Winter Retreat 2018: Cultivating the Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara
Dharma Post #3-B Cultivating Happiness

Dear Thay, dear brother Jerry, dear friends on the path,

The Buddha's enlightenment story[1] offers us deep teachings about the nature of happiness and well-being, which is the third Noble Truth.[2] During his time, ascetics were practicing drastic renunciation of the five skandhas (body/form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness) in order to attain an ultimate state of meditative bliss (enlightenment). Sidhartha[3] joined this practice, searching for answers to his questions about life and death, and liberation from suffering. As he practiced self-mortification to the point of near death, he had a realization—that body and mind formed one reality that cannot not be separated.

After sitting in the hot sun one day practicing meditation in a cemetery, the cool evening breeze caressed and refreshed his skin. He felt an ease in his mind that he had not experienced during the day. Surprised by this experience, he realized that the peace and comfort of the body were directly related to the peace and comfort of the mind. To abuse the body was to abuse the mind. He recognized asceticism as a narrow path that could not relieve pain and suffering in the world. Its extreme renunciation only created more suffering. Sidhartha's practice changed as he began looking deeply into the nature of his body, opening him up finally to an understanding of the four Noble Truths and the oneness of understanding and love.

Right Effort/Diligence

In the Buddha's first dharma talk to his friends after he attained full enlightenment, he shared the teachings on the Noble Eightfold Path. This is the path out of suffering by cultivating, in part, well-being and happiness. The sixth element of the Noble Eightfold Path is Right Effort or Right Diligence (*Samma vayama*). In order of presentation, it precedes Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. The Buddha found that practicing concentration through extreme asceticism did not lead to insight. Instead his determined, perhaps mis-guided, practice led to the deterioration of his body to the point of death. Thay might name this form of concentration "wrong concentration" because of its lopsided approach.

One thing the Buddha discovered after experiencing that cool evening breeze was what he identified as Right Effort. Right Effort was taught by the Buddha as:

1) encouraging the non-arising unwholesome states of body, speech and mind not to arise in us,
2) abandoning or quieting unwholesome states that have arisen,
3) encouraging wholesome states to arise, and
4) encouraging the strengthening and continuation of wholesome states that have arisen.

Practicing Right Effort encourages peace and comfort within our body and mind, which can lay a stable foundation for deeper and deeper levels of Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration to manifest in us. It encourages a practice that is balanced. There is a teaching from the Buddha about a lute player who was discouraged with his meditation practice and went to the Buddha to ask for instruction.

"What happens when you tune your instrument too tightly?" the Buddha asked.

"The strings break," the musician replied.

"And what happens when you string it too loosely?"

"When it's too loose, no sound comes out," the musician answered. "The string that produces a tuneful sound is not too tight and not too loose."

"That," said the Buddha, "is how to practice: not too tight and not too loose."

We are not too harsh in our practice (as were the ascetics of the Buddha's time) and we are not too casual. Right Effort is the tuneful sound that creates a fertile ground for transformation and healing to manifest.

Deepening our Well of Happiness: Practicing Right Effort

Working with Unwholesome States of Body, Speech and Mind

With Right Effort we encourage wholesome states of body, speech and mind to arise, and then we cultivate and strengthen their continuation in our conscious mind and body. This contributes to deepening our well of happiness. However, there are many conditions we inherit from our ancestors, our family, our culture, or society that encourage us to develop patterns of thinking, acting, or being that strengthen unwholesome states within us. Perhaps as a small child we were very happy playing in the mud but our parent interrupted us with a stern voice that gave us a sense that we had done something wrong. Or, because of our many experiences over time, we are afraid to send our black teenage son driving to school because we know there is the possibility he could be stopped by a police officer—and the results of that encounter are unpredictable and possibly dangerous for our son.

Experiences such as these may contribute, over time, to our developing dis-regulated patterns of response within our nervous system (such as rumination or an overly-heightened pattern of alert or depression) that can make it difficult for us to live fully in the present moment and trust that happiness is even possible for us. Our "window of tolerance,"[4] that is, the bandwidth of stable response within the nervous system, is narrow, we are less resilient, and we suffer more easily with fewer wholesome options for experiencing ourselves and the world.

