

Retreat February 22, 2014

We are just sitting here

Awake

That is enough.

There is nothing to create or fix or repair or adjust or strive for.
Or to want to be different.

This is our haven, our refuge. The continuous work of self-improvement can cease.

We don't even have to fix any one else. I am just saying that to your mind that may like to complain about others.

We are just sitting,
Breath coming and going all by itself.
Eyes seeing; ears hearing.
Thoughts doing their thing.
Sensations arising and passing.

This is what's going on: no more and no less.

"Practice only one level." (Kyodo Roshi)
This level.

Just sitting here

Awake

That is enough.

And we often create a predictable response in opposition to what is present. This is happening.
We don't like it when we hear a barking dog.

Not liking the barking dog creates a disturbance.
With compassion, with lightness and interest we notice how profoundly we don't like the sound of barking.

The dog barks for so many reasons.

Eventually the dog will stop barking.

We are that dog. Barking. Then not barking.

just sitting here,
so interesting.

Then what??

The Dharma talk could end here.

But I am going to keep going for a little bit, in case some of these other words might be of utility to some one in this room.

I once heard said that the value of meditation practice comes from really understanding the relationship between cause and effect and taking responsibility for that understanding.

Do we really understand cause and effect?
It can get so subtle and yet change the course of our world.

Do we understand that hating the sound of our own barking resulting in more suffering?

Not only our thoughts, but the underlying intention has an effect in shaping the course of thoughts and our speech and our actions.

And this idea must have practical value or it is simple entertainment.

We are told that we don't have to believe everything we think or act on everything we feel.

We are told that anything we think or feel,
or we think we are,
has no inherent truth to it

...everything is temporary,
relative to the moment,
a relative perspective, filled with projections based on our experience of the past, or a product of a dynamite imagination.

As a theoretical construct, these profound ideas are useless to get you out of bed on a cold morning to meditate.

How can this idea be helpful to our practice, as an approach to meditation?

Working with concentration

We are going to talk a bit about the courage of being honestly present to whatever is current, eventually learning to take responsibility for our responses by holding them with compassion and understanding and even, eventually, possibly, humor.

We frequently cause internal disturbance which is especially noticeable during a concentration exercise, such as paying attention to the breath at the nostrils.

We can look: what is the mental action generating the disturbance?

There are two important things to note here:

1. With honesty, can we examine the disturbance without adding on to it, without embellishing it, or denying it, or adding an interpretation to the disturbance? Can we see the action and result without turning it into a narrative, with its conceit of "I am this." simply: barking, recoil to barking.

2. Compassion needs to be present; we need to do this practice lightly

This process of unwrapping disturbance is not necessarily smooth and straightforward. We get very attached our habitual reaction patterns. Sometimes we can not simply give up the embellishments and the stories. Sometimes we need to indulge in it — in other words, to thoroughly enjoy our reactions. We are pretty ridiculous. Go for it!

("Keeping in mind, if you don't learn to enjoy the meditation enough to keep at it consistently, you won't grow familiar with it. If you aren't familiar with it, insight into its consequences won't arise.")

--Thanissaro Bhikkhu

And we really need to know the consequences of our beliefs What happens when we respond as if they are an enduring, immutable truth?

So play with those thoughts: that barking dogs are bad, or you are bad because you don't like barking dogs, and notice what that gives rise to.

And this is the afternoon of a long day of sitting. It is so easy to get lost in the wilderness of our minds...so notice your favorite places to get lost!

Is it the swamplands of self-pity and doubt, indulgent shame or guilt or remorse. What does it feel like? What is its effect?

Or maybe you hate the pain in your back or the slow movement of time. Hate, disdain, dislike, can be like getting caught in the brambles with their thorns that grab you, and no matter how you twist and turn, you can't get out.

Or perhaps you are in the great wind storms of an agitated mind, that just wants to run away, or howl at the top of your lungs.

Or the deserts of thirst and hunger, desiring any kind of stimulation. Enough of this flat, parched and empty, boring desert.

Or maybe you are somewhere in the fog. No idea if you are by the coast or in a valley or in the clouds of a mountain top. You could be anywhere.

Where are you finding yourself, in which of these areas of the wilderness?

What are you creating?

Is it helpful?

Is it fun?

It's so human.
And dog like.

What next?

This breath, sitting here.

Nothing doing. Being.
In this moment.

Working with insight

So in the concentration practices, working with cause and effect, the disturbances arise so naturally and automatically. We exert far too much effort or we get lost in increasingly subtle shifts in attention and intention. All our detours are highlighted. We must exercise patience.

One of most consistent automatic responses to sitting here is to begin noticing all the stories we tell about ourselves.

See the narrative, subtle and not so subtle of the "I" making.
Is it leading to a useless conflict, or is it leading me to generous and principled actions?

You can develop a story, an attachment to anything. This is "my" calm meditation.

Let the "I" become unfixed.

"Self" can be understood as forms of mental activity.

I am "selfing"

mostly quoting Thanissaro Bhikkhu:

"The mind develops the idea of self as a strategically. In our desire for happiness, or in our desire to avoid pain, we repeatedly engage in what the Buddha calls "I-making" and "my-making" as ways of trying to exercise control over pleasure and pain. I-making and my-making are mental actions. Whenever" we engage in them, we should check to see whether they lead to affliction; if they do, maybe we can highlight them and learn to hold them more lightly, as more permeable, less fixed.

"If we learn to approach I-making and my-making as a process of refinement, we can become more honest, discerning, and compassionate in seeing where an "I" is a liability, and where it's an asset. We can discover that while there are many areas where "I" and "mine" lead only to useless conflicts, there are others where they're beneficial."

He instructs us to

"...start to notice the subtle levels of affliction and disturbance that I-making and my-making can create in the mind. They can get you attached to a state of calm as well as distress. We can begin to develop pride around insights." These become stumbling blocks.

"If you remove labels of "I" or "mine" from your most attended pain, `even from your own insights and mental states, how do you see them? Simply as instances of ideas arising and passing away..."

There is the possibility in this, liberation from the tyranny of selves which no longer serve us well.

And in this we are called upon to be honest, responsible, and kind.

As we just sit here.

Alive.

Barking or not barking, or thinking of barking.

What next?

simply sitting here, breathing.

It is so amazing that our breath just knows how to breathe. How can we begin to comprehend that our organs function, and the friendly bacteria in our gut help us digest our food? This life is precious. This moment is not to be missed, appreciated.

And if we remember that someday we will draw our last breath, just as will everyone we love, or find difficult and the folks we don't even know. No air breather escapes death.

So I am paying attention now! This moment is a grand opportunity to be awake. So precious!

Breath coming and going all by itself.

Eyes seeing; ears hearing.

Thoughts doing their thing.

Sensations arising and passing.

With occasional dog barking.

Source material:

From article by Barry Evans from Tricycle newsletter article

From Thanissaro Bhikkhu, on the net under the title "The Integrity of Emptiness", in printed form in the book Purity of Heart