

Feelings : Writing on Water

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To be human is to have feelings and emotions, there is not one of us who does not have them. Depending on how we view and respond to those feelings they can become a cage that traps us or the vehicle that takes us deeper into the heart of meditation.

Our body and mind, every cell of our being, has a memory bank. All the confusion and unresolved issues of our past are stored within those memories. As we live our life, encountering other people and situations, these interactions call forth a response and the stored up karma (unresolved confusion) within us expresses itself through anger fear grasping etc, or just general confusion. We sense how deeply unsatisfactory it is to be as a puppet on a string, pulled this way and that, by life s circumstances and the reactions they call forth.

The first step is to want to do something about ourselves and to have the faith that we can. We then have to be willing to act upon that wanting in a way that enables us to be "one who can be taught". The wish to train is a precious thing, it shows that something within us knows what to do and that we are capable of hearing and responding to it. It is this wish that inspires us to seek out a spiritual practice because a practice is the means by which our life is transformed, freeing us from the web of mistaken perceptions and lostness that has confused our minds and dulled our senses, causing both ourselves and others much grief. A practice is the means by which our true wish is realised.

When introduced to this practice we are shown how to meditate, advised to keep our minds on the activity of the moment, simply calling it back to the here and now when it wanders off and to do our best to live by the Precepts. These are an expression of the true wish in every human heart to do that which helps instead of hurts, in other words to do the best that can be done in any given situation.

The meditation gives us the stability to look at and see clearly what is revealed by the awareness that deepens as we train in and with daily life and the Precepts help us to choose wisely and to calm the troubled mind instead of agitating and adding to its distress. When we go against the Precepts we are going against our own true nature, this makes us feel more lost and prey to the deluded ideas that confused feelings and emotions bring.

These three basics of the Serene Reflection practice provide a firm foundation and each one helps to point us towards and connect us with the Refuge; the source of true insight and help, the anchor in the midst of all conditions. This is indispensable because when troubled feelings and emotions arise they need to be met by that which

will not be thrown by their arising. The eyes of the Refuge (meditation) can look at anything, they will never judge hate or compare, nor are they fooled or swayed by the mighty tide of deluded misconceptions thoughts and feelings that can so easily condition our actions. So even if you feel afraid or full of doubt if, to the best of your ability, you steadily follow these three basics gradually they will bring stability confidence and the deep reassurance that you are not just struggling on alone. Establishing a regular meditation practice is the foundation stone. It is what everything else comes from, depends upon and returns to. Doing it regularly, both when you want to and when you don't, even for one minute a day, is of great value because it establishes a basis in something that is deeper than feeling, deeper than the memories and the pain. For some establishing and maintaining a steady daily practice will come easily whilst for others it may be more challenging. There are many simple, easy to follow ways that can help us to be true to the wish in our hearts by enabling us to go in the right direction, and I would like to write about some of them in a future article.

If you lead a busy life or do not feel able to do more than one minute a day then value that minute and make it count. It's a shame to waste it by blankly staring into space or mentally drifting off. Settle down in your sitting place and take a moment to check your posture so you are neither tense and rigid nor slouched and dull. Sit up straight with energy and vigour then relax into the upright position. Breath out the tensions of the day, let everything you think you are or know fall away and live fully in that moment. Surrender to the inward looking gaze letting it connect you with the sitting place, calling you home to the hara.

If the mind races or the emotions churn, or you think "I cannot do this" or "It won't make any difference" or even "Why bother? I don't really want to do it" be gently indifferent to these waves of distress doubt and anxiety, giving them clear direction as to the way forward. We need to care about ourselves enough not to believe in, and be influenced by, the confusion within us. We have become so used to the froth on the surface that we have lost sight of the eternal still calm in the depths, but something in us has never forgotten. IT KNOWS and when meditating we sit in that place of knowing, even though we may not be consciously aware of it for some time. For it is not just the memories of suffering that we hold within us. We have another memory, or perhaps knowledge would be a better word. We have the eternal knowing, buried deep within us, of our True Nature, Buddha Nature. A knowing of what we really are and with this comes the sensing of a deeper reality, a truer and more complete way of seeing and responding than we are presently aware of. Faith is

trusting this knowing and training enables it to have full free expression within and as our daily actions.

This place that we call the Refuge or the heart of meditation is deeper than all the thoughts feelings and emotions. Every troubled memory / feeling within us had a beginning, something that caused it-- " by accident the wheel of karma turned", and, as it had a beginning so it can have an end. One of the first things that the Buddha taught was that there is an end to suffering. The Refuge however has neither beginning nor end, it is not dependent upon anything. Nothing can add to it or take away from it, it just eternally IS. This is why it is the Refuge, why we can entrust ourselves to it and depend upon it.

