

# Similes for Meditation (2 of 5)

## Refreshing Lake Spring

November 1, 2022

### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

son, sea otter, settled, energy, unification, joy, happiness, well-being, independent

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This will be the second talk on the Buddha's use of similes for providing meditation instruction. I think that these beautiful similes the Buddha uses for his instructions might not seem like instructions at first. In fact, in my early years of reading the early Buddhist texts, I was somewhat dismissive of the similes and may have glossed over them. But now I linger with them. They seem to be quite enriching.

The human mind often works well with images, metaphors, and similes. Some people say that we understand ourselves and the world around us through the filter of similes and metaphors. Sometimes we can understand things in new ways through metaphor.

Someone might be repeatedly trying to fix themselves in an angry, aggressive way or trying to get rid of some trait that is causing suffering. Then they hear a metaphor that their approach is like picking at a scab (when we pick at a scab, it doesn't heal), so the metaphor might penetrate more deeply. Because it is evocative, suggestive, have some truth to it, that might penetrate much deeper into the psyche than simply saying: "Leave yourself alone. Stop trying to get rid of something that you don't like." So the metaphor somehow speaks to something.

When my son was very young, he didn't fall asleep easily, even though he had a high need for sleep. When I took him to bed, I would do guided meditations with him. But I wouldn't sit next to him and say, "Be aware of your in-breath, be aware of your out-breath." I would paint a picture of an animal in the natural world that was sleeping. A common one was a sea otter resting on the surface of the ocean with kelp all around and underneath that kept the sea otter quite safe. The sea otter would lay on its back and gently feel the rising and falling of the ocean swells. I would say: "The swells are very peaceful, gentle, and quiet. Put your hand on your chest, and as you feel your breathing, feel the rising and falling of the swell. The sea otter is resting safely and falling asleep." With that, he would stay with his breath, feel the movement of his breathing, and fall gently asleep.

I had a repertoire of animals that I would use. One was a gorilla or a monkey with a newborn baby that would rest on its chest. The baby would feel the rising and falling of the parent's chest as the parent was breathing. The baby would feel that movement. I would have my son put his hand on his chest and feel his movement. This worked very well for quite a while and helped him fall asleep.

Painting an image, a story, allows for the mind's imagination and an emotional connection – to the baby monkey with its parent, the safety of being surrounded by kelp. It touches different aspects of who we are that allow something deeper to connect to the movements of breathing in meditation. The Buddha's similes tap into our imagination to create a picture that reaches out and touches different parts of our emotional being and our concepts and ideas. They help us visualize in a way that supports what we're doing.

I didn't know our imagination could be part of meditation because both the Zen and vipassana practices that I did in Asia were clearly opposed to doing anything like that. In Zen, it was about sitting here present with the truth, not doing anything, not trying to make anything happen, just a direct penetration of the truth of emptiness or something. With vipassana practice, it was just directly

seeing things as they are, without the overlay of concepts, stories, images, and similes.

There was something very profound about the way I was taught Zen and vipassana. But it was also a kind of advanced practice. It was assumed that people were already able to settle quite well. And in fact, when I started Zen, I wasn't. When I started vipassana, I wasn't. So it took a while to find myself settled enough to do the instructions that they were teaching.

But when the Buddha gave his meditation instruction, he made a very simple, technical explanation of what to do or what goes on. But then he provided similes that filled in the picture, which gave a richer sense of what was going to happen within. It's almost like similes and metaphors evoke, touch, explain, and describe what can go on inside better than just a simple statement.

If someone says to me, "I'm feeling pretty sad today," I would care for the person and wonder what's going on. I've heard sad songs that have made me cry. There was one children's song by Raffi. I would hear the song and get kind of teary. It was such a sad song. So there are things that touch us and evoke something in us.

The simile I want to describe today is for the beginning stages of really getting quiet and settled. All the noises of the mind, the busyness of the mind, is no longer

there, and we're beginning to settle into the present moment. But there's still a kind of dynamism; an energy of life is flowing through us in a very nice way. The simile is that of a deep mountain lake. There are no rivers that flow into the lake. The lake is not being replenished by rivers flowing into it. And no rain falls on the lake so the lake is not being replenished from above. Instead, this particular lake is being replenished by an underwater spring at the center of the lake basin. Water flows out of the spring into the lake, fanning out in all directions through the lake.

This water is explained as being cool and fresh. In a hot climate like India, cool and fresh water was very comforting and wonderful for people. It had very positive connotations. So this cool, refreshing water of the underwater spring flows into the lake and spreads throughout so no part of the lake is not touched by the cool current of water. In the same way, as a person gets settled and starts getting quiet and able to listen more deeply to what's going on – partly because they're starting to get focused on the breathing – and the distracted, discursive mind starts getting quieter, there starts to be a unification, a gathering together, a harmonizing, of the energies, the sensations, what goes on inside of us. And something is touched, you could say something almost emotional. Something gets freed up. There's a flow of energy, a delightful sense of well-being that can flow through the body in the same way

that the water from the spring flows through the lake. This delightful current flows through the body so that no part of the body is not touched by it.

Sometimes this current is called a kind of joy and happiness. There are all kinds of intensities of it. It can be a sense of well-being, a sense of unification, that might be comparable to a craftsperson happily absorbed in the work they do. Or someone reading a book, playing music, doing some activity in which they are fully completely involved in it. We are not fragmented – all the energy is gathered there in a peaceful way to be involved in the activity. Some delightful, happy sense of concentration, absorption, has this welling-up feeling that spreads throughout the body.

So this simile gives us a sense that as we can get concentrated, as we get settled and present here with a quiet mind, something deeper wells up that feels quite healthy, delightful, and wonderful. And we can trust that; it is supportive. The simile gives a sense, a feeling, that there's a current, a flow, that arises out of some source within us.

The important part of the simile is that the sensations of delight and well-being that are going on arise from the inside out. They arise from within the body. They are not dependent on any rivers coming from outside – not

dependent on any of the sense stores being stimulated by sounds, smells, touch, sights. They are not dependent on anything in the world.

In the simile, no rain falls into the lake. The rain represents our thoughts, the stories we make, our concepts. None of that is influencing us. We are not being impacted by the world or the world of our thoughts. The source of this well-being is not dependent on anything in the world. That is a phenomenal pointing. The simile pointing to that possibility can give us a lot of inspiration: “Oh, I don’t have to fix the world. I don’t have to line up the world to be just the right way.”

There is a place of quietude and peacefulness where happiness can arise from the inside out. It can feel like it has no cause or reason, although the cause kind of is being settled, focused, and present in a more continuous way. It is the cause, but it is not a worldly cause. To begin having a sense that we carry within us this possibility can free us from the idea that our happiness is dependent on what goes on in the world: “I have to fix the world and get everyone to behave properly, then I’ll be happy.”

Rather, there is a beautiful, deep mountain lake inside of you in which there is a spring of refreshing energy coming up and it can flow throughout your whole body. The treasure is in you, not outside.

I feel a little apologetic that the guided meditations this week are a little long with a lot of words, but hopefully, they convey what I'm teaching with the similes. We'll continue again tomorrow. Thank you