These patterned responses are part of a natural biological defense system (hard-wired to keep us safe from danger) that has developed some bad habits. We may be triggered by a look, a sound, a smell, a touch, or an encounter with another person, and we see danger where there is none. Like the piece of rope we see as a venomous snake. Dangerous instead of harmless, we see the world in an upside-down way. Our perceptions are clouded by our previous experiences. So what can we do? It is not helpful to ignore or push things away, and it may not yet be safe to face them directly. Instead, we practice the "gentle way" taught by Thay and the teachers in our tradition.

Changing the Peg: According to Thay,[5] the Buddha offered many **ways to help us transform troublesome thoughts.** One way is to replace an unwholesome thought with a wholesome one by "changing the peg," just as a carpenter replaces a rotten peg by hammering in a new one. If we are constantly assailed by unwholesome patterns of thought, we need to learn how to change the peg and replace those patterns with wholesome thoughts.

Richard Rohr, a Catholic contemplative teacher, writes:

> To begin to see with new eyes, we must observe—and usually be humiliated by—the habitual way we encounter each and every moment. It is humiliating because we will see that we are well-practiced in just a few predictable responses. Not many of our responses are original, fresh, or naturally respectful of what is right in front of us. The most common human responses to a new moment are mistrust, cynicism, fear, defensiveness, dismissal, and judgmentalism. These are the common ways the ego tries to be in control of the data instead of allowing the moment to get some control over us—and teach us something new!

During the winter this year I have been practicing to see the light in the sky every morning as I drive to work. I usually anticipate the winter as dark and dreary, so looking for light even among the rain clouds and low morning light is a helpful practice for me to learn to respond to wintertime in a fresh way. On a recent day of mindfulness at the Abbey we were practicing outdoor walking mediation. On this morning walk we stopped along a road that unfolded into a farmer's field with a row of oak trees and the vista of a cloudy sky beyond. I was looking for the light in the clouds and noticed a patch of brighter light beneath a line of rather dark clouds. All of a sudden an image came to mind of the sun above the clouds, always shining just as I can see when flying in an airplane high in the sky. Thay's teaching that we are alive because of the sun—that the sun is actually our second heart, came to my mind and I immediately felt the warmth of the sun come into my own heart. In that moment I recognized how often I focus on what is not going well within me and I had a thought: I am happy! A smile came to my face and I practiced that phrase the rest of the way through our walking meditation. I realized something I had never experientially known before—I can be happy when I remember the sun is my heart!

We can also **change the peg by working with discomfort in our body**. If an unsettling thought or emotion lands in our body, or our body is triggered by something or becomes agitated, we can practice a method taught in trauma resiliency training.[6] Using this model, we do not focus on our thoughts or feelings, but on the sensations we notice in our body.[7] If we are experiencing negative sensations throughout our body, we may try to see if we can notice any sensation that is either positive or neutral. If we find such a place, we can gently bring our attention to that spot and see what happens. Sometimes the sensation will change or move, sometimes expand, or may remain unchanged. It helps to be patient, as the body does have its own time and it may take a while for sensations to arise or change. All we need to do is bring gentle curious attention to our body and see what it might have to tell us. The body does not speak in cognitive or language terms, thus the attention to sensations.

We can use the practice of tracking sensations even when our body is operating within the window of tolerance. Being able to tell the difference between sensations that are pleasant, neutral or unpleasant helps us strengthen our ability to identify them when we are experiencing unwholesome states in our body. And paying attention to neutral and pleasant sensations can help deepen our well-being—like noticing that we do not have a toothache.

I do find that a familiar sort of physical discomfort increases in me during the darker, shorter winter days. Sometimes I wake up with achy sensations that run through my arms and legs. Sometimes I just feel a darker sensation inside my chest. So I practice with these familiar sensations. Sometime I massage the aching body parts or rub them briskly to move energy within me. Sometimes I place a warm pack on my chest. And sometimes I can be still with them and notice parts of me, like the bottoms of my feet for example, that do not have those sensations. All of these sensations **are** impermanent and eventually they do change—sometimes quickly and sometimes not so quickly. It may be that there are underlying physiological factors contributing to my winter discomfort. But whatever the case may be, my experience is that over the years as I continue to practice with "winter blues" I am less overpowered by them, and I am able to find more spaciousness, more peace, and more calm within me during this time of year.

