

Calmness (1 of 5) Non-distraction

December 06, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

relax, unagitated, space, wisdom, caught, clinging, preoccupations, diminished, creativity, urgency, insistent, authority, embodied, tranquility, serenity, peace, ease

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Good morning, everyone. Welcome to this Monday morning talk. This week, the theme will be calmness and its five different aspects.

Meditation is often associated with calmness, not for its own sake (though calmness can be quite nice for its own sake) but because calmness allows greater wisdom to operate. It gives us a greater capacity to see what's happening. It also sets up the conditions where it's easier to let go of things that are healthy to let go of. There's more space and softness in the mind when clinging begins to loosen its grip.

When I think about the topic of calmness, I think about it in relation to a distracted mind: a mind that is caught up in its thoughts and preoccupations. The faster the thinking is and the more preoccupied the mind is, the more likely it is that the mind and the body are not tranquil or calm.

When there is an incessant chatter in the mind, where one thought follows or tailgates the other, our ability to perceive, understand, and be creative is diminished. When busy thoughts fill the bandwidth and space, other forms of intelligence we have, other ways of perceiving and reflecting don't have a chance to operate. But when we're not distracted, then we're also not distracted from our deeper wisdom and understanding. We are not distracted from taking the time to see what is really here.

Recently I heard someone say that the more urgency he feels, the slower he goes. I thought that was a wonderful principle because when things are urgent, that is probably a time when we have to use all our mental capacities to problem solve and understand what's happening. We need to do things well, not be impulsive and make mistakes because we didn't take time to learn what happened.

The art of calming ourselves, of not being swept away in destructive thoughts and an agitated mind is one of the most useful things that we can learn from meditation and mindfulness. But it's easier to learn it if we appreciate the value of calmness. Maybe we can begin by appreciating the calmness of a calm mind, or more specifically, calm thinking.

The Buddha talked about calming speech. Sometimes when we get agitated we speak faster. But we have some control over how we speak and the speed at which we speak. It is easier to control when we speak and how fast we speak than it is to control our thoughts and our thinking because we have to engage more physically with the act of speaking.

Experimenting with and getting a feel for speaking in ways that are not hurried can begin to give us a sense of what it's like for the thinking mind to also be unhurried. Then we can slow the thinking mind down, especially when we're distracted by our thoughts and concerns. We can calm down the thinking mind just as we would calm down speech.

This does not mean we stop thinking and let go of our thoughts, which might be too tall an order for anyone to do effectively in daily life. But maybe it's possible to begin slowing down our thoughts, to have more space around them, or a little more calmness associated with them.

So how do we do that? One way to do it is to relax the body. Chances are that if we're thinking in a fast or distracted way, something in our physical system is tense, tight, pushing or leaning forward, or there is a feeling of holding on. So then to relax: relax the belly, relax the shoulders. The advantage of relaxation is that it can be done without anybody else knowing we're doing it. We can do it at meetings; we can do it sitting in traffic; we can do it standing in line at the store. We can take a little bit of time to relax.

If you feel like you don't have the time to relax, for example when you're standing in a checkout line at a store, then you're probably caught up in some kind of distraction. Some distraction is limiting the potential depth of your wisdom, your clarity, and your ability to see what's happening.

So be very careful about the insistent voice in the mind and the sense of authority that distracted thoughts can have – “It's really important to think about this,” “I have to think about it,” or “This concern is so important.”

There can sometimes be fear and desperation or desire and greed in the thinking. There is an insistence in them. When that happens while standing at a checkout line and you can't stand on both feet and just relax your body for a few moments, chances are that your innate natural wisdom and clarity of thinking is not going to be available because you're caught in that insistence, that push to think.

So, as you go through the day, look for opportunities to relax your belly, shoulders, face, or your hands. Maybe no one needs to know you're relaxing. In that relaxing, or that intention to relax, see whether there begins to be a tug of war with your thinking mind, where your thinking mind in some form or another is saying, “No, no, we don't have time for this,” “It's so important to be thinking fast and furiously,” or “It is so important to be caught up in thinking about this concern.”

But maybe that's not the case. If you have an important concern that really needs to be thought about, maybe you can think about it more effectively when you're calm and relaxed. When you slow down, when the thinking mind becomes slow enough that you can be attuned to what it feels like in your body – when you are embodied – there is enough space to be aware of your emotions and feelings. Then you can have an emotional connection to what's happening more deeply, rather than to the surface emotions of fear or desire. Those are often symptoms of something deeper.

If we can slow down enough to fill in the picture with more of who we are and how we are, with more space for undistracted, calm, relaxed thoughts that arise from a deeper place of understanding and creativity within us, we can often find our way with the challenges in our life more easily than if we have an agitated mind. Calmness and relaxation of the body are vehicles to practice having an unagitated, calm mind. There is a wonderful interplay and mutuality between mind and body, in terms of helping us be calmer.

If some of you don't like the word “calm,” there are other words: tranquility, serenity, peace, and ease; all these words are in the same family. If you don't like any of those words, and you think it's too high a bar, or somehow not appealing, then perhaps “an unagitated mind,” or “an unagitated body.” When we're agitated, we can't be very wise and we can't be kind. Then it is harder to be kind and generous from a place of depth.

One of the wonderful things about becoming calm and unagitated is that our care, friendliness, and attention to others will feel as if they come from a different place in us. Our care can be bigger, richer, and more connected when we connect to others from a calm place rather than a distracted, fast, agitated place. At the fast pace that some of us live, sometimes there's not really enough space for ourselves or for others to connect deeply.

Maybe this week's theme will be useful to you, especially as we're getting ready for the winter and holiday season. May you become a student of calmness this week.

Thank you