

The Cloudy Late Afternoon of the Soul

Commitment to Meditation Practice is a significant act of courage.

- How can this be? I'm just sitting here.
- Mindfulness is the practice of letting go of conditioned tendencies of mind, and our identification with these. Dropping our attachments to our ideas of what we do, what we know, what we believe, what we value, and who we are.
- It's not even a single big pill we swallow once and are done with; it's an ongoing process of seeing the gross, dropping the gross, and then discovering the subtle; in an ongoing and, at least initially, seemingly perpetual process.

What propels and motivates us?

- Dissatisfaction – at a fundamental level, sense of futility of the craving-driven life; weariness with seeing the world through veils and distortions
- Glimpses of and then a growing love for truth – “I don't care what it looks like, I want to see it! Bring it on!”
- Dawning understanding that freedom is achieved through coming into harmony with truth.

Four Types of Courage

- Courage to Accept our Humanity
 - The Challenge – we call upon ourselves to:
 - Relax our grip on, and ultimately abandon defining our sense of who we are through our stories about self. These may or may not be true, but even when true they are not complete. Holding fiercely to some, we cannot grasp the others – like looking fiercely for a jar or peanut butter and not seeing anything else in the cupboard.
 - Acknowledge our shadow elements – that we can be irritable, petty, hurtful, cruel, manipulative, needy, dishonest, self-righteous; that we abuse others and ourselves
 - Give up our sense of personal continuity and consistency
 - Give up our separation from the humanity of others. If I am not all good, how can my enemy be all bad? If I am not superior, how can others be inferior? If I am perpetrator as well as victim, how can I spend my life feeling sorry for myself and wanting others to join me at it? If everyone contains all possibilities, how can I be special?
 - Do you see the need for courage?
 - The reward
 - Understanding
 - Purification vs. Perfection – there is no such thing as a perfect mind. Mind does not change, only our relationship to it.

- Trying to make ourselves or the mind perfect is a struggle we cannot win
 - A major basis of reactivity is projection – what we can't or won't acknowledge in ourselves we either deny entirely or project onto others – either way becoming blind in the process
 - When we accept our humanity we
 - Stop judging others and ourselves
 - Become more compassionate
 - Begin to watch our life unfold rather than being obsessed with controlling it
 - Begin to accept the perfection that exists independent above the plane of the thinking mind
 - We come to understand life as a play of consciousness. Among other things we become compassionate for those who are still identified with this play – ourselves included.
- Courage to Live in the Present Moment
 - The Challenges
 - Leave our thoughts, concepts and stories behind
 - When truly in the present, experience is direct and fills awareness. There is only the experience of consciousness, no separate self having the experience, no separate object triggering the experience. Just the experience, which simply IS.
 - Like all mental phenomena, thoughts always arise in the present; but thought's content is almost always about the past or is a future projection (based on what we think the past tells us). When truly in the present, there arises awareness of thought as a process; there is no identification with its content (which would pull us out of the present).
 - So the present is always empty of attachment to content and concepts. The present exists outside of time, which is itself a concept, and we are there without the mental anchors of “knowing” where we've come from, where we're going, what we believe or know is right or wrong, or even a sense of who we are; even what we are.
 - You can't be in the present and *hold* a thought. If you believe that thinking defines the mind, then the here and now can be experienced as the enemy (of the thinking mind).
 - Do you see the need for courage?
 - The Rewards

- We come to understand that our true nature transcends thought and even time. These do not extend into the present, yet our awareness does. So mind is literally more than we think it is. Moreover, this is not a function of our thinking not being sufficiently advanced or perfected. It is an inherent limitation of the very nature of thought. A corollary is that we are freer than we can possibly imagine – literally. Whatever you think or conceive, our true nature extends further.
 - When we live in the present we find that our direct experience, sense consciousness, always arises from contact - between our sense organs and sense objects. We realize the all ideas of separateness and separation are conveniences that mask the truth of our interconnectedness with all things. We begin to experience this connectedness when we cease to label our experiences by thinking about them.
- Courage to Work with our Afflictive Emotions
 - The Challenges
 - Working with afflictive emotions means shining the light of mindfulness on the mental formations – perceptions and thoughts – we would rather not acknowledge in ourselves and/or strongly wish were not there. Before doing this work we defended against experiencing them directly, but now we do exactly that, as directly as we can; and as much as we can without comment, judgment or decision. This can be difficult and even painful, especially if our mindfulness is not strong and well-developed; and we slide back into commentary, judgment and struggling about “what to do about it.”
 - Afflictive emotions are often tied to a “story”. These can either challenge or define our sense of self of who we are in the world. If we see things in terms of strongly contrasted Good and Evil, what happens if the story implies we have evil in us, which previously we have not acknowledged? Do we see ourselves as intrinsically Evil? If we see things in terms of our needing to control everything, and the story is about something in us that is uncontrollable, what then? If we see in ourselves a mixture of good and bad, do we take on the identity of a hypocrite? The more identified we are with a particular self-image, the more afflictive emotions that don’t fit with this is upsetting.
 - Do you see the need for courage?
 - The Rewards
 - Reactivity drains us of energy and destroys equanimity. When we relax in the presence of whatever arises, this energy is now available for other purposes. We may simply recharge our exhausted batteries – which is very worthwhile in and of itself - or we use that energy to empower more skillful practices, like investigation.