Cultivating and Sustaining Wholesome States of Body, Speech and Mind

Start with What We Love: In cultivating wholesome states may be easiest to start with what we love. It may be a person, a place, an animal, an activity or anything else within or without that makes us feel happy when we think of them. In the trauma resiliency model, this is called a resource. You bring the resource to mind and then intensify your connections with it. If the resource is a person or animal, you remember all the beautiful qualities of that being, and perhaps a happy interaction with them. My resource is often one of my grandchildren. If the resource is a place or activity (like gardening, running, or walking in the forest, for example), you think of what you appreciate or enjoy about that place or activity. You notice

colors, light, smells, or sounds of that place. As you give more detail to your resource, you pay attention to what happens inside your body and follow the sensations that are comforting or relaxing. Then follow what happens next. If you happen to notice any unpleasant sensations, you can merely shift your attention to places in your body that are neutral or more comfortable.

My dharma sister Nadene loves to sit in a comfortable chair with her cat close by and slowly sip a cup of hot tea as she reads and contemplates poetry or other spiritual readings. She has told me how she embraces and is deeply nourished by this practice. Though I have never been to her house, sometimes I imagine Nadene, with her gentle, thoughtful manners enjoying her cup of tea and her reading. One insight she learned from a co-worker and our dharma brother Jerry, is how to linger longer with those people and things we hold dear so that we can fully appreciate them. Her practice of lingering longer has encouraged my practice as well. Lingering longer can help strengthen wholesome states within us. It also deepens our connection to others, which is a practice of cultivating love.

Touch Happiness in the Moment: Several years ago, my dharma sister Tina was on a retreat in Oregon with dharma teacher Cheri Maples. On the first evening of the retreat, during an orientation period, Cheri said that for some people, coming back to their breath or body might not feel safe or possible and that that was okay. Then she said don't force your practice but do what feels safe. According to Tina, she talked about various options like noticing sounds or sensations. Tina shared that for her it was a relief and helped her both find a place of self acceptance for where she was, and feel inspired to learn ways to be able to be in the body.

As the Buddha taught, there are innumerable doors opening into the Dharma. As I shared in an earlier dharma post (1-B), there are times when we are unable to connect with our breath or our body. For some people it may take a long time to find their way in and that's okay. There are several practices I have found to be powerful in deepening my well of happiness, regardless of where I may be in my own personal practice. The first is described by Richard Rohr:

> To let the moment teach us, we must allow ourselves to be at least slightly stunned by it until it draws us inward and upward, toward a subtle experience of wonder. We normally need a single moment of gratuitous awe to get us started.

Stunned by the moment! Letting ourselves be caught by surprise. Dharma teacher Glen Schneider has developed a series of simple practices to help us cultivate happiness and fulfillment in the course of our daily lives.[8] It begins with being caught by surprise. He said that, "If we pay close attention, we can see opportunities for happiness to present themselves many times, perhaps hundreds of times, each day."

The practice he teaches is simple and based upon what neuroscience has discovered about nourishing happiness and joy. Happiness is far more than a positive feeling that comes and goes, happiness is wired into the physiology of our brains. While the human organism is wired to recognize dangers, happiness and joy can be strengthened. It is estimated that it takes about thirty seconds (about ten breaths) to firmly root a new neural pathway, so with awareness and practice we can develop beneficial pathways and decrease the ruts of unbeneficial pathways. Basically, 'what fires together, wires together."

The Ten Breaths to Happiness taught by Glen Schneider is a simple, concrete practice to nourish our seeds of joy and happiness. It can literally rewire our neural pathways so we may experience deeper and more lasting calm and peace. The Ten Breaths practice rests in two essentials:

- Sustain positive experiences for at least 30 seconds.
- Feel positive experiences *in the body* as fully as possible.

The practice is basically this: "Whatever catches your attention is up to you. Suppose a flower catches your attention while you are walking outdoors. You pause and simply present yourself to the flower without judgment, commentary or analysis. You behold it through your awareness of breathing and count your breaths through ten. Let the experience be as intense as possible. See if you can open up every cell of your body to the experience." He encourages us to practice in this way ever day—being caught by something beautiful.

During days of mindfulness at the Abbey, we have long practiced a modified version of the Ten Breaths as we practice outdoor walking meditation. When we hear the sound of a bell we stop, and take in the moment with every sense organ of our body. We notice our feet planted on the ground; the sensations of outdoor air on our face; the sounds of birds, frogs or water; the colors and light around us; the sights and sounds of swaying treetops; feel the touch sensations of clothing on our body. We drench ourselves in the moment. The bell minder counts the ten breaths slowly, and then turns to begin walking again.

