

Mindfulness of Breathing (25) Similes for *Samādhi*

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We've taken a little pause in moving through the next steps of the 16 steps of *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing to look more deeply at a particular way in which the mind works – the use of imagination in the mind.

I'll talk a little more specifically about the Buddha's use of the word 'imagination.' I've read sometimes people say that there's no Pali word for 'imagination,' but there actually is. It's a choice of the translator. I think there's a good argument that there is. I'll talk tomorrow about the words that have to do with imagination. They also relate

to the idea of self and not-self, which is so important in Buddhism.

Today I want to look at imagination as a preparation for next week when we start looking at the mind more carefully – what goes on in the mind and in mental activity. Part of the function of the earlier parts of *ānāpānasati* is to create the right conditions for supporting investigation and a deeper letting go in the mind. The more we have a sense of well-being in meditation, the easier it's going to be to work with the mind.

I've told this story many times, but I love the story. When my son was in kindergarten, once a week the children played with beeswax. When it was time to play, they would get the wax from the shelf. It was usually in the form of an animal they had made the week before. The wax would be hard and brittle. The only thing you could do with it would be to break it. The little animal legs could be broken off easily enough.

The children were instructed to put the little piece of wax between the palms of their two hands, and hold it there while the teacher told a story. By the time the story was over, the warmth of their hands had softened the beeswax. Then they could make more beautiful animal figures. But they had to have warmth to soften the wax.

It's the same thing with the mind and the heart. In order to make it into something beautiful – to move it towards freedom – it helps to warm it up and soften it. The good feelings that we sit with – calm, joy, happiness, well-being, contentment – are all creating the right conditions to begin softening the mind. Then the mind can be more pliable, flexible, and malleable in the best possible way. The healthy functioning of the mind can operate smoothly and easily.

The mind is actually used to cultivate the deeper states of well-being that arise in meditation. The mind is always being used. It's being used to apply and sustain the attention. But it can be supported by imagination.

The Buddha uses a lot of similes. Rather than thinking about them as being active and intentional uses of imagination, it's more like we learn the similes and internalize them well enough so they're in the background of the mind when we meditate. The mind associates meditation with the similes in a natural way. The similes create a positive view or orientation that supports us to be present.

It's very easy to have lots of imagination that is not helpful. We can carry a lot of unconscious and conscious associations, biases, fears, and projections

onto our experience, and they can create an unhealthy or unsupportive environment for practice.

The simple thought, "I'm a lousy meditator, I can never do this," is also a use of imagination. It's an idea or thought that creates a certain atmosphere, which in extreme forms becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you're completely preoccupied by the idea that you cannot meditate, then you probably can't because of that preoccupation.

There's also fear. There's fear of what's going to happen if I open my heart in meditation, relax, and really feel what's here. There might be good reasons to have some caution. But, to have chronic anxiety, and then vague, imaginary ideas of what's going to happen and why, is not really supportive for the process of deepening in meditation. We have to be wise about that anxiety and caution – and not feel bad about having it. It's there for a reason, but we want to work with it and find another way of being.

When the Buddha offers these similes, he's seeding imaginary associations in the mind. They begin to create a different atmosphere for what we're doing and what meditation is about. Whether we bring up these imaginations actively, or we let them sit in the

background, both are supported by really knowing the similes, the imaginary scenarios.

This comes particularly into play with deepening our concentration in what's called *jhānas*, deepening states of absorption. Really settling in and being present in a clear, continuous way. It's almost like there's a state shift: "Oh, now I'm here. I'm present. It's clear, I'm here."

The Buddha doesn't give a lot of prose descriptions of these states. He describes them a little bit. But, to really give a feel for what he is talking about, the Buddha provides similes. Often he describes these states of concentration, and then follows up with a simile. You can feel your way into the similes, and live in the feeling or the sense of them.

Right now, let's imagine that we are the simile in some way. Then something begins to be an atmosphere, and a context starts to form. An association awakens something inside of us that's not the imagination, but rather, the felt sense of what the Buddha is pointing to.

Three of the similes for deep states of concentration with a lot of well-being use water as part of the simile. Often, in the symbolism of the Buddha, water represents the mind – perhaps the clarity of the mind, or the awareness itself of the mind. I think it may represent

awareness more than the mind. We're getting a sense of how to work with awareness, how to relate to awareness, or how to notice qualities or aspects of awareness as we settle into the practice.