It also helps to remember that our mind is naturally linked to the hara / sitting place. By accident something caused awareness to falter and that connection was temporarily broken or lost sight of. We cannot reconnect the mind with the heart, we can only cease to obstruct that natural connection. And so this deeply profound practice will show us how to cease continuing our sense of separation, and how to live in a way that "cherishes the longing deep" within us to return to our natural way of being and fulfil our potential. It gives us the means to sit beneath the churning feelings so that we can be fully with them without being driven by them, just as the lotus is not wetted by the water that surrounds it. The feelings will soon pass and, even if they don't, we give ourselves the opportunity of knowing that we do not have to feel al-right to be al-right.

Indeed some feelings will not pass quickly. These are the ones that arise alerting us to a need to look more deeply at ourselves so that we can see, understand and resolve the underlying memories buried deep within us that produced them. When that has been done the troubled feelings fall away because they no longer have a need to exist. Anger is a good example of this. We become angry when something touches on an area of inner pain or confusion that we are either unaware of or do not know how to resolve. We may think that we are angry because of what someone else has said or done, in other words, because it hurts to look within we look outside of ourselves to find a reason for our feelings. The practice asks us to put aside this way of looking for explanations and reflect within instead. When we do we will see that the anger was an expression of stress and confusion coming from inner pain, that it is like a lid that covers something else, so if we sit still with anger when it arises it will lead us to it's source, to the unresolved issue within us. This is true of any persistent feeling of distress that arises, it gives us the opportunity to understand what has made us the way we are and to help ourselves in a real way.

As we lower our eyes in meditation the movement of the gaze being drawn within, called home to the hara, sends a message to all that is troubled within us that help is on the way. This inner reflecting, which happens both when we formally meditate and when we call the wandering mind back to ground ourselves in the activity of the moment, is like a loving hand or ray of light that reaches down deep into the turmoil of blocked areas within us.

Just as a little seed grows through the dark heavy earth towards the light so does our karma rise up to be seen and known by the tender eyes of the heart. As these two movements connect Buddha recognizes Buddha and something begins to do the work within our hearts. This brings a deep sense of reassurance and increases our trust both in ourselves and in the practice.

This training is a mystical path and there is often more going on than we may be aware of. We do not need to know and understand it all, indeed we never can. Our role is to sit steadily, rooted in meditation and daily practice so that we become as a strong pipe through which all the distressed feelings can flow into the sitting place and find what they need. We sit still and the stillness does the work.

We cannot do this without the Refuge. Self cannot resolve self, confusion can only create more confusion. No matter how much we think read or talk about it we need what only the Refuge can bring. The eyes of "self" miss what the eyes of the heart see. The intellectual mind has only its store of conditioned information and knowledge to rely on, and this is not enough to resolve spiritual issues, in fact it just causes the mind more anxiety. We need to care about and help our poor stressed mind by giving it clear direction, by turning to the Refuge, to the Master in the heart and by listening carefully to what comes forth from that deeper place.

We often have habitual ways of trying to deal with painful feelings. Some of us will lash out, others may withdraw, we may become defensive or artificially jolly...whatever our usual strategy the practice wisely asks us to put it aside and just sit with what is there. This may cause short term distress, "If I don't do what I usually do, what am I going to do?". We are going to sit still in faith and patience and wait for the Master in the heart to give us direction. A deeper insight or alternative way of responding may not arise immediately. There can be a gap, a time of feeling lost and vulnerable, but we are not lost because we know what NOT to do and by ceasing from doing what is unhelpful and works against us we are in fact taking a step forward. In its own time the Refuge will fill that space within us. By being willing to offer our old habit patterns and simply accept that we do not know what to do we have enabled ourselves to receive deeper insights and make wiser choices. This brings gratitude and joy and inspires us to keep letting go and listening.

There are many pitfalls along the path of training and one of the most common, and understandable, is the urge to seek escape from the troubled feelings within us. Sadly this mistaken attempt to help ourselves always works against us by adding to our confusion.

Many good people find their own company hard to take because it hurts to look within, but when you stop and think about it, not being able to face what lies within your own body and mind is no way to live.

This turning away from ourselves creates and continues deep distress anxiety and a sense of loneliness. The pain and confusion within us needs help and the only one in the world who can take the healing light of truth to the troubled areas within you is you. This is why it is so important that we never give up on ourselves or the practice, (ultimately we come to see that the two are the same). Any movement towards connecting with rather than turning away from ourselves should be encouraged and valued.

As well as seeking escape from what is there turning away can also take the form of not allowing the feelings to arise in the first place. We can put an iron clamp of control on our minds and delude ourselves that we are serene and content when we are no such thing. Training is, at times, a bit like cleaning out a boil, it can have some messy aspects. If we tend to keep a tight grip of control on ourselves and have rigidly held views on what it is to practice Buddhism certain feelings, like anger rage hostility or resentment may be unacceptable to us, so we simply block them. Sometimes this may be from fear of making a mistake, (a good Buddhist is never angry), or from fear of what we will have to look at if we allow ourselves to open up. All attempts to escape come because we are not connecting deeply enough with the Refuge, we are still struggling on alone, trying to make life right instead of surrendering all to the tender heart of stillness. The help is there, waiting to flood in and the practice will enable us to receive it, without that help we will never complete this great journey.

