

Similes for Meditation (4 of 5) Clean and Wrapped in Peace

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We come now to the fourth talk on the similes for meditation that are used for strong concentration practice – for the *jhānas* or absorptions. These similes are particularly apt or representative of some of the deeper experiences and clear stages or phases that we go through as the mind gets settled, focused, and quiet.

I also appreciate that these descriptions work for meditation well short of deep absorption. Some of what the similes for deep concentration represent can be experienced in lighter meditation. Even mildly settled meditation goes through phases. Changes occur to our sense of self and the body. All kinds of things change as we settle, even modestly. To recognize and feel it supports the deepening and the opening up to settling even more.

Part of the advantage of being sensitive to some of these shifts and changes in more ordinary deepening meditation is that we start to recognize and get comfortable with it. Then when meditation really deepens, we are already somewhat familiar with it, and we recognize what is happening. We don't get excited, afraid, or confused by the deepening. We are already familiar with it. It is just a deepening of what has already been experienced and known.

So we come to the simile for the fourth *jhāna*. The fourth *jhāna* is a state of very deep tranquility and equanimity. In the fourth *jhāna*, the mind is so still and quiet that there is very little conceiving or making of concepts through which we see ourselves and the world around us. In fact, with the eyes closed, there are no thoughts, no conception, and no perception of the world around us. We are so settled, content, and peaceful that everything else recedes.

One of the things that recede from awareness when the mind is settled, peaceful, and calm is the sharp definitions of the body – the sharp way we understand the body. Much of the experience of the body is mediated through concepts. Being self-conscious about the body often has to do with making comparisons, one concept versus another. We compare our body with someone else's body type. Our body is too thin, too

large, or too small. It is possible to get really wrapped up in body consciousness.

These ideas and concepts have a lot to do with comparative thinking. We are comparing ourselves to an ideal, to other people, to how we were when we were younger. This is all navigating in the world of concepts and ideas, which belong to the world of the thinking mind, the conceptual mind.

The body in and of itself – in terms of its perceptions of itself – is perceiving sensations of the body. The sensations of the body are free and independent of the concepts we have. With regular street consciousness, it might be inconceivable that we can experience the body without any concepts, especially if the concepts are so deeply ingrained in the mind that we don't even know that we are conceiving them. There are these very deep layers of the mind where conceptions operate without words or images. It is just kind of there. All that can get quieter and quieter. We can start perceiving the body without seeing it, without any clear sense that there is a body here.

So the simile for this *jhāna* is a delightful simile that I will embellish a bit. The two previous similes had to do with being in a lake. Imagine that you are grimy and dirty from backpacking or hiking. It has been days without a shower. Finally, you go to a beautiful, quiet

lake and clean yourself really well. All the dirt and grime is off you. You come back to the shore, and you are very contented and happy. There is nothing to do, nothing to be. You have arrived where you want to be.

Someone gives you a clean, soft, cotton blanket to wrap around yourself. You are completely enveloped in this blanket. Every part of the body is covered by this blanket. You are protected from the flies and insects flying around and nothing comes in. The blanket protects you from the sun. You are protected from the wind. It just feels so nice, safe, and protected inside this blanket.

Because you are completely enveloped in this blanket, no one can see the body. This soft, gauzy kind of blanket means the body is not seen. But inside that blanket, the person – you – is feeling completely clean. There is a purity; there is a cleanliness. There is a radiating feeling that can happen after you are really clean, after a shower or a bath. You are very content and peaceful. There is a feeling that everything is good and right in the world.

So that is the simile. This person is enveloped in a clean, cotton blanket, and nothing is left uncovered. In this deep meditation, the blanket shows us that you can't see the body. We don't perceive the body in ordinary ways. The body gets diffused and disappears.

There might be individual sensations here and there, but they disappear almost entirely.

Remember in yesterday's simile, there are still things in the lake. The lake still has a certain kind of substantiality. There is water in it, and individual lotus flowers are floating in the lake. There might still be sensations in the body, which can have a feeling of floating.

In this fourth simile, there are almost no sensations in the body. It is almost like the body disappears except for this feeling of cleanliness, of refreshment that is coming from the bath. There is this feeling of being peaceful, tranquil, and equanimous. Everything is okay. The work you had to do is finished. Nothing needs to happen. There is no reactivity of the mind and no being for or against anything – just a very, deep contentment. There is no clear sense of rapture, pleasure, joy, or delight. There is something that feels more satisfying, which is a kind of feeling of deep cleanliness, purity, and peace that seems to radiate where the body used to be. It is a lovely experience.

I've known people (myself included) where the body seems to disappear in these states. They kind of begin doubting: "Do I really have a body anymore? Has my body really disappeared?" Then they open their eyes to see: "Yes, the body is still there. It didn't go away." The

sense of the body disappearing is so strong that you want to check and make sure it is still here.

One of the important lessons in this kind of meditation, through the simile, can be that as meditation deepens, we can experience ourselves, experience our life free of many of the ordinary concepts that we live with on automatic pilot. Some of these concepts we take for granted, we believe they define reality – this is what is really happening – but it turns out they are provisional concepts of the mind. They are not inherent. They do not have to be here.

A lot of these concepts of ourselves, our body, and what is going on bring us a heavy burden or a lot of suffering and distress. It is kind of surprising and radical to have all these concepts disappear and stop. We then feel this deep peace and contentment without anything in the world or even the challenges in our body having been fixed. This is a different way of experiencing life or the body. It is not mediated by the concepts that we usually navigate or struggle with.

That puts a little question mark after the concepts and the struggles we have. “Is this as real as I thought it was? Is this really as substantial and necessary as I thought it was?” There is another way.

In the discourses and suttas, the Buddha talks about himself as an old 80-year-old man. Back in ancient India, there was no pain medication. There were none of the medications that we now have that can make aging so much easier. There was no palliative care or hospitals to reduce the pain.

He talked about how much his body hurt and was creaky. His back was bent over in his old age. This deep state of meditation that the simile describes was the only place where he got relief from his pain. I imagine that is where he got refreshed and renewed so that he could continue with his life. This meditation lifted and refreshed his creaky, painful, old body for a while.

This kind of meditation is very useful for us. It can help a lot. The biggest help for people doing mindfulness meditation is that it can begin to free us from the authority and the hegemony of concepts and ideas. We can start to see them as provisional, conditional, and contingent. It is not always necessary to live by them. Meditation can take us to this paradigm shift, and hopefully, in doing so, help us to be much wiser in navigating the world of concepts.

So thank you. We have one more simile, and that will be tomorrow.