

Similes for Meditation (5 of 5) Lake Clearly Seen

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I offer my fifth and final reflections on the Buddha's similes for meditation. The previous similes all came from the Buddha's discussion of the Four Absorptions. Today's talk will be on his analogy or simile for awakening, which often follows the absorptions. It is a remarkable simile because of its ordinariness.

The Four Absorptions are very satisfying states of deep meditation, so people can have a variety of attachments to them. They can be attached to wanting to have these states of meditation when they don't and can be upset

about not having them. If they have had one once, they can want to have one of these states again, sometimes in a desperate way. Sometimes the states are a little frightening because they are so different from ordinary life. People may pull back, wondering, “What was that?”

Sometimes these states lend themselves to feelings of great bliss, rapture, wonder, amazement, and delight that can be very healing. There are many benefits from concentration practice. But they are extraordinary states of mind, at least from the point of view of everyday life. In the middle of some states of concentration, if they are not too intense, it can feel as if *this* is the natural mind, this is the natural state, and the altered state of consciousness is the everyday mind of anger, desire, confusion – everything that causes agitation in the mind. When the mind is settled, quiet, and peaceful, it can feel as if this is natural. In any case, some of these states of concentration are rather extraordinary in some ways.

The simile for awakening returns to something ordinary. Along with all the ways that Buddhist practice emphasizes not-self, the similes for absorption involve a kind of disappearing of the person in deeper states of concentration, until the body disappears, and the person is not quite there. This does not discount you as a person – it is simply that the mind has gotten so quiet and peaceful.

In the simile for awakening, the person has come back. The person is standing. In my mind, there is a clarity in that standing in a place, here. There's a definitive location. The person is standing upright. The person is looking into a very clear lake, and, because it is so clear, they can see right down to the lake floor. The person sees different kinds of shells in the water. One kind of shell is translated in the text as "oyster shells." They also see gravel and pebbles in the water. They see schools of fish, either swimming around together or hovering still in the water. These are seen clearly. That is the simile.

I think nothing extraordinary or symbolic is meant to be represented by the objects in the water, because the emphasis here is on the clarity of seeing: one sees something so clearly and so obviously that it simply seems ordinary. The mind is not for or against; it is not excited by what it sees; it is not making a self out of it, and not congratulating itself. The things are objects of nature – gravel and pebbles – and we don't make much of them. We don't make much of the shells unless we want to eat them. I imagine the schools of fish are very small fish, so it is not as if we would want to fish for them. They are way too small to eat.

So the simile of this natural scene in the water reflects the ordinariness of awakening. Maybe there is something extraordinary about the freedom and the

release from attachments of awakening. But there is also something amazingly, extraordinarily, ordinary. We are seeing nature. We are seeing what is natural. We are seeing what is here as part of nature, in its naturalness. This is part of the release. We are releasing all the ways we want the extraordinary, all the ways we attribute meaning, purpose, self, and philosophies – layers and layers of building cathedrals of ideas, stories, self, and meaning around experience. All these get released and freed.

What are we left with? We are left with simplicity. Very simple: just standing, seeing clearly, as if everything is in the naturalness of everything.

I will read the simile, now that you have that background. This is Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation. It is in the 39th discourse in the *Middle Length Discourses*. It is also in the second discourse in the *Long Discourses*. It goes like this:

Just as if there were a lake in a mountain recess, clear, limpid, and undisturbed, so that a person with good sight standing on the bank could see shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also shoals of fish swimming and resting, the person might think: "There is this fish swimming about and resting. There is this lake, clear, limpid, and undisturbed. There are these shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also these shoals of fish swimming about and

resting.”

There are different choices for exactly how we are supposed to interpret this simile for awakening. Certainly, there is more to be said about this. But I would like to end this week by emphasizing the ordinariness of it – the ordinariness of you standing still, quiet, and peaceful, and seeing. Seeing the ordinariness of life. Seeing the simple things around you, without the mind wanting, needing, avoiding, building, fantasizing, and making up a self in relationship to it.

In this simile, the person does not disappear. Sometimes this idea is extra – that I am not supposed to be here, I am supposed to be empty, I am supposed to somehow vanish and have no self here, I am supposed to have a non-dualistic relationship with the world, where I disappear and it's just the world, or everything disappears.

I interpret the simile as saying: you are allowed to just stand and be here. For many people, if they are alone in the mountains in a safe, wonderful, cozy place and looking at the water, the self and the usual social concerns of life in urban centers can kind of disappear. You are just here, not needing an identity, not needing to prove yourself, defend yourself, assert yourself – not needing to be anything for anybody. You are just

standing here looking into this calm, peaceful lake and seeing the most ordinary things in it: gravel, shells, and small fish swimming around.

What would it take for you to have enough trust that it is okay to be this way? To stand tall and confident in a certain way – the kind of confidence that looks confident from the outside, but inside, you are neither confident nor not confident. To just be, willing to be as you are, and able to gaze upon everything – the world, yourself – content to know what is obvious. Not searching for meaning, not searching for what's behind it, the cause and the history, fault and blame.

There might be a time and a place for those things. But what is it like to just stand and gaze upon things as if everything is just natural? Everything is obvious. Everything is seen clearly, as it is, in the present moment. Whatever it might be, you see it as nature, with no greater or lesser value than gravel in a lake bed or little fish swimming around. A marvel of nature, but not something to appropriate, to be greedy about, or to hate. Not something supernaturally phenomenal and fantastic about which you can write postcards home and say: “Wow! I had this amazing experience. It was so far-out!” Not to diminish the value of far-out experiences, but instead, just the ordinariness of being here, with clarity.

Part of the value of similes is they can be interpreted in different ways. Sometimes, like with poetry, maybe you don't always have to understand the author's intent behind similes. But rather, by exploring them, interpreting them, and seeing them on different days, in different months or years, they might point to something, speak to something, or clarify something new. We might see the world and ourselves in new ways. Similes have a wonderful power to reach deep inside us to understand in new ways and expand our senses.

Because all of these similes have to do with meditation – the path of the Dharma – there is a place for trying to understand what they mean dharmically as part of this path. How do they work together? How do they unfold together for the purpose of freedom? Freedom that, in the end, allows us to be ordinary. A glorious ordinariness where we are free from all the burdens that we carry. Thank you very much.