

Samvega

July, 2003

Many of the passages we chant here are designed to induce a sense of samvega: a sense of awe at the huge mess we've got ourselves entangled in, coupled with a sense of urgency to try to find a way out.

Without that sense of samvega, it's difficult to practice. Because where is the door out? It goes through the present moment. What do we find when we look and sit down at the present moment? There's pain, there's suffering, there's distraction.

It's for these reasons that the mind doesn't like to focus on the present and is always finding reasons to focus someplace else. It keeps deceiving itself, "Think about this over here! Think about that over there!" A thought comes in and, instead of looking at it simply as an event in the present moment, we've programmed ourselves to think of it as a sign pointing away someplace else. So we follow the arrow of the sign, always veering off away from the present. We find the present either boring or painful, not that attractive a place to stay.

But that's the door we have to go through. Unless we have a really good sense of why we want to go through the door, it's hard to even think about it.

So we have the chant, like the chant in the morning on the three characteristics. And the two chants we had just now, "The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving, has nothing of its own, it's swept away, does not endure." And then the reflections on aging, illness, death, and separation, followed by the passage that gives a glimmer of hope: "We're heirs to our actions." But even that passage is kind of scary when we think of some of the actions we've done in the past. We'd like to be delivered out of our pain and misery without having to deal with the habits picked up from our past mistakes, without having to do much effort on our own part.

But it simply doesn't work that way. Our own lack of skill is what has us entangled here. So we're going to have to develop skill to get out. And nobody else can develop skill for us. It's something each of us has to do for ourselves.

So the Buddha devised ways of bringing us into the present so that it's not that scary, so that we're not overwhelmed by what we encounter here. At the same time, he kept stressing samvega as a way of setting fire to the bridge behind us, so we don't want to turn around and go back.

So look at what's ahead. Pain. Well, how are you going to deal with pain? First the Buddha gives us breath meditation as a way of giving the mind a comfortable place to stay in the present moment. Working with the breath, you can create a sense of comfort. Even if it's only a little tiny space to begin with, work on that little tiny space.

When the breath comes in, open things up for it to come in comfortably. When it goes out, allow it to go out comfortably. Whatever way you have of relating to the breath that

makes it feel good just to be with the breathing coming in, going out right here in the present: Take that approach to the breath. This gives you a beachhead so that there's something to hold onto in the present moment that's pleasant, a good place to stay.

And it gets you interested in the present. How does the breath relate to the other sensations in the body? When the breath starts feeling good, you can start spreading that sense of good breath energy throughout the different parts of the body. If you find that you run into a sense of pain here or a sense of blockage there, think of the breath as being fine enough or refined enough to seep right through that sense of blockage, that sense of pain. And see what that does.

This gives you a new way to approach the pains that you may encounter while you're sitting here. In other words, instead of trying to run away from them or trying to push them away, you open up that knot of blockage around them and let the breath energy flow through. And often that actually improves the situation.

Too often we're afraid to open that up. We think that if we've got the pain locked away, at least we've got it under control, it won't spread beyond there. We're afraid that if we open up that little shell of hardened energy around the pain, the pain will start slipping out, like mercury running all over the body.

So put aside that fear and just allow yourself to breathe right through the pain. And once you've got this—this sense of ease that comes from being with the breath, together with the sense that you've got a tool here that you can use—it changes the balance of power. You're not so afraid of the pain. You're willing to look into it to see what exactly it is you're doing to the pain that turns it into suffering.

We think that wherever there's a pain there's automatically got to be suffering. But the Buddha said, "No." The connection is not automatic. From the pain from the feeling, we have to go through craving and clinging in order to get to the suffering. So we sit with the pain and watch to catch sight of where that craving and clinging get started, how they get started, when they get started.

This means being willing to sit with pain. So you breathe through the area around the pain. But there's still a painful feeling there. This means you have to be willing to sit with it for a while. If you keep changing positions or running away from it, you never get to really understand the pain.

