

Robert Cusick Coastside Vipassana 06-23-2010



The Dharma talk on June 23rd was by Robert Cusick. Robert has been practicing Buddhist meditation since 1997. He is a student of Gil Fronsdal and was trained as a Buddhist monk at Pa Auk Forest Monastery in Burma. He also trained in the Soto Zen tradition at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in 2001. He has worked with Hameed Ali in the Diamond Approach (Diamond Heart Six) and is a certified Kripalu Yoga teacher. Robert participated in the 2nd Buddhist Chaplaincy training offered through the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies and completed the first Dedicated Practitioners Program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in 2003. He subsequently served there in the role of Retreats Program Manager.

Reflections on Practice

Robert noted that those from the West approach Buddhism differently than those born into a Buddhist culture. Westerners tend to want to jump right into meditation. There's a belief in the West that meditation is the whole of the practice. In Asia, the belief is that practicing ethics is the major focus. In fact, these two approaches interact.

In the West, we tend to think that meditating is the way to achieve serenity and to still the mind. However, we are more likely to achieve serenity by wholesome acts that create integrity of self. When we are out of integrity with ourselves, meditation practices do not work. If we are disturbed, we cannot be mindful.

Meditation, however, does enable us to become aware of the issues. If we have resentments, meditation can turn our attention to the feelings of resentment and allow us to see it as it is. If, however, we plow through our anger, and just focus on counting our breath, it will be hard for us to be present in the moment. Meditation can reveal to us the things we need to let go of, the things we need to renounce. If we see that we need to renounce anger, we are on a more wholesome path. It is wholesome behavior that leads us to happiness, not meditation. If our behavior is unwholesome, the resulting disturbance will prevent meditation from being effective.

Practicing the Five Precepts will lead us to be more virtuous and wholesome. (Monks have 227 Precepts, including the Five, which are the basis for ethical behavior.) If we take any one of the Five Precepts to heart, we will make spiritual progress, which leads to wholesome behavior and happiness.

The Precepts are not Commandments – they are training guides, and a program of practice.

The Five Precepts are:

- 1) I undertake the training to refrain from injuring or killing any living thing (*panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*);
- 2) I undertake the training to refrain from theft or taking that which is not given (*adinnadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*);
- 3) I undertake the training to refrain from immoral sexual conduct (*kamesu michchhachara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*); (Immoral sexual conduct is sexual conduct that harms.)
- 4) I undertake the training to refrain from false speech or lying (*musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*); and
- 5) I undertake the training to refrain from intoxication (*sura-meraya-majja-pamada-tthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*). (Intoxication from alcohol or drugs leads to heedlessness and violation of other precepts)

One approach is to concentrate on a precept for a month. This makes us more aware of wholesome behavior in one of the five areas. Each area leads to virtuous behavior, which increases happiness. As we start taking these to heart, our spirits lift and our hearts open. This condition makes meditation more effective, since we are not dragged down by unwholesome feelings.

Some situations can make us hyperaware of a precept. For example, Robert noted that after a month long silent retreat, he became very conscious of right versus incorrect speech. Incorrect speech includes idle chit-chat and gossip in addition to lying. After a month of silence, it was very obvious when anything but Right Speech was used.

An abbot told the story of one of his students, who was a single mom. She was putting together a complex Real Estate deal, and the buyer offered her a direct payment of \$250,000 as part of the deal. The conditions were such that no one would know about the money, and she could have kept it for herself. This money could have made a huge difference in her life and that of her young son. However, she decided to turn the money over to the company she worked for. At first, when her son heard about this, he was upset, because he could have used the money for a better computer and other things he wanted. In the end, he recognized that this decision allowed his mom to keep her personal integrity and showed that she was a person who could be trusted.

Lack of ethics leads to a feeling of profound loss. We can be our own worst enemies, and unethical behavior creates a barrier to happiness. This feeling prevents meditation from being effective – we can only find joy and happiness when our life is clear. Following the precepts opens the heart and makes meditation more effective and useful.

