

Similes for Meditation (3 of 5) Still Water

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Good morning and good day. We come to the third talk of the Buddha's use of similes to provide instructions for meditation. Some of the instructions describe what can happen as we meditate, so we can recognize that. The Buddha talks a lot about entering and abiding in experience. I believe this idea of abiding in, resting in, dwelling in, or living within is supposed to have connotations of being at ease, being still, contented, and happy to be present for what's here. So to recognize the states that are useful to abide in.

To abide or dwell is a metaphor. I think it has connotations of being at home in the experience, being where one is supposed to be, and being at ease there. So by recognizing these experiences, one knows where

to abide. To convey those experiences of meditation and to provide instructions, the Buddha uses similes.

As I said in the guided meditation, there are a lot of similes in which the Buddha uses water. In different similes, water represents different things. But often, in the context of meditation, it seems that water represents awareness and mindfulness.

Mindfulness feels differently in meditation depending on how strongly centered we are. When we begin practice, the mindfulness that we bring to our experience might be intermittent. We might have a moment of being mindful and then we wander off, followed by another moment of mindfulness. So the Buddha talks about sprinkling water into soap powder, which was the simile on Monday. I love the idea of sprinkling because, on a hot day, it's refreshing to be sprinkled with water. It cools us down. Or it can be nice to stand in a shower with lots of water sprinkling down. Buddhist monastics will sprinkle water that's been blessed. They are doing blessings and sprinkling water on people's heads. It's kind of a fun ritual ceremony that they do. So the practice is not just about bringing our attention to the breath, the mind wanders away, and then we bring the attention back. It's about bringing the attention back in a nice way where we are sprinkling, blessing, or refreshing our experience with awareness the best we can.

As these drops of water become more continuous and come together, then the metaphor is that of a lake with a delightful current flowing through it from an underwater spring. Here, there's still activity and movement in the awareness. We're maybe still applying ourselves. There's an active way in which awareness is functioning within us. We feel the dynamism of it, the dynamic quality.

Then, as we get more concentrated and more settled, resting and abiding more deeply in the experience, the metaphor that the Buddha uses is a lake that has no current or movement in it. The lake is completely still. I think of this lake as very clear, very still, and very peaceful.

I've seen big mountain lakes early in the morning before the birds are up. The surface of the water is so still and quiet at dawn, before the wind picks up, maybe reflecting the mountains in the distance. Watching that is so peace-generating. I love sitting there and looking at the peaceful morning scenery in which the day hasn't yet begun, and everything is so quiet and still.

So the Buddha uses this idea of a still, quiet lake for how sometimes meditation can be experienced. The mind has no sense of movement anymore. Awareness has no sense of movement. It's not being applied or

brought to anything or flowing through us. It just is and things occur within it.

Within this very still, quiet lake are lotus flowers of different colors. I forget which colors they are, maybe white, red, blue, black. I don't know the colors that lotus flowers can be. In this metaphor, the lotus flowers are floating not just on top of the water but also underneath its surface. I don't know if lotus flowers can float underneath the water. Maybe it's the buds before they've opened.

Because the water of the lake is clear, the lotus flowers are floating there, each one separate from the other. The different colors of the lotus flowers represent all the different experiences we can have as we're sitting in meditation. Each experience, each individual detail, is allowed to exist there by itself. Each thing is allowed to be just itself without being tied to or caught up in the past or the future, without comparisons to other things that are not it. It is just allowed to float.

So agitation could just float there and be a lotus flower. Sensations of the body can have a feeling of just floating there. Everything just seems to float, each thing by itself. And we're not doing anything with it or connecting it to anything else. It is just allowed to be itself. I think this idea of allowing each thing to be itself –

a pristine self as it actually is – is conveyed by the simile of the lotus flowers floating in a very still lake.

The water here is not just awareness, but awareness saturated or filled with a kind of joy and delight. So if you have joy and delight, joy and happiness, there's a strong awareness that comes along with it. The distinction between this joy and delight in awareness may not be so obvious or maybe it is. Maybe joy and delight are some of the lotus flowers.

But the idea is that the water touches everything. No part of the lotus flower is not touched by the water. In this metaphor, the Buddha says that no part of the lotus flower is not touched by the peace, tranquility, contentment, joy, and happiness that's present in this state.

It is not easy to suddenly feel and experience the mind, the awareness, as being a still, quiet lake. But when it does happen, then the instructions are two-fold. It is to abide in it, rest in it, and very gently allow the well-being, the joy, the happiness, sometimes the rapture, the bliss, that's there to spread and suffuse throughout the body, throughout everything so nothing that occurs is not touched by awareness, by this well-being that can be there.

So these metaphors and similes of the Buddha illustrate the kind of experience that can come when the mind gets settled, focused, quiet, and still – when we start living in awareness, rather than only sprinkling awareness. We remind ourselves to bring more to it and more to it.

It points to a possibility, a potential that we have. With these beautiful similes, maybe it's inspiring to think about the possibility of abiding and resting in awareness. Not contending with anything, not resisting anything, but meeting everything with clear awareness and letting that build and develop over time, the sprinkles that we do slowly increase.

The earlier simile was that of soap powder coming together and holding together. Another simile that the Buddha uses is rain falling on a mountainside. If the rain continues long enough and sits on the surface of the soil, the water starts to flow and become little streamlets. Then the streamlets become streams, which become creeks, which become rivers. As the rivers flow down the mountainside, they first go into a small lake, and then a bigger lake, and then an even bigger lake. With each bigger lake, it gets quieter and stiller because the lake is so big compared to the amount of water coming in until finally, the water ends up in the ocean. The ocean, in this simile, is the greatest, most peaceful place if you go a few feet under the surface of the water.

So drop-by-drop, we practice our mindfulness – that's our job, to provide the drops. If we keep doing it, the drops join and come together, and we start getting a sense and a feel for something vast, large, and beautiful.

This was my attempt to make these similes come alive for you. Maybe you can see if something in your experience corresponds to them. Maybe there's something about water that's evocative and interesting as a simile for your awareness, your mindfulness, that can change the quality and the characteristics of how you practice mindfulness. Practice as if you're bringing moist, flowing water to your experience, where there's no resistance to what is. It's flowing around and through and over and under. Or if it's not flowing, maybe it's still and just holds everything in the stillness of a quiet mind.

So thank you. There are more similes that the Buddha gives. We'll continue tomorrow. Thank you