

Mindfulness of Breathing (23) Inspiration through Imagination

February 2, 2021

Summary Keywords

inspired, imagination, virtuous, Buddha, meditation, joy, happiness, gladness, *pāmojja*, brightness, peaceful, confident, uplifting, present moment, *muditā*, *ānāpānasati*, virtue, *pā*, *mukha*, *vipassanā*, Zen, waves, sand, bird, wings

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My friends, the subject for this week is the fifth and sixth steps of mindfulness of breathing, which is to experience joy and happiness in meditation. It's certainly not easy to experience. You can't do it just because the instructions say you should. But to explore the territory of joy, happiness, meditative well-being, and some of the conditions that support it and bring it about can be very helpful.

Often in the suttas, gladness is the precursor for joy and happiness. The word for 'gladness' in Pali is *pāmojja*. *Pāmojja* comes from a root word. We never know if the root or the etymology was important for the people who spoke Pali, but it's certainly a fun game to play. *Pā* is the prefix, which can mean 'outward' or 'upward.' *Mojja* comes from *mukha*, the word for 'face.' The idea is of an uplifting face, a face that is rising up, or maybe a mouth. Sometimes 'mouth' is closely associated with the word for 'face' – an uplifting of the mouth. I think of it as lifting up the corners of the mouth to make a smile. It is that which makes us smile, or it may be a beatific upward gaze at what inspires us.

In fact, when there are difficulties in meditation, the Buddha encouraged people to think about or imagine something inspiring. But to think about something inspiring in a way that's not activating. The word for 'inspiring' also has the meaning of that which brings confidence, peacefulness, or brightness. We'd simply say 'inspired' in English. To be inspired when we sit down to meditate involves activating the imagination.

Imagination is regularly referenced in the teachings of the Buddha in relationship to meditation. This was very different from how I was introduced to both *vipassanā* practice and Zen practice. The explicit and implicit instructions were to not be involved in thinking so much – and certainly to not be involved in imagination. This was a meditation practice about just being present for things as they directly are, unmediated by concepts or imagination. Just the experience in and of itself, the direct sensations, direct contact with things. That's definitely true.

But it becomes true as meditation gets more and more centered in the present moment. And imagination – with some joy and well-being – can be harnessed for that purpose of getting ourselves centered in the present moment. So the Buddha encouraged people to think of an inspiring topic. One of the topics he talked about was to think about the Buddha himself. Think about someone who really inspires you by their practice, their being, how they are in life – in a way that is inspiring enough for you to really want to sit here, be here, and put to rest distracting thoughts and concerns.

Or to be inspired by your own virtue. Of course, that requires you to be virtuous. The word 'virtue' really means "virtuous conduct." You don't have to be inspired by what you're feeling on the inside. The Buddha's teachings are to be inspired by how you *act* in the world. If you're acting in the world without causing harm – you haven't stolen money from a bank or killed any of your neighbors – that's a source of being inspired.

It doesn't mean you have to be 100% virtuous, but you recognize the way you are living a virtuous life – even if it's just for today. Not to be burdened by the past, but rather to be inspired by what is good and beneficial. It may be a hard thing to imagine experiencing inspiration from one's own virtue. But it's certainly one of the teachings of the Buddha. One of the purposes of being virtuous is to create the inner context to be inspired, gladdened, and uplifted so that it's easier to stay present.

The Buddha also makes explicit that another source of inspiration is *muditā* (appreciative joy) – to think about things in the world that bring you wholesome, nourishing joy. And to share in the joy of others who are doing wonderful things. To be inspired by that.

The idea of being inspired by things is not meant to take us away from the present moment or to be a spiritual bypass. It's not meant for us to dwell there – to keep thinking and fantasizing about it. But rather to do it just enough that it orients us to the present moment. It brings uplifting feelings and goodness, which we're capable of feeling, and then we can ride those feelings into the present moment.

It's sometimes easier to be present if there's some modicum of well-being. It's not meant to override or bypass the challenges or the suffering we have. But it is helping to create a context where it's easier to be with and work through the challenges, to meditate with them – breathe with them.

The principle, which I think supports the idea of using the imagination for something inspiring, is that we do it when the alternative is worse. Human beings spend a lot of time in their imagination – imagining the future, the terrible things that are going to happen, remembering the past. Some percentage of our memory is fantasy. It's well-known that we don't necessarily remember accurately what happened in the past. We're telling ourselves a story. We spin it in a certain way. We spin it around the things that have a charge for us, whether it's good or bad. We stretch certain parts of the story to fill the space of our memory in a way that's not completely accurate.

Sometimes that can be very depressing and agitating. Certain fantasies are not helpful. If we're doing that anyway in the imagination, then it's possible to use the imagination. Don't fight the imagination, trying something that might not be working. But rather harness the imagination to help you be here in the present moment – to gather together. Then when you're here enough, you can let go of the imagination, sit here, and be present.

In the course of these teachings, I've offered some helpful imaginary scenarios and images. For example, I love the image for breathing of ocean waves washing up on a sandy shore. The waves wash up across the sand, making the sand wet for a while, and then recede. As the waves recede, the sand is wet, and then the water gets pulled underneath the sand. You get a whole different texture, a feeling of receiving and absorbing.

I like to use this image in different ways in meditation. I imagine breathing or the experience of breathing as the waves and my body as the sand. Or I imagine the experience of breathing – the sensations that come and go – as the cycles of upswelling with the inhale and receding with the exhale – washing across the shore, the sand, of awareness. That image keeps me there. I'm involved.

I've known one person who used the image of a large, wonderful, majestic bird flying in the sky. The inhales and exhales were the long and slow flapping of the wings. That image kept her engaged and involved in flying along.

To use the imagination to help us be connected, and then be inspired. To know, as I've said, how not to overuse it. How to use it so it's onward leading in the direction I talked about yesterday – that we're going towards doing less and less activity, to more quiet, stiller states of mind.

From coarse to refined. From active to peaceful. We use the imagination to support that process, knowing that at some point we have to let go of it. Not relying on it too much. Not overdoing it. Not depending on it. We're not using it as an antidote so we don't have to face our difficulties or work through them. But rather as a way of being present in an effective way.

I want to end now with the idea of inspiration – that which brings brightness, uplift, delight – that which brings confidence, trust, willingness to engage in the practice. Thinking about inspiring things.

I encourage you over the next 24 hours to consider what inspires you. Stay close to thinking about it, visiting it, being with it. Somehow be connected to it. Maybe you can share with friends or strangers what inspires you, and ask about what inspires them. These things may be spiritual in nature or fundamental to what gives life purpose or value. In doing so, I hope that you have some wonderful conversations and thinking time with yourself. What is it that inspires you? Maybe you can stay close to that.

Thank you very much. We'll continue with how the Buddha uses imagination for meditation tomorrow.