

Terror & Revulsion

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When you meditate you want to understand both the *how* and the *why*. How you meditate. Why you meditate.

If you focus only on the *how*, it becomes mechanical, simply a matter of technique: something you do while you sit here with your eyes closed and then you drop it to go off and do something else.

But the *why* helps the practice to seep into the rest of your life, to give you new perspective on what you're doing with your life.

Because that's always the emphasis in the Buddha's teaching is: the doing. Why we do things, and whether we're really getting the results we want from the things we do.

But first the how.

Close your eyes. Sit up straight. And focus on your breath. Know when the breath comes in, know when it goes out. All the way in, all the way out.

Try to stay with the sensation of breathing wherever you find it clearest to follow. For some people, it's the sensation of breathing in the nose. For others, it's the movement of the chest, the movement of the abdomen—any place in the body where you can sense: Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.

And wherever you focus, allow the sensation to be comfortable so that it feels good breathing in, feels good breathing out. If it feels good, it's a lot easier to stay with the breath.

This may require adjusting the rhythm and the texture of the breathing: deep breathing or shallow breathing; heavy or light; fast or slow. You can change the speed and the texture of the breath in the course of even one breath, especially when you're doing long breathing. Be careful that it doesn't get too strained.

Then, once you've been able to get the breath comfortable, think of that sense of ease flowing through all the nerves of the body. Because the sensation of having a body here is a type of breath energy. If we didn't have the breath energy in the body, we wouldn't know we had a body here. We wouldn't feel it, we wouldn't sense it. So try to think of all these sensations as being connected.

That also helps not only to make the breath really comfortable deep down inside but also to keep you awake. If the range of your focus is too narrow, it's very easy, once the breath gets comfortable, to fall asleep or to start just drifting off—or in and out of focus. So make sure that once there's a sense of ease, you allow it to spread like melted butter spreading over toast, seeping down into the holes in the bread, saturating the bread.

And then once you've got a sense of ease filling the body like this, try to maintain it. And make your awareness fill the body, too. And here you have to be careful, because there will be a tendency for your awareness to shrink. So try to keep aware of the whole body breathing in, whole body breathing out.

That, in a nutshell is the how, how you do the meditation.

The why takes more explaining.

But in brief, the why comes from our reflection on our own lives: realizing that we do things and say things and think things primarily because we want happiness—that's the underlying motive all the time—and yet to what extent do we really find happiness, do we actually create happiness? Often the things we do create pain instead, both for ourselves and for the people around us. And we can set our sights on goals and spend our whole lives working toward things that will not bring happiness at all.

So the purpose of the meditation is to deal with that issue, to put the mind in a position where it can really reflect on what true happiness is and also what the actual results of our actions are, what do we need to change, so that our actions will lead to the happiness we want..Because it is within our power, one, to change, and two, to find true happiness.

This is why we meditate: to be more sensitive to our own actions, and particularly the actions of the mind.

Now, the how and the why are not radically separate.

I recently went back and re-read some of Ajaan Lee's instructions on basic introductory meditation. And I was struck by how often he refers to the word *samvega* as a way of inducing concentration. You get the mind to reflect on things in such a way, he says, that you induce this feeling of *samvega*.

Now, *samvega's* a hard term to translate. In Pali, it's related to a word that means "terror." What it comes down to is when you start reflecting on your life and the things you've been attached to, the things that you've been thirsting after and looking for: You come to see how pointless they all are. All that energy, all that effort focused on things that are not going to help you to find true happiness at all, and in many ways set you up for major disappointments.

That's what the terror's all about: You see how complacent you've been, focusing on things that are of no substance, no real worth, and then doing things that actually put you in harm's way, set you up for a fall, a major fall.

You've probably read of cases where people have worked very hard for something and looked back at their lives and realized that the whole time was wasted. That's scary. That's the element that puts the edge on *samvega*. There is an element of terror. There's that possibility that you could spend your whole life struggling for something very hard and then it doesn't provide you with any help at all.

We see people in old folks' homes. Say, professors who've worked very hard

at trying to understand a subject and then they get Parkinson's and they forget it totally. They get to the point where they can't even recognize their family.

Or people who've worked very hard at being fit all of their lives and all of a sudden the body turns on them. We've seen people die and all the things they've done in their lives don't seem to help them at all at that moment. That's scary. Because you could be in those positions as well.

