

Tranquility



The May 13 Dharma Talk was given by Susan Ezequelle. Susan has been practicing meditation since 1997. A student of Gil Fronsdal, she worked closely with Gil and other community members to found the Insight Meditation Center, where she teaches meditation classes and yoga.

The topic for the evening was tranquility, or serenity, which in Pali is *passaddhi* or “cool calmness.” Serenity is one of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. In the teachings it is said that these seven factors need to be present for there to be true liberation. Cultivated together, they are the cause of liberation. In addition to serenity, the other six factors are Mindfulness, Investigation, Effort, Rapture, Concentration, and Equanimity.

The Serene Monk

There was once an elderly monk, known and loved by the community for his serenity. All who met him, admired his calm, serene, kind and loving tranquility.

Each week, this monk was sent to the marketplace to make the purchases for the other monks. Most of the monks avoided the marketplace, because it was noisy and crowded, filled with people urgently seeking bargains and necessities, an anthill of activity and jostling. However, the elderly monk was not affected by the disturbances and went about his business in an island of tranquil contentment.

A younger monk asked him how it had come to be that the elder monk had such depths of peace. The elder monk replied, “When I was young, I searched all over for the ideal place to practice. Every place I came across was unsatisfactory in some way – they each were too noisy, or had too much activity, not enough peacefulness, were too bright or too dark. I tried forests and parks, secluded groves, coastal cliffs and lakesides – nowhere could I find the spot where I could practice without distraction, until I came to this monastery.

When I entered the gates, I knew this was the place I had been seeking. I felt an immediate calm descend over me, and I was at peace. I sat down to meditate, content in that I had found the ideal surroundings to find serenity. As I began to sit, all of a sudden, the noise I had been fleeing from came back and assaulted me. I realized then, that the disturbance I had been trying to avoid was within me, and was something I carried and created. To obtain serenity, I had to find it within, for it was in no other place.”

Tranquility: Fifth Factor of Enlightenment

In U Pandita’s book *In This Very Life* (<http://web.ukonline.co.uk/buddhism/pandita9.htm>), he discusses the effect on the mind, when tranquility is absent.

Most people's minds are in a state of agitation all the time. Their minds run here and there, flapping like flags in a strong wind, scattering like a pile of ashes into which a stone is tossed. There is no coolness or calmness, no silence, no peace. This restlessness or dissipation of mind might properly be called the waves of mind, reminiscent of the water's surface when wind is blowing. Ripples or waves of mind become apparent when restlessness occurs.

Even if this scattered mind becomes concentrated, the concentration still is associated with restlessness, as when one sick member of the family affects all the others with feverishness and unrest. So, too, restlessness has a strong effect on other simultaneously occurring mental states. When restlessness is present, it is not possible for true happiness to be reached.

When the mind is scattered, it is difficult to control our behavior. We begin to act according to our whims and fancies without considering properly whether an action is wholesome or not. Because of this unthinking mind, we may find ourselves performing unskillful actions or saying unskillful things. Such speech and action can lead to remorse, self-judgment and even more agitation. "I was wrong. I shouldn't have said that. If only I'd thought about it before I did it." When the mind is assaulted by remorse and regret, it will not be able to gain happiness.

The enlightenment factor of tranquility arises in the absence of restlessness and remorse. The Pali word for it is passaddhi, which means cool calmness. Coolness and calmness of mind

The characteristic of passaddhi is to calm the mind and body, to silence and tranquilize agitation... Its function is to extract or suppress the heat of the mind which arises due to restlessness, dissipation or remorse. When the mind is assaulted by these harmful states, it becomes hot, as if on fire. Tranquility of mind extinguishes that heat and replaces it with the characteristic of coolness and ease.

When we allow ourselves to act according to the whims and fancies of our minds, then we are really opening ourselves to suffering and we find ourselves in situations we probably would not choose to be in. That's when we live heedlessly, and heedlessness inevitably leads to unskillful actions that cause us harm, or others harm. The result of causing ourselves or others harm is remorse and more agitation in the mind. As U Pandita points out, "When the mind is assaulted by remorse and regret, it will not be able to gain happiness."

We want to be very mindful of our actions in life so that we don't cause harm to ourselves or others, because that will stand in the way of our True Happiness. As we know, True Happiness is not about being able to consume as much as we want of everything, despite what our market-oriented culture would have us believe. True Happiness is not about having our experience in life be just the way we want it to be, down to the last detail.

