

Similes for Meditation (1 of 5) Kneading Flour

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The theme for this week will be the Buddha's use of similes for teaching meditation. It's possible to give very simple, basic, technical instructions on meditation, but that leaves a lot to be filled in by the meditator. The Buddha gives very simple instructions for breathing meditation. Some people gloss over them because they seem too simple or beside the point.

The most basic instructions that the Buddha gave many different times is that when one is having a long inhale, one knows one is having a long inhale. When one is having a long exhale, one knows one is having a long exhale. When one is having a short inhale, one knows it is a short inhale. When one is having a short exhale, one knows this. So these instructions do not seem very inspiring or evocative. They don't really indicate the

richness and the possibility of meditating in this way. In fact, for some people, the instructions may seem discouraging, uninteresting, or uninspiring. They don't quite come alive.

But these simple instructions stand in or represent, in a sense, a whole universe of what can happen in meditation. It's like a pointer or the title of a chapter that gives a sense of what the subject is about. It doesn't fill in the details, which is what reading the chapter will do.

Meditation is, in a sense, something organic. The practice of meditation is something holistic that with time can include all of who we are. It's not a simple, disembodied experience. Meditation is not only about becoming calm and centered. It's about gathering together all of who we are, and having all of who we are somehow held in a field of attention, of awareness. So it's multifaceted. In a sense, it's all of who we are, not just a simple kind of mechanistic attention to how long and short the breathing is.

When the Buddha gave instructions on meditation, he sometimes would include similes. The similes are actually part of the instructions. They give more life to the instructions. They provide examples and illustrations for how to do the practice or a sense or feeling of what can happen as we do it. They provide a somatic or

kinesthetic feeling or sense of what's going on or what can happen when we do the instructions.

This week, I'd like to talk about the similes for meditation that the Buddha gives, and in particular, I want to focus on breathing. I talked quite a bit in the guided meditation. For those of you who are experienced meditators and prefer silence, I can sympathize with you. Perhaps, for this week, you might meditate a second time each day in silence. What I'm trying to do with the teachings here is to let some part of the meditation come more alive for you, so that when you do meditate silently by yourself later, it will be with you, supporting and guiding you. So if I speak a lot in the guided meditation, think of those instructions as laying the foundation for what you'll do later in the day on your own, to get the full benefit of what we're talking about.

It's fascinating all the ways that the Buddha uses water in his similes, especially similes for meditation. Sometimes I think water represents awareness. It's what happens to awareness as we meditate that shifts and changes. Sometimes he uses water to represent not awareness but related things in meditation. And how that works together is part of the richness that we kind of live in to.

The simile for breathing in and breathing out, and being aware of long and short, is that of kneading flour. Mixing water into flour and kneading and massaging it until the water is evenly spread throughout the flour, and then making a ball in which all the flour is held together into one whole. I think this is a marvelous metaphor for the rhythm and massage of breathing, coming and going, coming and going. If that rhythm of breathing is the kneading and the awareness is the moisture, then we're moving and developing the moisture of awareness so it spreads throughout the body and the body gets gathered together.

Part of meditation in the Buddha's teaching is a process of unification, of gathering together, bringing all of who we are in the same place at the same time so there's a holistic feeling of being here, connected, in our lived experience. So, there is this massaging that goes on.

The Buddha gives this simile not of flour but of a certain kind of soap powder that they had in the ancient world. They would put soap powder in a metal bowl, sprinkle water into it, and then start kneading and massaging that until all the soap powder is saturated with water, forming a ball. The whole ball is saturated. All these wonderful synonyms are used – the moisture pervades, saturates, suffuses, fills the ball of soap powder. So the water suffuses, pervades, fills the flour as the bread dough is being made.

The repetition of these words is delightful. In the ancient world, they weren't reading the text. They were chanting it, and so to chant this over and over again – suffuse, pervade, saturate, fill. It must have provided kind of an embodied reference point, like when you chant it, you feel that *this* is what we're doing.

So the Buddha says that this ball of soap powder, the whole thing, is suffused in the same way that the whole body is suffused, with no part of the body not touched. It's clear that there is really an openness to the whole body. And why this kneading of the powder is a good metaphor is that it represents the rhythm of breathing, breathing in and breathing out.

So here, we take this as part of the instructions. It is not just being aware of the long and the short, but it's taking whatever length the breathing is and entering into it as if it's a massage. It's as if we're supposed to get into the rhythm of it, ride the rhythm, and let the awareness gently – not forcefully, not with expectations – softly open a wider and wider field of awareness in the body.

We might start with awareness at a particular point. Some people are aware of the breathing in the nostrils, in the middle of the chest, or in the belly, and really stay with that, be with that. As we're doing it, the sense of awareness, that opening to the body, begins to spread

and spread and spread. And then we're saturating the body with awareness.

Technically, when the Buddha gives his instructions, there is a certain kind of satisfaction, delight, and joy that comes when we can give our attention over to the meditation, rather than giving our attention to distractions and preoccupations. This ability to appreciate and value attention, which is not compromised by being pulled into the strong preoccupations we might have, is also spreading that delight and joy with the awareness, or feeling that satisfaction of awareness freed from distractions, even if it's for just one exhale. Feeling the goodness, joy, and satisfaction of uncompromised awareness for a few moments – that satisfaction is what we are spreading with the awareness through the body. There's a lightness, joy, and pleasure of some kind that goes along with the breathing. It may be a subtle pleasure, but it's a pleasure of attention that is not compromised or held hostage.

Another metaphor for water that the Buddha uses has a very different reference for moisture. People in the ancient world didn't have matches or lighters, like we do, to make fire. They would rub two fire sticks together. Rub them together long enough, they would get hot and a spark would get created. But if one fire stick is saturated with water or is moist, the fire will not light. So

here, the soggy stick, the soggy log, is like a mind saturated with preoccupations, the hindrances, sensual desires, ill will, rigidity, stuck-ness, restlessness, and all kinds of things that grab the awareness. And when we're saturated with that, the fire won't light up. But as we empty ourselves, as attention is not caught in those things, then awareness is kind of drier and can light up.

In the ancient world, I think a fire, even a small one like a candle, was much more associated with making light than it is for us because we have lots of light (electricity). But in the ancient world, fire in one form or another – an oil lamp, a candle, a fire – was how things were lit up. So to light up with awareness that is not compromised by distractions. To light up the body – not necessarily put it on fire, but to light it up – and spread the awareness through the body.

These are the similes that the Buddha uses. I think for many years, I ignored the similes because I thought they were just kind of cute or something. But they are actually part of the instructions. They fill in the details in a certain kind of way. With the similes, our imagination is employed for the purposes of meditation.

So, perhaps, for this next day, you could try meditating and engage your imagination with these similes. See if having those similes present in your imagination can give you a richer, deeper sense of connection and

involvement in your meditation, maybe even absorbed in your meditation, as you free your awareness from preoccupations, where you get all soggy and nothing lights up, to this lighting up of attention that moves and fills the body.

As we go through the week, I'll talk more about the different similes that the Buddha gives for meditation. I'm hoping this will give you a richer sense of what's possible in your meditation. Thank you