As we open our senses, our body, our mind up to the intimate experience of beauty within and around us, we create a stable ground for our practice. As the Buddha discovered, a nourished, calm body encourages a calm mind. It expands our window of tolerance and opens us up to more wholesome ways of responding to our experiences and the world around us.

Practicing Right Effort, we find ourselves more fully present in the Land of Great Happiness.[9] We learn how to listen to the sounds of birds, the rustling of golden leaves that fall in autumn, the tinkling of wind chimes, and the echo of bells as they ring through the air. We learn to be more keenly aware of all the beautiful aspects of our very own Mother Earth. We see more deeply into our interconnectedness—that

our happiness and well-being are dependent upon our great Mother, and her happiness and wellbeing is dependent upon us. We come to see more fully the beauty and preciousness of all life with no discrimination.

Breathe You are Alive

As we practice, bit by bit, we *can* learn how to connect our breath to happiness. There is a poem with music written by Sister Annabel that can help us strengthen the bonds between breath and happiness. "Breathe! You Are Alive" can be recited as a verse or as many short gathas. It can be used as a reminder or an aspiration. The word "you" can be changed to "I" for personal practice. The pairs of phrases can be used for guided meditation. For example: "I breathe in compassion. I breathe out joy." And the poem can be sung as a practice song (you can find it on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHluXjD-arE). The poem goes like this:

> Breathe and you know
> … that you are alive
> … that all is helping you
> … that you are the world
> … that the flower is breathing too
> Breathe for yourself and you breathe for the world
> Breathe in compassion and breathe out joy.
>
> Breathe and be one
> … with the air that you breathe
> … with the river that flows
> … with the earth that you tread
> … with the fire that glows
> Breathe and you break the thought of birth and death
> Breathe and you see impermanence is life.
>
> Breathe
> … for your joy to be steady and calm
> … for your sorrow to flow away
> … to renew every cell in your blood
> … to renew the depth of consciousness
> … and you dwell in the here and now
> … and all you touch is new and real.

Several weeks ago my dharma brother Peter had a dream. In the dream his dharma sister Jayna, who had recently passed away, came to him and sang Sister Annabel's song. Peter doesn't recollect ever hearing the song, but went online and found the words and the tune—exactly as Jayna had sung it to him in his dream. How did it happen that Jayna sang this song to Peter in a dream, and that Peter shared his dream with me as I was in the midst of writing this post? Perhaps synchronicity.

Perhaps as a message that came from outside of space and time. Certainly it is a mystery that we can take in and allow to manifest.

To be able to follow our breath and connect it with the body can be absolutely exquisite and powerful. It helps us establish a one-pointed focus, and deepen our concentration. It truly can put us in touch with the ultimate dimension. Perhaps that is the message Jayna was communicating to my friend Peter, as well as to all of us
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[1] From Thay's book **Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha**.
[2] For a more detailed presentation of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path see Thay's book, **The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching**.
[3] Siddhartha Gautama is the name of the historical Buddha, who was born in the Sakya clan.
[4] "Window of tolerance" is a conceptual term developed by Daniel Siegel used to describe the zone of arousal within the nervous system in which a person is able to function most effectively. When people are within this zone, they are typically able to readily receive, process, and integrate information and otherwise respond to the demands of everyday life without much difficulty.
[5] From **The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching**
[6] Based on the Trauma Resiliency Model and Community Resiliency model developed by the Trauma Resource Institute. For more detailed information you may be interested in the book, **Building Resilience to Trauma**, by Elaine Miller-Karas.
[7] A vocabulary of sensations was developed by Pat Ogden and Janina Fisher, and presented in in their book, **Sensorimotor Psychotherapy**. Some familiar sensations are tight, relaxed, constricted, tingly, cold, warm, dense, light, sharp, dull, etc.
[8] For more detail, see **Ten Breaths for Happiness**, by Glen Schneider, Mindfulness Bell: #59 Winter/Spring 2012, available online through the Mindfulness Bell. For a fuller exploration of the Ten Breaths Practice, you may be interested in his easy to read book, **Ten Breaths to Happiness**.
[9] See dharma post 3-A.