- If we do the latter, mundane and cognitive insight may arise, where we suddenly see things such as the thoughts behind the emotions, or their origins – when the story was first told, who or what told it to us, and what conditions gave it its power. We may see karma at work, both in creating our tendency to reactivity, and also we begin to see the forces our reactivity put into motion; how unskillful actions promote unskillful consequences, for skillful actions promote skillful consequences.
 - More importantly, transcendent insight may arise. We may come to understand that thoughts are only thoughts, and stories are only stories. Only our reactivity gives them the illusion of reality and power. As we sit with them, doing our best to bring mindfulness to them, they lose their power and their solidity. We see that they possess the same three qualities as all other conditioned phenomena – that they are impermanent and ever-changing, that they are unsatisfactory (not just in their unpleasantness, but also in that they tell us nothing meaningful, nothing that can be held as real, nothing about our true nature), they have no quality that can be described as self or belonging to self. As we get more and more comfortable with these three qualities, we find that in the context of afflictive emotions they offer us blessed relief.
 - We realize that the only proper response to these experiences, to the experiences themselves, to our reactivity to them, and our understanding of their origins – is compassion, loving-kindness and acceptance of their existence. What other response could possibly make sense?
- Courage to Live from an Open Heart
 - The Challenges
 - The open heart is not selective. When the heart’s telephone rings, it doesn’t qualify or screen before answering. It doesn’t check caller-ID and refuse to answer, or say “Please excuse me while I put you on Hold”. It just picks up and says “Yes”.
 - This of course allows any number of things in – all things, actually. The good, the bad and the ugly. If we identify we any of it, if we let any of it define who we are or how we must feel, or should not feel, we suffer.
 - Do you see the need for courage?
 - The Rewards
 - As for content, we feel all of it, fully, but just for the mind moment of its presence, and when it’s done passing through our awareness, we feel whatever takes its place. At some point we experience a shift, and we really see not so much the content as the process of its flowing through. The drama loses its sense of drama.

- We learn that the open heart is not open just to take things in. We learn it equally lets everything flow out. We are not the stream, we are the stream bed. Life is not what we have, life is what flows freely through us.
- We learn that all craving and every attempt to hold on and push things way, essentially is our attempt to say No to life, to freeze the flow; to isolate a part of life and hold fiercely to that is to cut it away from the very flow that gives it life. It is the embracing of the lifeless. We learn that we don't have to say force ourselves to say No to our tendency to hold on, we simply learn to stop turning away from life.

So those are the four courages, and now we are ready to turn to the dark night of the soul, and the cloudy late afternoon of the soul. And as you may well ask of yourself, what the hell is he talking about?

Let's turn back to the topic of working with afflictive emotions.

- When these arise, the conditioned mind reacts defensively. We do this internally, when we repress or deny the experience, or project unacceptable emotions or intensions onto others. We do this externally, when we act out verbally or physically, either directly coming from what we feel or when we react to what we've projected onto others.
- As our practice matures, we become aware of this reactivity – typically at first looking back after its occurred, then we begin to recognize it while the pattern of reactivity is in the midst of occurring, and then, most skillfully, as the tendency to react first arises. The awareness gives us distance from this reactivity, and ultimately leads to its being cut short and then not arising at all. Instead, we simply sit with the “original” afflictive emotion.
- Depending on how intense and established these patterns of reactivity are, this process can be many layered. We can react to our own reactivity - for example, feeling justified, mortified or frustrated with our reactions - and the point where our awareness begins to soften and we still our reactivity may be quite far from anything recognizable as an “original” afflictive emotion. Recognizing how embedded we are in our own “stuff”, how complex are our patterns of reactivity, is a great challenge to both our practice and our self-image. Stated another way, it is all very humbling.
- Objectively, all of this work is important; both because it is intrinsic to letting go of our conditioned tendencies of mind, and because every success teaches us that this can indeed work, and thus prepares us for the next round of effort. But to say that all of it is equally important flies in the face of our perceptions – conditioned though they might be. When we think about what's going on – never a particularly good idea, but we tend to do it anyway – we perceive some content as far more important and worthy of our effort than other. That is, we say this afflictive emotion is minor, but this one, this one, it's a beaut. “Let's go to work on this one”, or, “Ummh, let's put this one off a while.”

- Sitting with these big boys are the makings of what we label Dark Night of the Soul. We perceive their importance. We feel their weight. We create drama about our work. We identify with our quest!
- This sense of drama – that here at last is a foe worth the fighting; and this *identification* with the drama – that I am the one who fights this good fight - is simply the next thing in line for letting go. It is itself an afflictive emotion with which we can sit, without judgment, commentary or decision.
- Looking back at it all, when that which had arisen has passed away, who can say with accuracy this was the Dark Night of the Soul? When it's over, it's all story. If I have to call it anything, I like to call it the Cloudy Late Afternoon of the Soul. It substitutes a little humor for a lot of drama. The important thing, as the Tao Te Ching says, is “Work is done, then forgotten. Therefore it lasts forever.

So, we've looked at the four forms of courage intrinsic in the practice:

- Courage to Accept our Humanity
- Courage to Live in the Present Moment
- Courage to Work with our Afflictive Emotions
- Courage to Live from an Open Heart

And then we looked especially closely at the third courage, working with afflictive emotions.

We want to acknowledge and cultivate these courages, but we want to do so without identifying with them. They aid our work, but they are not who we are. They are an aspect of the Dharma and our walking this exquisite path; but they are another of the rafts of which the Buddha spoke. They are essential to our journey, our crossing what we take to be troubled waters, but they not to be confused with the destination. We are not about courage, or about the work fueled our courage. We are about freedom.