When you reflect on this, it helps sharpen your focus on the meditation.

It's a common pattern throughout the Buddhist tradition that the feeling of *samvega* is paired with *pasada*. *Pasada* means a sense of confidence, confidence that there's a way out and that this is it.

The more you realize how other things are closing in on you, and that this is the one way out: This sharpens your focus, gives you more energy to practice, to try to understand how it is that the mind can spend so much time working, working, working for happiness and yet acting in ways that actually cause suffering or leave you unprotected when aging, illness, and death come.

So it's good to reflect on these things, to remind yourself why you're here. And it helps put more energy into learning how to develop the skills that will protect you from those dangers: mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment, all founded on a sense of *pasada* or *saddha*, which means conviction, conviction that your actions can make a difference and that there is a way out.

This way, *samvega's* paired with heedfulness. You realize that your actions are important and so you have to be very careful about what you do. Because it is very easy to slip off the path and lead a life of quiet desperation that ends up in major disappointment. So you've got to be careful.

The other emotion that's good to reflect on is *nibbida*, which is translated as disenchantment or even revulsion. This comes more toward the end of the practice. After you've gained powers of concentration, you can really look at where you've been trying to find happiness in the past, and you develop a sense that you wouldn't want to act in those ways ever again.

This is where the Buddha's image of feeding comes in. There's a passage in the Canon where he's teaching a young novice through a list of questions. The questions are, "What is One? What is Two? What is Three? What is Four?" on up through, "What is Ten?" And Two, Three and Four up to Ten deal with well-known teachings of doctrine: Two is name and form. Three is the three kinds of feelings. Four is the four noble truths, and so on.

"One" is interesting. The question is, "What is One?" And the answer is, "All beings subsist on food." This is how the Buddha introduces causality. In other words, causality, interconnectedness, is not always a pretty thing. It's essentially feeding. And if you're feeding on something inconstant and undependable, your life is inconstant and undependable, too.

This image of feeding also goes to a deeper level when the Buddha talks about clinging, because the word for clinging—*upadana*—also means the act of taking sustenance from something. And here again, the Buddha has you reflect on where you try to find happiness and realize that you've been feeding on things that really don't provide any solid nourishment.

That's when the feeling of revulsion comes in, or the feeling of disenchantment: You've had enough of that kind of food, and don't want to feed on it anymore.

Now the Buddha has you develop this feeling as the mind has developed concentration. Through the practice, you've been learning these strengths of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, these strengths that nourish the mind. As you practice, you want to feed on these things. But ultimately they put the mind in a position where it's so strong that it doesn't need to feed anymore. That's where it's skillful to develop *nibbida*.

The sense of disenchantment or revulsion then lead to dispassion. From dispassion, there's release. You let go of the things you've been clinging to. And in the image of fire as it's used in the Pali Canon, once there's letting go, there's release: In other words, the reason you're stuck on things is not that they're hanging onto you. You're hanging onto them. The same way that the fire, they say, clings to its fuel and it goes out when it lets go. It's unbound because it lets go.

The same image applies to the mind. We cling to form, feeling, perceptions, thought-constructs, and consciousness because we think we'll get some nourishment out of them. For the most part, though, they're like junk food—they give pleasure, but no real nourishment, and can actually be harmful. But once we've turned them into the health food of the path, and they've strengthened us as much as they can, we realize that we don't need to feed on them anymore. If we let go through the strength of the practice, we don't have to feed on anything at all. When we let go, we're freed. We're unbound.

So this is why we practice. We see that we've been looking for happiness in the wrong places, making the mind dependent on things that can't really provide it any shelter or refuge. Realizing this, we learn to develop the qualities of mind. We have confidence that these qualities of mind will grow and develop and provide the mind with a path out to true freedom, a freedom that's unconditioned. So unconditioned we don't have to feed on any conditions at all.

So we move from a state of heedless feeding to a state where we become more heedful, to a position where we don't have to feed at all.

That's how the how and the why come together.

So it's useful to reflect on these things. A lot of the meditation deals with the how, the techniques of how you deal with this problem, how you deal with

that problem. But it's always good to keep the larger picture in perspective by remembering the why.