True happiness comes from within us, it comes from developing the inner resources we all have available to us, just as the monk in the story discovered and put to use.

Tranquility, serenity, arises when the mind is free from agitation, free from remorse and regret. It comes from being mindful every second of the day, so we make as few mistakes as possible; so we cause the least amount of suffering; so we make the most skillful choices possible in any given situation. Tranquility comes from being able to look clearly at ourselves, without judging, when we make mistakes. Otherwise, how can we learn?

Often, many people don't want to look at their mistakes. They want to believe in themselves as good people, and "good people don't cause harm." But, if we don't look with clear eyes at our behavior and the effects of the behavior that follows, then it's very hard to get more skillful in life. That means we keep having to deal with the remorse and the regret. This is what really gets in the way of our ability to experience serenity & tranquility-- a necessary factor for true liberation, for true happiness, and also a fruit of liberation.

Perhaps you've seen some of the statues of the Buddha from ancient times there is a really incredible collection of them at the Asian Art Museum in SF - and some of those statues depict the Buddha with half-closed eyes. Buddhist lore tells us that after his Enlightenment, the Buddha sat seven days with each of the seven factors of Enlightenment, enjoying each factor to the fullest. And he was in such a state

of rapture and tranquility - these two factors are very closely entwined - that it is said he was so completely satisfied that he did not want to even move his eyelids to fully close his eyes.

The Buddha's Life (condensed version)

The Buddha was born to King Suddhodana, the chief of the Shakya nation, one of several ancient tribes in Northern India, and Queen Maha Maya. The Buddha's family name was Gautama, and his given name was Siddhartha, "he who achieves his aim." (Later in his life, Siddhartha also became known as Shakyamuni, or "Sage of the Shakya tribe.")

After his birth, several seers predicted that Siddhartha would become either a great king, or a great holy man. King Suddhodana, of course wanted his son to become his successor and a great king, so afforded him every privilege and luxury. Siddhartha was taught everything a warrior king should know, including poetry, martial arts, horsemanship, and courtly etiquette. At everything he tried his hand at, Siddhartha excelled. His father, the King, shielded Siddhartha from knowledge of human suffering.

The King arranged Siddhartha's teenage marriage to Yasodhara, who bore him a son, Rahula. Prince Siddhartha lived a completely sheltered life for many years, but one day ventured outside the palace to visit his subjects. During this outing, Siddhartha discovered that life was not as luxurious as he had thought while in the protected environment of the palace. For the first time, he encountered sickness, old age, and death, and realized that material wealth could not protect us from these. Siddhartha also came upon a wandering ascetic, who despite the suffering in the world, seemed at peace. These four, sickness, old age, death, and the ascetic, became known as the Four Divine Messengers or Four Teachers, and resulted in Siddhartha's resolve to leave the palace, and seek a way to gain satisfaction and end suffering.

The Four Noble Truths

After the Buddha was enlightened, the first teachings he talked about to his disciples were the Four Noble Truths. A person who views life in a very deep way according to these Truths is a person who will have the Seven Factors of Enlightenment present in him or her, including Rapture and Tranquility, just as the Buddha himself did.

The Buddha never dealt with those types of questions which we as humans have been trying to answer since the beginning of time: Where do we come from? What happens to us when we die? What is the nature of the universe? Instead, the Buddha was driven by a desire to address a more fundamental question common to every human heart -- how can we be happy in this life? How can we be free of suffering?

"I teach one thing and one thing only, suffering and the end of suffering."

The Buddha often presented the teachings on the Four Noble Truths using a medical model:

- 1) there is an illness -- we suffer, we are at dis-ease so much of the time
- 2) there is a cause of the illness -- our cravings, our desire to experience pleasure and escape pain in our lives
- 3) there is a cure for the illness
- 4) there is a course of action to follow to get the cure -- the Noble Eightfold Path:

Wisdom (Sanskrit: prajna, Pāli: *paññā*)

1. Right view

2. Right intention

Ethical conduct (Sanskrit: sila, Pāli: *sīla*)

3. Right speech

4. Right action

5. Right livelihood

Concentration (Sanskrit and Pāli: samadhi)

6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

The First Noble Truth

It's important to understand that despite the words "Right View", etc. the Buddha was not presenting the Eightfold Path as a set of commandments or beliefs. He presented them as guides we can use to avoid suffering in our lives, guides that help us make skillful choices in life.

