

Mindfulness of Breathing (24) Imaginings for Gladness

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Summary Keywords

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There has been a strong tendency in the West to present the Buddha's teachings in a fairly rational way – to emphasize their empirical nature. It's about seeing things as they are in a direct way. In doing so, sometimes we've left behind or it's gone unnoticed the tremendous degree to which the Buddha and early Buddhist tradition use imagination, use creativity in images and ideas to support the teachings. And not just the teachings, but rather to provide a different reference point for both the teachings and the practice than simply rational, logical ideas.

The Buddha uses lots of similes, poetry, images, and little stories. They touch in to other dimensions of our inner life than our rational, cognitive understanding. They touch into our emotional, kinesthetic and motivational life – the parts that can be inspired and gladdened. They tie in to our memory associations, capacities, and thinking. All our different faculties are touched, awakened, and brought into the field of our Dharma relationship, our Dharma practice.

This contributes to the sense of unification that is *samādhi*. Cultivating and developing *samādhi* is really important. In fact, the Buddha said,

To see things as they are, cultivate samādhi.

Samādhi is unification. Unification is the bringing together of all our faculties in a dynamic working of the whole – to really be in harmony. Everything is in harmony.

Using the imagination is a means to evoke this harmony in support of meditation practice or support of freedom. Of course, it has to be done carefully. It can be overdone. Certainly, people use their imagination for all kinds of things that are not healthy or appropriate for Dharma practice. We can spend a lot of time in fantasy, have feelings of delusions of grandeur or great pleasure, get lost in the pleasure of imagination, or get lost in fantasies of war or conflict with people. All kinds of things take us away from this practice.

We have to get a feel for the imagination that connects us to it. Does it really connect? Does it help us to be more settled and present for our experience? It's using the imagination to eventually go beyond the imagination. It's a stepping stone.

The images that the Buddha seems to use tend to not be stories or whole ongoing sagas. They tend to be very simple, like a mountain, the earth, or a lake. It's not a story, but rather an image. Sometimes it's a dynamic image, like that of an underwater fount in a lake – an underwater spring that's spreading goodness throughout the body. It's not a story, but a dynamic image of what's happening. This is a process of integration.

As I've said before, if we don't use our imagination, it's all too easy for it to be used by others. We internalize the images that advertisements, commercials, and politicians make up. We internalize them in a way that sometimes is not beneficial. They can actually be quite detrimental – imagining terrible things happening in the world that spiral us down.

It's not fantasy. We don't use imagination in Buddhism to avoid or deny what's going on, or to run away from life as it actually is. But use it with care. We should know how to use it so it really helps and supports us to be present. If it doesn't help us to be present, there's no need to use it. You're not a better Buddhist if you use your imagination. But it is available as a support to get us more focused.

One of the ways that the Buddha talks about developing gladness in meditation – the gladness that leads to joy, joy that leads to tranquility, tranquility that leads to happiness, happiness that leads to *samādhī* – is to appreciate what's absent as we sit and meditate. The most common absence that the Buddha emphasizes is the absence of the hindrances. Meditators often contend with the hindrances – desire; aversion; lethargy; restlessness, agitation, regrets, remorse; and doubt. These can be strong, compelling hooks in the mind. We can get caught up in thinking about them. We can get lost in desire or aversion fantasies, caught up in resistance, regrets, and anxieties. We can get lost in the universes they create for us.

As we settle down in meditation, getting more focused and relaxed, and starting to let go of the force of preoccupation – the bait of the thoughts that take us away from the present moment – and we're able to sit a little more in the present moment, there comes a time when the hindrances have abated. They're not so strong anymore, and it becomes relatively easy to stay here.

The image I used the other day was of a five-foot diameter bowl like they have in some children's museums. You drop a marble down the edge, and the marble moves this way and that way until momentum slows it down. Eventually, it falls through a hole at the bottom or rests at the bottom of the bowl. But, if you lean into the bowl and keep pushing the marble, it goes and goes and goes.

To be caught in the hindrances is to keep the marble spinning. But to finally settle down and let the marble settle and rest at the bottom of the bowl can feel so good in meditation. The mind is just here.

The Buddha talks about having gladness because one is no longer caught or enslaved by the mind that pulls us away, or has a mind of its own and we've lost freedom in the process.

Be glad about feeling the gladness. Here is where the Buddha teaches this as an act of imagination. He uses a particular word, which I'm translating as 'imagination,' can also be 'visualization.' It has the word 'seeing' – *ānupāsana* – in it. It is *samānupāsana* – "with seeing." It's not seeing through the physical eye, but rather through the mental eye of imagination.

The Buddha gives five similes for being free of the hindrances – to be really here, with the absence of the hindrances:

- a person in debt, who becomes free of debt
- a person who was terribly sick, who is no longer sick
- a person who was in prison (in bondage or tied down), who is freed from prison
- a person who was enslaved, and who becomes freed from slavery
- a person who wandered in a dangerous desert for a long time, who comes out to the other side and is no longer lost – free of wandering in the desert.

The Buddha gives these five similes for the hindrances and being free of them. The reason for these similes is to give reference points for something people would celebrate – to be so happy, relieved, and joyful to be out of prison, or no longer sick. If we don't remember that we're free of these things (like being freed from) prison, we will go on to the next preoccupation or concern.

It is important to take time – not just to keep going back to the breath – but to really appreciate the goodness, well-being, or delight that comes with being free of the hindrances, being focused and present. The goodness of that spreading through the body, opening up more widely, or bringing gladness – that is part of this integration, this unification process. We're beginning to not just keep doing the laser focus of the mind – if we ever did it that way – and just staying focused, focused, focused. But there's a mellowing, opening, and settling experience of softening that gladness can give birth to.

As we allow space for gladness and joy, we don't pump it up. Hopefully, it's a natural joy or gladness, which is available when we take the time to feel the goodness of what's happening in meditation. That is what allows the growth of joy and happiness on the way to strong *samādhī*.

This has been another talk on the use of imagination. It takes some wisdom to know what kind of imagination to use and when to use it. What to use when we first sit down. What to use when the hindrances have abated. Not to make a big project of it. But to note this is available to us. It's like a little, quiet aid that supports us to be inspired to stay in the present moment, and to feel the goodness and well-being that comes when we really settle down in meditation.

We're allowed to be present here and now, and we're allowed to enjoy it. This is the stepping stone for going deeper, and in some ways, in a more powerful way into the 16 steps of *ānāpānasati*, which we'll be continuing soon.

For now, I'm trying to introduce you to the territory of imagination, which can come into play when we start feeling settled in meditation. That supports the further settling and absorption in the very practice we're doing.

Thank you and I look forward to tomorrow.