We're not here to torture ourselves, but we *are* here to learn from the pain. What does the pain have to teach us? For one thing, a lot of interesting discussions come up in the mind around the pain. We're often too involved in them to notice them: making comments on the pain, "I don't like the pain. Why the hell do I have to sit here with this pain? Why can't we be more relaxed about it?"—all these comments the mind makes up: fear that you're going to harm yourself, cutting off the circulation to your legs, you're going to get numb and after you get numb you're going to get paralyzed. The mind has all sort of stories it makes up about the pain. And the trick is to get out of that conversation and just watch it from outside of it. See what commentary comes up around the pain.

It's like going to a salt lick. Animals out in the forest all need salt but there are very few

places where salt is available for them. And where it is available, places where there's salt on the surface of the ground, you get the animals from all over coming.

You if want to see the animals in a particular section of the wilderness, just go to the salt lick. And everybody in the immediate area is going to have to come at some point or another. Instead of having to wander around looking for them, you just stay there at the salt lick and they all come.

Pain functions the same way. All the different committee members of the mind are eventually going to come here and have their say. And if you can learn to step back and look at them, that gives you your chance.

This ability to step back and look is equanimity. Learn to develop some equanimity around the pain. Just watch it for a while and see what happens. Instead of jumping in and passing judgment right away, you want to watch things for a while to really understand them, before you pass judgment, before you make your choices.

They're interesting, those passages we chanted just now: the one on the five recollections and the other one on the sublime attitudes. In the five recollections, the reflection on karma is the reflection that offers hope. There is a way out of the suffering of aging, illness, and death. And under the sublime attitudes we have pretty much the same passage, but in that context, the reflection on karma is for equanimity.

So put those ideas together: Equanimity is what offers us hope. We can watch what's going on in the present moment and learn from it, to the point where we work ourselves free.

Equanimity isn't indifference. It's just the ability to sit and watch. Nudge things a little bit there, nudge them a little bit there, watch again. Because it's in the watching and the looking: that's where you really see, that's where you gain your insight. That's the way out.

Through the insight, there comes release. Release from what? Release from those old habits of taking pain and turning it into suffering. Release from those old habits of being unwilling to look at the present moment, trying to run away, veer off every chance you get—which leaves the pain untouched. It's still there, it's simply that we've tried to turn a blind eye to it. But when you turn a blind eye to things, they don't go away.

So remember the way out will lie through the pain. And again, it's not that we're going to have to suffer in order to get out. You're sitting here with the pain, the question should be, "Okay, why is there suffering?"

Remember that the Buddha says it's not necessary. Remember that the suffering of the four noble truths and the suffering or stress in the three characteristics are two different things. The three characteristics apply to everything: that's simply the way they are. Everything that's fabricated has to be inconstant, stressful, and not-self. But the stress that comes from craving and clinging: That's not necessary.

So you sit with the pain until you get fed up with creating suffering around the pain, and you're willing to look at your own actions to see how you could do things differently, how you could relate in a different way.

That's our motivation for being here. The samvega helps remind us that if we don't go

through the pain, we'll be stuck in meaningless suffering. And the breath meditation gives us the tools we need in order to get there, so that the mind can develop a state of real equanimity around the pain.

All too often when we deal with pains, the unspoken agenda is, "We've got to get rid of it, we've got to get rid of it as fast as possible." But when you work with the breath, you finally can get to that state of equanimity in what they call the four last tetrads of those sixteen steps: Where you're just watching so that you can really see inconstancy, stressfulness, not-self. See all the way through to dispassion, to cessation, and finally to total letting go.

There is a way out, the door may be difficult, but the Buddha gives us this magic bullet, our magic instructions that'll get us through.

And as I said, at the same time, when teaching samvega, he keeps lighting fire to the bridge behind us so that we don't get tempted to turn back when the going gets difficult. Because it's when we're cornered like this: That's when we get really intelligent, start getting ingenious in finding our way out.