*The practices of sila or moral conduct diminish the strength of our defilements such as anger, negativity, jealousy, ill will, possessiveness, ego/self-cherishing within our reactions to everyday life. The practices of sila help one to have a calm and balanced mind which is conducive to meditation. However, Gautama noted that just the practice of sila was not enough to be free of the defilements of the mind, they still lie in the deepest part of the mind and one cannot attain full freedom from them by the practice of sila alone. In other words being good will help you to live a better life, more peaceful, more helpful to others, however being good alone will not free the mind from generating negativity. He incorporated the practice of **samadhi**.*

Samadhi is the practice of concentration at the most subtle levels. This is done through the observation of the natural breath pattern as it arises and passes from the nostrils. Gautama found that the breath is a bridge between the involuntary and voluntary parts of the body in that, the breath will naturally continue without conscious thought but will also allow itself to be directed and held. He also found that the breath is directly connected to both the conscious and sub-conscious parts of the mind. The breath can be consciously directed as previously stated, and is also subject to rapid change if there is a change in emotion or thought either negative or positive in the mind. A change in either thought or emotion in the sub-conscious part of the mind and the breath pattern will naturally be effected. Gautama recommended no mantra or visualizations. This is not because observation of the breath with a mantra or visualisation does not concentrate the mind, it will help to concentrate the mind. But he did not recommend it because quite naturally the mind begins to focus too much on the mantra or visualisation and not on the natural changes in the breath. It is the sensitivity to and observation of the breath which gives us a deeper insight into the workings of the sub-conscious mind. Gautama taught just observation of the natural breath, as it naturally flows in and out of the nostrils, ever becoming more and more aware of the subtlety of the breath, it's every sensation as it flows in and out, it's temperature and so on. This is samadhi. With the practice of sila and samadhi, Gautama discovered that his root defilements of the mind may be diminished but not eradicated, he had not attained full freedom from suffering, full nibbanic peace. Although he had certainly gone along way on the path and if you follow this path to this point you will also have found more peace and more

freedom from creating negativity in the mind and in your life. All of the practices spoken about so far were in popular culture in India. Sadhus were speaking about coming out of negativity and stopping craving and attachment to our desires, and not creating aversion for the difficulties of life, but it was Gautama who discovered a practice for achieving this, this was Gautama's enlightenment.

*The enlightenment of Gautama was the practice of **panna**. Panna is wisdom, the wisdom that comes from direct experience, this was the type of wisdom Gautama practiced and taught. He did not play intellectual games, he practiced, he experienced, he knew, and his teachings encourage all to know through direct experience, your direct experience, this is paramount. He rediscovered Vipassana meditation, which had been lost to the country of India. Vipassana is the practice of the direct experience of observing the arising and passing of sensations in the body. There are sensations happening within the body at all times, biochemical processes linked with respiration, digestion, elimination for example, and also the sensations that thoughts and emotions create. Vipassana is the practice of becoming more sensitive to these sensations as they arise and pass away. As one observes these sensations, one practices the maintenance of equanimity, or balance of the mind during this observation. By maintaining equanimity we teach the sub-conscious mind not to react with craving for one sensation by naming it good or pleasant, and not to have aversion for other sensations by naming them bad or painful. Simply observing, no reaction, no judgment. This begins to eradicate the negativity of the mind, the negative habits of the mind by getting at the root level of the mind, the sub-conscious. When negativity begins to go, peace is all that remains. And thirdly Vipassana is the practice of the realization that all sensations and all things in nature are impermanent, always coming into existence and going out of existence. ...*

By the correct application of sila, samadhi and panna (through the practice of Vipassana), this was the full enlightenment of the Buddha Gautama. His mind stopped creating any negativity, and he experienced full nibbanic peace within himself, which is what enlightenment truly is. This enlightenment and freedom from the defilements of the mind is available to all who wish to practice the path.

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May all beings be free.

May all beings be happy.

May all beings live without expectations.

