.

It's not that the Buddha didn't recognize that there is pleasure in life. The five aggregates, he said, all give pleasure. That's why we're all attached to them. But when we're attached to them, they trap us. So the Buddha's trying to teach us freedom. He says that when you focus on the fact that these things do carry stress and suffering, and you understand them to the point of comprehension, that leads you to freedom. This means that when the Buddha teaches us to focus on how the aggregates or the sense media—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas—are all inconstant, stressful, and not self, it's not just to stay with those negative realizations. Those perceptions are there to make us look at the things that we're attached to and ask ourselves, "What do you think you're getting out of them? There is pleasure, but is it worth it? Couldn't there be something better?"

When you see that the pleasure is not worth all the negative things it entails, then you can let go. And when you let go at the final stage, you let go of everything, even those perceptions of inconstancy, stress; not self. Those are perceptions, so they come under the aggregates. They do their duty and then you put them aside.

After all, we're not just here to arrive at a truth about things. The Buddha talks about truth in many ways. The truth is something you perceive—i.e., you tell it to yourself—and you tell it to others. It's also a quality of the character: You're truthful in sticking to a task that you've set your mind to, or you're truthful in keeping a promise. The truth is also something you safeguard. When you say something, you want to be clear about whether you're saying it because you know it or because you've heard it or because you think it makes sense. And the truth is also something you awaken to by finding somebody reliable, listening to that person, putting that person's teachings into practice. Finally, you awaken to the

truth of a particular fact: the fact of freedom. The actuality of freedom. And then the truths that you use, the Buddha said, are things that you escape from, that you transcend.

So we're not here just to arrive at the conclusion that, yes, that aggregates are stressful, because as the Buddha points out, they do have their positive side, their pleasant side. But if you focus on the pleasant side, you're going to stay trapped. If you focus on the negative side but in an unskillful way, you get trapped there, too.

We *use* these teachings, all of these teachings. As the Buddha said, they're a raft to take us to freedom. This means that insight is a value judgment: Are these things worth holding onto? You want to get the mind to a point where it says No. But to get there, you've got to train it, because no matter how much you might explain things to yourself about how this attachment is bad or that attachment is stupid, if you don't give the mind something good to hold onto in the meantime, it's going to go back to its old attachments. It's going to say, "Well, it may not be perfect but it's good enough for me."

One of the reasons why we try to get the mind into concentration and learn how to inhabit this sense of the body from within in a way that gives rise to ease and sense of well-being, a sense of really belonging here, is that it puts us in a better position to make better value judgments. We've got something better to compare things to. The pleasure that comes from lust, the pleasure that comes from anger, the pleasure that comes from holding onto your ideas: You're willing to see that, yes, there is some pleasure there, but are also a lot of drawbacks. And if you can develop a sense of well-being by the way you breathe, by the way you allow the breath energy to flow through the body—so that body, a feeling of pleasure, and awareness all seem to become one—that puts you in a better position to make better judgments as to what's worth holding onto and what's not. You hold onto this for the meantime. And you actually try to make this as pleasant and as constant and as much your own as possible.

You're fighting against those three characteristics, so that when other things come up, it's very obvious how inconstant, stressful, and not-self they are. Only when you've done a thorough job of looking at all your other attachments should you take this one apart. Here again, you'll use those same three perceptions. You'll see that even the concentration state involves aggregates. There's the aggregate of form: your breath, your sense of the body as you feel it right now. Feeling: the feeling of pleasure or equanimity. Perception: the perception of breath, or—as the sense of the body begins to dissolve away—the perception of the space that permeates the body and then spreads out, so that it seems like the skin turns into nothing more than little dots of sensation, with no clear boundary between space

inside and space outside. There can also be the perception of awareness, what knows all these things. All these things are perceptions.

There's the fabrication, the directed thought and evaluation, and then there's consciousness of all these things. All five of these things—form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness—are aggregates. Even when they form a state of concentration, they, too, are inconstant, stressful, and not self. And when the mind is really ready, it can then let go of all these things. At the same time, it lets go of those three perceptions, too, so that awakening to the truth involves transcending or escaping from truth into freedom, which is what this is all about.

This is how we start with our realization of stress and then—through the development of conviction that there's got to be a way out and this is it—we develop our heedfulness. We develop a sense of well-being that comes from following the path. We hold onto the path as long as we need it. And then all aspects of the path—virtue, concentration, discernment: Finally we let those go, too. This is the purpose of everything the Buddha taught.

So we're not here just to be mired in aging, illness, and death or what's inconstant, stressful, not self; trying to embrace these things briefly and squeeze whatever little pleasure we can out of them before we let them go. We're here to realize that there's something better. This is why we need conviction, because we're going someplace we haven't been before. As the Buddha said, we come trying to see what we haven't seen yet, to realize what we haven't realized yet, to attain what we haven't attained yet. We're going someplace we haven't been before—although when we arrive, there's a sense that it's always been there. We've been too busy, however, ignoring it. And we ignore it because we're interested in other things, attached to other things. Only when we can let go of those attachments can we find the freedom that's there.

That's what this is all about.