

Mindfulness of Breathing (66) Fading of Compulsion

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Buddhism, dispassion, passion, fading, freedom, liberation, observing, ease, suffering, impermanence, compulsion, *virāga*, *rāga*, drivenness, inconstancy, antidote, medicine, transiency, disinterest, *ānāpānasati*

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My friends, we continue with *ānāpānasati*, and the topic is the fourteenth step:

One trains oneself: breathing in, observing fading away.

A different translation is:

One trains: breathing in, observing dispassion.

The word that is translated as “dispassion” is *virāga*. This translation doesn’t quite work for some English speakers because the word “passion” has acquired many positive associations, connotations, and definitions in some circles. I think its original meaning – that of the Passion of Christ, where it meant suffering – is kind of lost. But there are remnants of that meaning in English, so “passion” can have negative connotations. It *is* a source of suffering. When someone has a passion for something, like power or sex, it is an intense engagement that can be very painful.

I want to talk about dispassion, *virāga*, in an indirect way. Buddhism is often considered a religion. Once it is called a religion, people will reasonably try to understand the fundamental tenets and beliefs of that religion. Perhaps by looking at the generalizations – the big, universal statements about things. One of the universal statements that Buddhism emphasizes is that everything is impermanent or inconstant. People usually say, “Everything is impermanent.”

When we have a universal statement, we are contending with: “Is this really true?” “Is this always the case?” “This seems like a rather depressing way of seeing everything.” There can be all kinds of reactions to this almost general, philosophical statement – as if it is some universal truth that Buddhism teaches.

One approach to understanding Buddhism is to look at this as a universal statement. However, the practice approach to understanding Buddhism is not to begin by understanding it in the abstract, but to begin with oneself and one’s own experience. Given the degree to which Buddhism emphasizes the possibility of being free from suffering, we begin with ourselves: “What is the suffering that I have here? What is my emotional pain? What is happening here? They say that it is possible to be free of suffering. Well, how can I become free of it? What does it take?”

In this very personal exploration of feeling and being here, Buddhism says: “If you look carefully at your experience, you will see that there is a close connection between the experience of inconstancy – change, transiency, impermanence – and your ability to ease up from your suffering – to soften it, to calm it down, even to have it fade away and disappear.” We see that the purpose of seeing inconstancy is not to find some universal theory, belief, or philosophy about life. But rather, the purpose is a pragmatic idea that the observation of change and inconstancy is an antidote, a medicine, for what Buddhism calls suffering.

Something eases up when we can feel the flow and be in the current of change. Whether impermanence is a universal philosophical or metaphysical concept is beside the point. We are pointing to inconstancy or impermanence because of its value in helping us loosen, lighten, and free up in the places we get caught. That is enough. We don’t have to take a big leap of philosophy to make a universal claim: “Now I know something about the fundamental nature of the universe – the physics that everything is impermanent and changing all the time.” It may be an interesting idea, but this is not what Buddhist practice is really about.

As we see things shifting and changing – the transitory nature of phenomena – we get more interested in the process of change and inconstancy than in the content of our thoughts and feelings. Many times we are focused

on the meaning of things – the content, the purpose, the ideas, and the particularity of what is going on. But, at this point in *ānāpānasati*, we are stepping back in a sense.

The particularity of what we are thinking is not that important. But rather, to just see that thinking itself is an inconstant phenomenon, coming and going. You have probably had some thoughts repeatedly. They have come and gone for days, weeks, months, or years. They just come and they go. After a while, if you see how much they come and go, maybe you will ease up about them.

Our emotions also sometimes come into play – their meaning, the story around them, even the emotion itself, what emotion it is, what it means to have that emotion, and how it reflects back on ourselves as human beings. At some point in meditation, we shift from all that complication to not even caring whether it is sadness or joy. But rather, we tune into how the process is shifting, changing, moving, and coming in and out of existence. We tune into how awareness picks an emotion up and then puts it down – gets distracted by something like a train whistle. We are not sad for a moment because there is just a train whistle. Then we pick it up and we are aware of sadness again – it has arisen. Then we hear more whistles. All this is coming and going.

It is this coming and going that begins to loosen us up, like a lubricant that begins unsticking the ways in which we are uncontrollably caught in our emotions, activity, or motivations. One motivation is *rāga*, which can be translated as “passion” or “lust.” When it is translated as “lust,” some people feel that this limits it too much to sexual passion. One definition in the Pali Text Society dictionary is “uncontrolled excitement.”

I like to think of *rāga* as “drivenness.” We can be driven by lust, hatred, ill will. When there is drivenness, something has taken over control. We are not in control anymore – that level of passion.

Describing it this way may seem dramatic. But, as we get quieter in the mind, we see the subtler ways in which we are caught in the grip of a certain drivenness. Anybody who meditates tends to see, surprisingly, how much we get swept away by, pulled into, and caught in our thoughts. That represents a kind of uncontrolled excitement, interest, or engagement.

As we settle back into just observing, we can see that being involved in uncontrolled drivenness, caughtness and preoccupation does not serve us. There starts to be a process of disinterest – losing interest in continuing to be driven. “I’ve had the same thoughts for months now. I’m not interested in doing this anymore.” “I’ve had the same preoccupation with certain emotions, feeling as if they’re the most important thing. I’m not so interested in this anymore.” “I don’t want to give much more attention to these things. I’ve given so much attention to them already.” “I’ve been kind of driven to pay attention to my anxiety, and I think it’s okay to put the anxiety aside. I know I’m anxious, but I don’t have to be so driven by it. I can ease up. I can just observe it. I can be not so involved or entangled with it.”

The movement towards being non-driven – the dropping of compulsion – is *virāga*: the fading away or dispassion. This is closely connected to freedom. It is a kind of freedom. After a while, we begin appreciating that freedom is sweet. Freedom is a breath of fresh air – a kind of joy, delight, vitality, and healthiness.

We begin feeling a sense of freedom as we observe. There is freedom in observing. This freedom in observing is a guide and support that helps us lose our interest in or preoccupation with drivenness – with the things that we are caught in.

There is a fading away of compulsion, a process sometimes translated as “dispassion.” There is a movement towards dispassion, towards freedom. The word *virāga* is a celebrated term in India. It is akin to liberation, to freedom itself. It is the end of *rāga* – the end of compulsion, drivenness, lust in all its forms, passion in all its negative forms.

Virāga can come in a peaceful way. I like to think of this whole process as settling into ease – easing up, relaxing, softening, fading away – not so much into nothing, but fading into a peaceful, happy, healthy, liberated way of being.

*Breathing in, observing fading away.
Breathing out, observing dispassion.*

Thank you all very much, and we’ll continue with this tomorrow.