

Mindfulness of Breathing (26) Imagining, Visualizing, and Freedom

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

imagination, imagining, Buddha, vision, freedom, similes, visualizing, embodied, constructing, *maññati*, Bhikkhu Bodhi, misconceive, mis-imagine, identification, *anupassati*, *samanupassati*, observe, visualization, unified

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I have emphasized this week the role of imagination in Buddhist practice. It's not something that I'm making up on my own. The Buddha used imagination in a variety of ways. He evoked the imaginary powers of people when they engaged in this practice.

As the practice deepens, a particular capacity for imagination is born. In English, we might call it 'vision' – to have a vision of a possibility. This vision can seem very clear, tangible, and immediate. It may be in a certain way. It's not something that is tangible or physically seen – but rather seen with the mind's eye.

In Buddhism, awakening is opening the eye of the Dharma – the eye that has a vision of freedom or the potential for freedom. It can see the peace and freedom of the mind, which is already there to some degree. And it then has a vision of it becoming complete, a vision of it expanding and touching the places where we're not yet free.

The idea of becoming a visionary – using the imagination to know a possibility – is not fantasy. It's based on something real. It's imagining the fulfillment of that. For example, if I hold my hand in a tight fist, I could release one finger while still holding the other fingers tight. I could then imagine, "Oh, I think it's possible now. I have a vision. I see the potential of opening up the whole hand and relaxing it." It's imagination, a vision of potential.

It is said sometimes in Buddhism that awakening is an act of vision. It is seeing or it awakens vision. It awakens the imagination of something that's possible, which then becomes the direction we go – or what we wholeheartedly put our life's energy into: "This is important. To live this way is valuable." It doesn't mean we have to leave the world behind. But rather, with a clear enough vision of the potential for awakening or freedom from clinging, we realize that it can be the foundation for how we live our life. It can be the all-encompassing container or approach for everything we do.

The vision that it's possible to live freely – to wholeheartedly enter into life with that as a guiding principle – is a radical thing. It isn't that we have to leave our life. It's not compromising our life necessarily. But rather, it's bringing what's best in life – freedom, peace, and compassion – as the container, the context, the foundation. It's a vision that this is possible – and then a decision, even a commitment or vow: "This is how I want to live my life."

Imagination can be harmful or debilitating, but it can also be forward-leading and opening. It can help us to grow and develop. To be able to distinguish between these two qualities of imagination is very important.

The Buddha used words that I'm translating as 'imagination.' One word is *maññati*, which is regularly used for acts of imagination that are not helpful. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator, sometimes translates *maññati* as 'misconceive.' Even though there is no negative prefix in the word, it's used in such a negative way in the suttas that it often can mean to mis-imagine or bad/poor imagining. The Buddha used the example of a jackal that imagines itself to be a lion; it misconceives itself as a lion.

One of the very interesting places in the suttas where the word "one imagines" (*maññati*) has negative connotations has to do with identification. In many places, the Buddha emphatically talks about the problems people have when they imagine an identity for themselves – that they are something in relation to other things. For example, imagining that they are the same as the universe or the same as the world. Imagining that they are in the world or the world is them. Imagining that they are distinct from the world.

The Buddha uses the word *maññati*, which I'm translating as 'imagine.' *Maññati* is often translated as 'conceive,' which doesn't capture the idea of imagination. Rather than talking about the self and identity of who I am as a belief ("I'm this, I'm that"), which gets into philosophy – the Buddha uses the word 'imagine'. It's not a philosophical issue. It's an issue of what we're doing with our imagination.

What are we constructing? What are we fantasizing about? Many of the problems around self are not about what we truly are as a self – whatever that is – but rather how we imagine ourselves to be. We then have a whole different understanding of the not-self teaching.

For example, in the suttas, a common phrase is "me, myself, and mine." The order of these words represents a bit of a mistranslation, but the meaning is the same. The Buddha uses the word 'imagine' – imagining that something is mine, that I have an identity, and that there is an essential self. It doesn't say one believes in me, myself, and mine, but it's something we're construing, constructing, or imagining.

Part of meditation practice is to quiet and calm the excessive over-imagination, false imagination, and misconstruing that we do. It's not questioning or challenging any kind of philosophical view of self – me, myself, and mine – in these particular teachings. We don't have to get involved philosophically: "Is there or is there not a self?" Where we do get involved in meditation practice is to clarify, let go of, and quiet the imaginings that are operating. That's *maññati*, imagining that's usually negative.

The word for imagining that's positive has the Pali word *anupassati* in it. *Anupassati*, one of the central words for mindfulness practice, means: to observe, to see. With the prefix *sam* in front of it – *samanupassati* – in the context in which it's used in Buddhism, we can understand *samanupassati* to be imagination, maybe in the form of visualization.

In the similes for freedom from the hindrances, which I talked about a few days ago, the Buddha says,

Visualizing oneself as no longer sick.

Visualizing oneself as no longer in debt.

Visualizing oneself as no longer enslaved.

Visualizing has a richer feeling than imagination. It touches into something deeper, more emotional, embodied, and tangible in the mind's eye. It helps us to fill something out. This is one of the two functions of imagination or visualization, which the Buddha talks about and uses in practice.

One function is to give us a visceral, embodied sense of what the Buddha's talking about, which is not just explanations. It's like poetry or something evocative. It's something that opens up and touches into more dimensions of our life than just words. It touches into our emotional and kinesthetic being. Some of the images include action and movement – flowing water, a person working a lathe, or kneading water into powder.

A second function is to touch into the memories and associations we have with these things, and into our capacity for imagination, thought, and thinking.

We have here a movement or support in imagination for becoming unified – which means gathering together all our different functions as a human being so that we're focused and present for the practice of meditation. We're not fragmented or divided. We're not leaving any part of ourselves out. Rather, we're gathering together all of ourselves to center and be here.

On Monday, we'll continue with steps seven and eight of *ānāpānasati*. These steps continue the process of gathering together, settling, and unifying. Once the imagination has functioned in a useful way, we're supporting it to settle as well. Not to hold on to it, but to go to deeper states of unification and calm where, at some point, imagination is no longer supportive. Next week, we'll start going more deeply into the mind.

Someone said yesterday that they wanted to see the similes for the four *jhānas* in written form. I will post it and my translation of the 16 steps of *ānāpānasati*. Once they're up, I'll let you know where they are. [They are here on the AudioDharma website.]

Thank you all very much, and I look forward to our next time together.