In fact, nothing the Buddha taught was ever presented as a belief system -- he was always very clear about offering the teachings and the practice as something we each need to try out for ourselves, to see what is true in them for ourselves. This practice is an empirical practice - we test it constantly through our experience.

With each of the Four Noble Truths there is an associated action, so these are not truths that we just sit back and passively accept. This practice requires action and the action associated with the first Noble Truth, that suffering exists, is *to Understand It*. To see the true nature of life as a human being - that along with all the joys, life brings sorrows as well, that everything we know in life is impermanent, that there no solid ground, nothing that offers us complete security.

I think it is useful to distinguish between pain and suffering in life. Some pain is inevitable for all of us as human beings - our relationships sometimes don't work, we may lose our jobs, we lose loved ones, we have bodies that age and get sick, and so on. Suffering is what we add to these inevitable things in life - the wishing that things were otherwise, the feeling that this just shouldn't be happening to me, the feeling that it's not fair, the blaming of ourselves and others, the anger and fear and resentment, the envy for others who aren't going through what we're going through. This is the suffering and it is optional. Pain in life is inevitable, the suffering is optional.

When we practice we get quiet and still enough to study our suffering, to notice our suffering. Sometimes we keep ourselves so busy that we don't even know when we suffer. We first must notice that we're suffering. We need to turn our attention towards it, not avoid it or ignore it, because then we can bring our awareness to it. We can then begin to understand its roots and its causes. If we don't understand it then how can we end it? This is another important reason why we practice.

The Second Noble Truth

The cause of suffering is our clinging or craving, our attempts to hold on to the pleasant things in life and push away or avoid the unpleasant ones. This is greed, hatred, and delusion at work in us. When we believe that the source of our happiness is out there, is all about getting what we want and avoiding what we don't, then we are living our lives in a state of delusion.

The Buddha identified four types of delusion:

- Seeing the permanent in the impermanent
- Seeing happiness in suffering
- Seeing beauty in ugliness
- Seeing the self as something solid and permanent

In the teachings, the action associated with the Second Noble Truth is *to Let Go*.

The Third Noble Truth: the good news.

The good news is that the possibility exists for each one of us in this room to be free from suffering in this life, and to be truly happy in this life. The action associated with this truth is simply *to Realize It*. Realize that the practice of mindfulness can free us from suffering.

One of the things that can be part of this realization is to see the power of direct experience, or bare attention; to see how being truly present, mindfully present, can set us free from suffering.

What is bare attention? I'm sure most of you have noticed by now, how often you are lost in thinking ABOUT experience, lost in mental stories about experience. This is what keeps us from being present. Even when we find ourselves in pleasant circumstances in life we don't even notice, because we are so busy rehashing the past or worrying about the future. Our stories, the stories we create about experience, are often huge contributors to the mental anguish we experience, aren't they?

In our tradition we actually have a word for this kind of mental story-making - it's called Papancha. (http://audiodharma.libsyn.com/index.php?post_id=244359)

The Fourth Noble Truth

The 4th and last Noble Truth, is the Noble Eightfold Path, the 8 steps to happiness. The action associated with this Truth is *to Develop It*.

The first two steps are very important to keep in mind as we practice. What view do we want to have of our lives here as human beings? Many people are happy and contented to have success in their careers, or wealth, or many interesting experiences in life -- there's nothing wrong with this. But how do you want to frame your life? What does it mean to you to be a human being in this life? What constitutes true and lasting happiness for you? What intentions do you want to have as the root of your actions? What actions lead to suffering and which ones lead to freedom?

A person who sees deeply into life through the lens of the Four Noble Truths is a person who will possess the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, a person who will have tranquility and serenity in life.

How do we develop these qualities? We develop these through the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as described in the Satippathana Sutta.

The Buddha said: "Oh Bhikkhus, if the Four Foundations of Mindfulness are practiced persistently and repeatedly, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment will be automatically and fully developed."

When Susan returns in July she will be talking more about this sutta and the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. So stay tuned.

The End, for now.

*If you would grow to your best self
Be patient, not demanding
Accepting, not condemning
Nurturing, not withholding
Self-marveling, not belittling
Gently guiding, not pushing and punishing*

*For you are more sensitive than you know
Mankind is as tough as war yet delicate as flowers
We can endure agonies but we open fully only to warmth and light
And our need to grow is as fragile as a fragrance Dispersed by storms of will
To return only when those storms are still
So, accept, respect, attend your sensitivity*

A flower cannot be opened with a hammer.