

Dharma Talk- March 4, 2009, Hugh McMillan

Last night our speaker was Hugh McMillan. Hugh was brought to the dhamma, as so many are, by mountains of self-inflicted suffering. He has been sitting since 1984, including numerous short retreats with Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Amaro followed by longer retreats at IMS with Joseph Goldstein and others. He has been involved in developing the Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery in Redwood Valley under co-abbots Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro since 1994. Hugh also teaches meditation to prisoners at Soledad prison.

We had a few people new to insight meditation last night, so Hugh began with some discussion and instruction.

Insight meditation, or Vipassana, is one of the central teachings of the Buddha. It has continued as a living practice for 2500 years. At the heart of insight meditation is the practice of mindfulness, the cultivation of clear, stable and non-judgmental awareness. While mindfulness practice can be highly effective in helping bring calm and clarity to the pressures of daily life, it is also a spiritual path that gradually dissolves the barriers to the full development of our wisdom and compassion.

Insight meditation is nothing more mysterious than developing our ability to pay attention to our immediate experience. We are often pre-occupied with thoughts about the past or the future or with fantasies. While sometimes such pre-occupations may be innocent and harmless, more often they contribute to stress, fear and suffering. Mindfulness practice is learning how to overcome pre-occupation so that we can see clearly what is happening in our lived experience of the present. In doing so, we find greater clarity, trust, and integrity. Mindfulness relies on an important characteristic of awareness: awareness by itself does not judge, resist, or cling to anything. By focusing on simply being aware, we learn to disentangle ourselves from our habitual reactions and begin to have a friendlier and more compassionate relationship with our experience, with ourselves and with others.

Mindfulness is the practice of being attentively present. It is called a practice in the same way that we say that people practice the piano. Being attentive is a skill that grows with practice. It develops best if we set aside any self-conscious judgments or expectations of how our meditation is developing. The practice is simply to relax and bring forth an awareness of what is happening in the present.

In order both to develop the skill and experience the joys of non-reactive presence, a daily meditation practice is helpful.

Insight Meditation usually begins with awareness of breathing. This is an awareness practice, not an exercise in breathing; there is no need to adjust the breathing in any way. We simply attend to the breath, getting to know it as it is: shallow or deep, long or short, slow or fast, smooth or rough, coarse or refined, constricted or loose. When we get distracted by thoughts or emotions, we simply return to the physical sensations of the breath.

Because of the mind's tendency to be scattered and easily distracted, we use the breath as a kind of anchor to the present. When we rest in the breath, we are countering the strong forces of distraction. We train the mind, heart, and body to become settled and unified on one thing, at one place, at one time. If you are sitting in meditation and your mind is on what you did at work today, then your mind and body are not in the same place at the same time. Fragmented this way, we all too easily lose touch with a holistic sense of ourselves.

Mindfulness of breathing is a powerful ally in our lives. With steady awareness of our inhalations and exhalations, the breath can become an equanimous constant through the ups and downs of our daily life. Resting with, even enjoying, the cycles of breathing, we are less likely to be caught up in the emotional and mental

events that pass through us. Repeatedly returning to the breath can be a highly effective training in letting go of the identification and holding which freeze the mind and heart. It also develops concentration.

-Gil Fronsdal, Insight Meditation Center (<http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/>) in Redwood City. Gil has just finished teaching a six week course on insight meditation, which is available here: <http://www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html>

There is great value in learning to be in the now. When we are thinking in the future, or in the past, we typically are wrapped up in emotion. Worrying about what might happen (I might lose my job and end up homeless) or having expectations about the future (I know I'm going to win the Lottery) is thinking in the future. Certain types of thinking in the future are appropriate - planning, making decisions, etc. There is nothing wrong with rational thought -- it is a powerful tool. However, wasting energy worrying about things that might happen is not very productive. Similarly with thinking about the past, our thoughts often involve resentments and anger about things that have already happened. Perhaps we recall a personal triumph or point of pride. We cannot change the past -- it is done. When we are not in the now, we have a tendency to be spinning tapes, or telling ourselves stories about what happened or might happen. Reflecting on past memories, we are often mistaken - we have altered the details so it makes a better story to tell ourselves. We embellish the truth, even to ourselves. There is saying about this: "Don't believe everything you think."

Getting to the "now" is a way of turning off the tapes and stories that run through our thoughts. We teach the mind to "shut up and listen." This is one of the benefits of insight meditation. We learn to listen to what is happening, feel what our body is telling us, without having the mind interpret and comment endlessly.

Grandchildren are a joy to behold. When we are parents, we are too busy taking care of everything to really notice what's going on. As grandparents, we are a step removed, and get a chance to truly observe. Children are amazing. Their eyes, ears, and senses are wide open, and they absorb everything around them. They are taking in the world. This is a very important stage in development. Socialization and survival would not happen if children were not learning machines. They are being programmed, and given a quick start in life.

However, at some point, all these external lessons need to be replaced with internal direction. Instead of being told what you should want, you have to decide for yourself what you want to do. As children, we get filled up with scripts from those around us. The expectations of parents are a powerful influence on us -- but as adults, we need to make our own determinations. A young woman who is constantly told by her father (or other influences) that she is too fat, may end up with an eating disorder. We have to shift away from the scripts we were filled up with as children, and determine who we are and what we want.

Mindfulness is letting go of the old scripts. Scripts cause suffering, and often have little truth in them.

Suffering is inevitable in life. We grow old, we get sick, we are injured, we die. These are inescapable. Everything passes. If you have an ice cream cone, you can enjoy it now, but eventually, it will be gone. There is a type of suffering we bring upon ourselves, and that suffering is usually caused by the scripts we run in our head. We can make our suffering worse. As Gil Fronsdal says:

...we can distinguish between inevitable suffering and optional suffering. Optional suffering is created when we react to our experience-for example, through anger at the inevitable suffering of pain, or by clinging to joy. When we suffer from physical pain or illness, we can become self-judgmental: "What did I do wrong to have this thing happen to me?" We attack ourselves, or we blame others. Or we become angry, sad, or depressed about the suffering in the world. Optional suffering is added when we react with aversion or clinging, justification or condemnation. These reactions add complications and suffering to our lives. It is pos-

sible to experience the inevitable pain of life in a straightforward, uncomplicated way. If pain is inevitable, life is a lot easier if we don't resist it.

We eliminate optional suffering in our lives, and learn to accept inevitable suffering. The Buddha said: "Suffering exists." This is the First Noble Truth. We cannot avoid suffering. But we can eliminate the suffering we cause ourselves. It is our emotional reaction to situations that cause us the most suffering: anger, resentment, depression, disappointment. These emotions are brought on by wanting things we do not have, by being attached to things which, inevitably, will go away: "This too shall pass." We cling to our opinions, our self-importance, our pride, our pleasures, and our desires. The thing to remember is that the things that happen to us are almost never meant personally - they are just things that happen. The universe is not out to get you.

The Second Noble Truth is "The cause of suffering is craving." If we let go, and accept life as it happens, our optional suffering, the suffering we cause ourselves, goes away.

The Third Noble Truth is that "It is possible to end suffering." Although you can't control other people or situations, you can learn to control your own suffering through skilled practice.

The Fourth Noble Truth is that there is a method to end suffering, known as The Eightfold Path. In practicing ethics, following inner practices, and learning insight, we can become spiritually mature and skilled at dealing with life on its own terms

With metta,

Dave

<http://www.coastsidevipassana.org>