There are four similes. I want to read them to you. Maybe you can let them sink in and imagine that you can feel them with your body or feel it inside.

The first simile is one that in the modern world we associate with making dough with flour. You sprinkle water onto flour and knead the water in until all the flour is moist. In the ancient world, the simile has to do with taking a certain kind of soap powder and making that into a ball:

Just as a skilled bath person or a bath person's apprentice heaps bath powder in a metal basin and, sprinkling it gradually with water, kneads it until the moisture wets one's ball of bath powder. Soaks it, and pervades it inside and out, yet the ball itself does not ooze. So too, a practitioner makes the joy and happiness born of seclusion drench, steep, fill, and pervade this very body, so there's no part of one's whole body unpervaded with the joy and happiness born of seclusion.

In my description, there's awareness here that comes along with joy and happiness. One is sitting in

meditation, and there are feelings of well-being. Then one gently kneads, massages, spreads, or expands it through the whole body. No part of the body is not moist with the goodness of joy and happiness.

This implies that there's an engagement with the process. Not just opening and allowing well-being to be there. But, gently and lovingly, each time we breathe maybe – opening, filling, and stretching. Letting it ooze or spread through the body. There's a little more active involvement. The mind is a little more involved in staying there. Stay present, be with it, work on the breathing – the in-breaths and out-breaths.

As the mind gets stiller and quieter, there's no more kneading. No more work is needed to stay present. No work is needed to spread anything or cultivate it. The next level of absorption is:

Just as though there were a lake whose waters welled up from below, and it has no inflow from east, west, north, or south, and would not be replenished from time to time by showers of rain.

There are no streams flowing in from any direction into the top of the lake. It's only the upwelling of a spring from below:

Then that cool fount of water flowing up in the lake would make the cool water suffuse, fill, completely fill, and pervade the lake, so there is no part of the

whole lake unpervaded by the cool water. In this way, one suffuses, fills, completely fills, and pervades this very body with the joy and happiness born of samādhi. No part of the body is unpervaded with joy and happiness born of samādhi.

The third absorption is:

Just as in a pond of blue, red, or white lotuses, some lotuses that are born and grow in the water thrive immersed in the water without rising out of it, and cool water suffuses, fills, completely fills, and pervades these lotuses to their tips and their roots, so that there is no part of all these lotuses unpervaded by cool water. So one experiences happiness in the same way, one experiences happiness with the body that the noble ones describe: One abides with happiness of one who is equanimous and mindful. One suffuses, fills, completely fills, and pervades this very body with happiness. No part of the body is unpervaded with happiness.

The joy, which is more active and energetic, has stopped, and now it's just happiness.

The final one is:

Just as though a person were sitting covered from the head down with white cloth, so that there's no

part of one's whole body not enclosed by the white cloth. So one suffuses, fills, completely fills, and pervades this very body with mental purity, mental clarity. No part of the body is unpervaded with mental clarity.

The idea of being surrounded by a white cloth so no part of the body is not touched by this white color is that there's no outside stimulus anymore. There's also no clearly defined body anymore. You can't quite see it, but it's there. It's covered. There's softness in it – the soft, clean cloth that touches it everywhere.

So we go from working the joy through the body – to feeling the joy as being a very peaceful, quiet lake – floating in the stillness of happy awareness with whatever we experience – to becoming so quiet and still that the body begins to recede. It's very peaceful, safe, quiet, and equanimous. It's characterized by a kind of mental purity, mental clarity, or cleanliness.

This is the closest we get to the Buddha really describing these states of concentration. I don't know if they mean something for you, or whether they evoke some imagination for you. But, if they evoke your imagination, then these are things to take in and internalize in a certain way.

Some people memorize these descriptions. Then they're in the background for the mind to perfume itself

or perfume one's meditation with the association. Associations which might be a lot better than some of the other ways in which your imagination is influencing your experience.

May your joy and happiness have the opportunity to spread, pervade, and soak your whole body. Don't get so distracted that you don't allow your well-being, happiness, and joy the chance to really be felt and experienced in this body you have.

Until tomorrow, thank you.