

Full Attention

July 2, 2019

We've all had the experience where we've had to hide our feelings, cover them up. We come away from that experience with the belief that our feelings are the real us, and the side that said to cover them up is coming from outside, so we tend to identify with our feelings more than almost anything else. We forget the Buddha's analysis of feelings, which would place feelings and emotions, in our sense of those terms, under the aggregate of fabrications, rather than under the aggregate of *vedana*, which is a matter of the feeling tone: pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful. We forget how fabricated our feelings are, how conditioned they are, and the fact that just because there's a feeling in the mind right now doesn't mean that it's the real you, that it should be there, that it's actually helpful, or that it's something you really want to identify with.

One of the skills we develop as meditators is learning how to change our feelings. This comes under right effort. You generate desire to have skillful mind states. So with the feeling, if your emotion is an unskillful one, you should have the desire to get rid of it, and you want to learn how to identify with that desire for the time being. In the Buddha's analysis, what we have here is a combination of past karma and present karma. It's not the fact that just because a feeling is there it's got to be there. It's just an influence from the past. Then there are the skills or lack of skills that we have in the present moment that can turn the feeling into something skillful or not.

So here we're working on our skills. The Buddha includes feeling-tones with perceptions as the big mental fabricators: the things that shape our emotions and other states of mind. This means that when trying to understand emotions, you have to look at your perceptions. We get practice with this as we work with the breath. Ask yourself: "What kind of breathing would feel really good? How do you perceive the breathing? Do you perceive it in a way that prevents it from feeling good?" Think of it as something that's going through your nerves, down through your blood vessels, down to the tips of the toes, not so much the quantity of air that comes in and out of the lungs, which tends to get mechanical. But think of a flow. And you're not outside doing the squeezing or the pulling. You're in the midst, being bathed by the breath sensation, letting it come in, letting it go out, and directing it simply with a thought: "longer" or "shorter," "deeper," "more shallow." If you don't find the breath refreshing, ask yourself, "What is getting in the way? What needs to be refreshed in the body right now? What's not getting

the refreshment it wants? Can you think of the breath helping with that spot? If you're feeling dissatisfied with the sensations in your body right now, what can you do to change them?" But first you've got to analyze: Where's the problem? What's the dissatisfaction coming from? What's feeling starved of breath energy? Make a survey, go around the body, go to the spots that you don't normally focus on and allow them to open up.

It's good to perceive the breath and breath meditation not so much as a chore, but as an opportunity. It's like when you go camping. You can think of all the hardships that you're putting yourself through and you can make yourself miserable that way. Or you can realize how liberating it is to be away from society, with your only bathroom a hole in the ground, your source of water a spring—and looking around, you don't see anybody telling you what to do.

In other words, learn to focus on the positive side of the experience and you make it enjoyable. You realize, of course, that there are both negative sides and positive sides, but why focus on the negative? There's so much negativity in the world as it is. Learn to focus on the positive. What's already getting satisfied, say with the breath, as you breathe in, breathe out? And what potentials do you have for satisfying other parts of the body? Look at this as an opportunity. You don't have a deadline. You don't have crazy people telling you what to do. You're away from human society.

The ajaans will often tell their meditators: Tell yourself you're the only person sitting here in the sala. Even though there are other people around you, you don't have to worry about them. It's as if they weren't there. So if you'd like your awareness to spread out and just to fill the whole sala and say "I can take this whole sala as mine," that's perfectly fine. It gives you a little more space, and you've got the sense of the body surrounded by space. Then you can ask yourself, "Where is there tension in the way you hold the body right now? Can you release the tension?" Try to sit straight and ask yourself which muscles in the body are pulling you out of a nice comfortably, straight posture. Relax those muscles.

Get into the details. The reason the breath seems mechanical is because you're not really sensitive to what you're doing. You're not giving it your full attention, your full sensitivity. Think of meditation as listening to a piece of music you'd like to hear, but it's far away, so you have to make yourself really quiet and really sensitive. Learn how to be a real connoisseur of the breath.

At the same time, you begin to realize the power of perception and you get a different sense of the voices in the mind, the ones that you want to identify with, and the ones you don't want to identify with, realizing that they've all been part of you, so you have the choice. As I said, the voice that tells you to hide your feelings

often sounds like somebody else coming from outside. But the voice that tells you to change your feelings, you can actually learn how to identify with that. That's an important part of you.

There was a famous physicist, Richard Feynman, who did a lot of work on quantum mechanics but also liked to play the bongo drums. He once received a letter from a fan saying how much the fan liked to know that Feynman played the drums. It made him human. Feynman wrote a letter back saying, "Look, isn't physics part of humanity? Isn't it part of the human mind, human psyche, the human desire to want to understand things?" In other words, the uncontrolled desires we have are part of our human mind, but the desire to get them under control is also part of our human mind—the part that sees consequences, wants to figure out how to do something skillful, because it's concerned for genuine happiness.

To make yourself *want* to do something skillful is really wise. As the Buddha said, the customs of the noble ones are not simply to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. They involve taking delight in developing skillful qualities and in abandoning unskillful ones. Make it your sport to step back from your emotions, step back from your feelings if they're negative, and see if you can work your way around them, transform them into something better. You've got the breath here, you've got the ability to talk to yourself, you've got your feelings and perceptions. All these things, the Buddha said, count as fabrication, and the skill of meditation is learning how to fabricate a good state of concentration.

You've got the instructions in the Buddha's description of right mindfulness. This is how you do concentration: You focus on the body in and of itself, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. And part of the enjoyment of meditation is rejoicing in the fact that you don't have to worry about the world outside right now. Take delight in that fact. You've just got your body sitting right here. You can give it your full attention. There are no devices beeping at you, no screens to pull your attention away. This means you can really have the chance right now to get to know the body as it feels from within: just the body in and of itself, the breath in and of itself, on its own terms. Stay with it and ask yourself, "What would be a way of breathing, a way of relating to the breath, a way of perceiving the breath that would allow a sense of ease to flow through the body?" The Buddha says you want to get the body saturated with a sense of ease and well-being. You want your awareness to fill the body. You've got a body, awareness, feelings, all taking up the same space, able to stretch their legs, stretch their arms. They don't have to be confined to a particular timetable or a particular space. They

can open up because the world is not impinging on them—and you're not pulling the world in.

When you pull the world in, the sense of the body as you feel it from within tends to get trampled on, crumpled, pushed off to the side, and as a result it gets stunted. We're not really that familiar with it. So here you're given the chance to fill up your awareness and you're able to give your full awareness to it. When the body and mind meet with a sense of fullness, that's when you can settle down, and it feels good to settle down. You've allowed yourself to relate to the body in a new way, to relate to the idea of being on a path in a new way. You look after the path: In other words, you look after the body as you experience it right now. You don't have to worry about where it's going to take you. You do your job well here, and it's going to take you someplace good. You don't have to keep glancing down to the end of the path to ask yourself, "How much longer is it going to be?" Because you're free to be here right now. So learn to appreciate this opportunity, learn how to appreciate the raw materials that you have to work with, and they'll show you their potential.