

A Meditator is a Good Friend to Have

April 16, 2012

Take some long deep in and out breaths. Have the sense that the breath is sweeping through your whole body, from the top of the head down to the tips of your toes. Try to notice where there are any patterns of tension in the body. Allow them to relax and let the breath sweep right through them. And then allow the breath to find a rhythm that feels really comfortable. You can experiment for a while, to see what kind of breathing feels most refreshing. Sometimes shorter breathing is what the body needs, sometimes longer, sometimes deeper, more shallow, heavier, or lighter, faster or slower. Try to keep on top of what the body needs. And as for any other thoughts that may come in, just let them go.

We're trying to sensitize ourselves to what's going on in the body, and how the breath can help. It's an area of our awareness that we tend to ignore because we're too interested with things outside to notice what we're doing inside.

When they talk about things being unconscious, or subconscious, it's not so much that there's a basement in the mind where things have to be unconscious. It's simply we're not paying attention. Thoughts go flitting through the mind and then leave an imprint on the body. Or events in the body can have an impact on the mind. All too often, if we're not aware of this, the tension builds up and results in a sense of being burdened, being weighed down. And the Buddha's essential insight is that much of that being burdened or weighed down is totally unnecessary. In fact, none of it is necessary. There may be stress in the body, but it doesn't need to have an impact on the mind.

As the Buddha says, when people are in physical pain, it's as if they were shot by an arrow. And then they shoot themselves again with another arrow: the sense of being burdened or victimized by the pain. That image has always struck me as a little too weak. It's not just one extra arrow that we shoot ourselves with. We shoot ourselves with many more arrows, a whole quiver of arrows. And of course the act of shooting ourselves with those arrows makes the original pain even worse, to say nothing of all the pain of the extra arrows. So no wonder we feel burdened all the time. No wonder we feel victimized, or at the very least that something is wrong.

And so what we do when we meditate is that, instead of looking for the answer outside, we look for the answer inside. "What are we doing here that's adding all that unnecessary pain?" And this is not being selfish. Because if you can stop adding that extra pain to your own mind, you're less burdened, you're less of a burden on others. And you can actually start paying attention to how other people are getting along. We tend to forget this part of the practice, but meditators are really good friends to have, because they've learned how not to weigh themselves down all the time. And when they're not weighed down, they can actually be of more help.

When pain comes along, whether it's physical or mental, they realize that they don't have to take it personally. There's a passage in the Canon where the monks are talking, and one of them, Sariputta, says, "You know, I was thinking today: Is there anything in the world whose

change would cause me grief? I couldn't think of anything at all." And Ananda, another one of the monks says, "Well, what if something happened to the Buddha? Wouldn't that cause you grief?" And Sariputta says, "No, I'd reflect on the fact that he was a great human being and had been very helpful to many, and it's a sad thing he couldn't live on. But I wouldn't feel any personal grief around that." And Ananda says, "That's a sign that your conceit has gone"—conceit here meaning not necessarily pride, or arrogance, but more a sense of who you are and how you take things personally. If you can be in a difficult situation and not take the loss or change personally, you're actually more helpful to others than you would be otherwise.

I've seen many cases where people are crying over someone who is about to die. And a lot of the crying has to do with how much they're going to miss that person, how much grief they feel. That's not all that helpful to the person who's dying. The best gift you can give to someone else who is in trouble is that you've taken care of your habit of personalizing the grief of focusing on how much you're going to feel the loss, how much you're going to feel deprived, and that allows you to look more carefully: What does this person need? How can I be of help?

We were talking today about helping someone who's dying. The first thing the Buddha said is to try to make sure that the person isn't worried. There are two cases in the Canon. One is of a woman whose husband seems to be on his deathbed. So she goes and tells him, "Don't worry about me. I'll be able to take care of myself when you're gone. Don't worry about my financial situation. Don't worry about my turning away from the Dhamma. In fact, I'll be going to the monastery even more now. So put your mind at rest."

And it turns out that the husband doesn't die, at least not then. He recovers and he goes to tell the Buddha what his wife told him. The Buddha replies, "Do you realize how fortunate you are that you have such a wise wife who has your best interest in mind?"

There's a similar case where one of the Buddha's cousins, Mahanama, learns that the Buddha's going to go away at the end of the rains retreat. So he asks him what to do, what to say, if anybody is dying while he's gone. "What should I tell him?" And the Buddha says, "The first thing to tell him is to not worry about his family: 'Regardless of the situation, the fact that you're worried now isn't going to help anybody. So drop those thoughts from your mind.'" But the Buddha doesn't just leave the person there. He then tells Mahanama to ask, "Are you worried also about the sensual pleasures you're going to be leaving?" If the person says yes, then the Mahanama should say, "Try to set your mind on higher levels of being where the sensual pleasures are more refined." In this way, he should keep advising the person to take his thoughts all the way through even higher and higher levels, until he gets to the Brahma world, where the pleasure is the same pleasure that we gain from a really concentrated mind. And if the person can keep that up, then the Buddha says then to tell him to let go even of that. That, too, is impermanent. The sense of identity you would build around that, that's impermanent, too. If the person can follow you all that way, then he or she can gain total release from all kinds of suffering. That's a huge gift you can give to someone who's dying.

It's not always the case that the person dying can follow you that far. It would require someone who's got a good meditative background. But

your first duty always is try to pull that person away from any worries and then advise them to set their minds on something good. It could be the good things they've done in the past—which doesn't mean the good times they've had, because that gets people sentimental and that can get them really upset.

Have them think about the times they were generous, the times they were virtuous. If they have any meditative background, try to remind them of that. Give them something good to hold onto. This means that you're not putting your sense of loss in the way of really helping them. This is why having a meditator as a friend is a really good thing. Someone who really is concerned with your welfare and is not only thinking of his or her own sense of loss, or sense of pain, is not being burdened by those extra arrows.

In my own case, many of the people in my family wondered what good it was to have a monk in the family. And then one year my father went through a severe depression. I was away in Thailand and finally was able to make my way back after several months. Within a couple of weeks, after talking to my father and letting him talk, he was out of the depression. This was after my brothers had been trying for months to help him. That's when one of my brothers said, "You know, it really is good to have a Buddhist monk in the family." Of course, it doesn't have to be a monk: Anyone who has trained his or her own mind is a good person to have in the family, a good person to have as a friend.

So as you're meditating here remind yourselves: It's not just for us that we're doing this. We're doing this so we can also be a help to others. The less we burden ourselves with our own sufferings, the stronger we'll be. If we're not carrying huge loads around, then when we find somebody else carrying a heavy load, we can shoulder part of their burden. In that way, training in good friendship can continue. As the Buddha says, you try to look for good friends, people you can rely on. Not only so that you can gain their help, but also so that you can learn from them what it means to be a good friend—so you can pass on the gift.