Another possible pitfall on the path of dealing with feelings is becoming obsessed by them. Thinking of ourselves as one who has a really hard time or seeing our karma as the cross we have to bear re-enforces our ability to suffer. It holds onto and continues the illusory world of "me", so we must take great care not to become our own magnificent obsession.

This is where practising moment to moment awareness in daily life comes into its own. When the thoughts get entangled in "me and my problems" we can call the mind back to the activity of the moment and, with energy and vigour, ground ourselves in

the here and now. This gives us an anchor of stability and it reassures the distress within us that we are doing something to help it.

If you feel you cannot stop constantly thinking about yourself then break the chain of thought by saying the three Refuges, I take my Refuge in the Buddha, I take my Refuge in the Dharma, I take my Refuge in the Sangha, or repeating a line from the scriptures that is meaningful to you. What matters is that we make the effort to cut habitual thought patterns that work against us.

If you feel lost or swamped by feeling it can help to be able to talk openly and honestly to those who can listen with a sympathetic and confidential ear. This is where the sangha refuge of contact with a trusted senior monastic comes into its own. When you feel that someone can understand and sympathise with you it can be easier to hear the truth from them, and the truth is that there is always a way forward.

Buddhism is very practical and the next step is always something that we are capable of taking. Sometimes we miss it because it seems small and unspectacular, but it is there and going for refuge can help us to find it.

If, at the moment, you cannot accept your feelings and sense resistance towards being still with yourself then just note that this is so. Ask the Refuge for help and begin by simply enduring that which is hard to bear. This is a noble act and will pave the way to acceptance in the future. Once we can allow feelings to be there without trying to block or run from them the way forward opens up and the rest is just a matter of time. There is no need to feel defeated because some feelings are more than you can sit still with right now. Put the big issues on one side and just keep a steady practice going. Perhaps you have an explosive temper that gets the better of you but find that you are able to work on the smaller more manageable aspects of anger, like letting go of minor irritations when kept waiting. Look for what you can do and do that. Many tiny cracks can split a huge boulder and, before you know it, you will see that you are making progress.

All the time we are training we are changing. So often we cannot look at or be still with feelings because of the limits we have placed upon our own minds. Daily practice keeps pushing those limits further back enabling us to let into our minds aspects of ourselves that we previously found daunting.

In our society we place much importance upon feelings and usually divide them into three groups, good bad and indifferent. When feelings we dislike arise we hope they will go away whereas we want to hold onto and maintain the ones we like. Buddhism encourages us to explore this world of feeling so that we can have a deeper insight

into what we are doing and a clearer understanding of the consequences of our thoughts and actions.

For example excitement is seen as being fun and something that enriches our lives, whereas despair is considered unpleasant and to be avoided. Reflecting upon these feelings shows us that they are two sides of one coin. If we push the pendulum out in one direction (excitement) it is only a matter of time before it swings the other way (despair), hence we set in motion our own suffering. So studying the world of feeling is also to study the law of cause and effect.

The mind that is driven by like and dislike is the mind that suffers. Meditation gives us the opportunity to end that suffering. If we sit with a happy good feeling we see that in order to stay with that defining thought (that it's a happy feeling) we have to hold ourselves back from meditating. In-fact to think in that way we have to stay in the head and view the feeling through the discriminatory mind which mistakenly thinks it's perception is real. Once we let go and turn the gaze within so that what is arising is viewed through the eyes of the hara / meditation it becomes just a feeling and, as our awareness is drawn deeper it fades altogether and there is only the stillness of the Refuge. If we do this with an unpleasant feeling we will find exactly the same thing, for pleasure and pain have a common root. They are as waves that rise and fall and every wave is of the ocean and the depths of the ocean remain the same no matter what happens on the surface.

From my experience, as someone who came to training thirty years ago with painful unresolved issues I found that I began with feelings and emotions flying out in all directions. As I kept steadily following the practice they spilled out less and became contained within my body and mind. This was still very uncomfortable at times but I could sense things moving in the right direction and, in my heart, I knew that the practice was working.

As the years went by it was as though the scales began to tip the other way. Instead of the world of feeling being in the ascendancy the steadfast rock of the Refuge of training came to the fore with clarity and strength. Faith and stillness deepened as I felt all the confusion and distress being drawn into the hara / sitting place.

Sometimes, when meditating, an image would come to mind of two tender golden hands holding the pain. I felt safe in those hands.

Gradually the feelings and all that lay behind them were no more than a tiny dot in the centre of my hara. I noticed that that dot was the source of my sense of "me", of self, and that the remaining troubled feelings emanated from that spot. What naturally

developed was an attitude of love and caring towards it. I would place my hands on the area where I felt it to be and say "I am glad that you came to me, put your hand in mine and we will walk on together. I will never turn from you". Within stillness the healing love of the universe flows and in those private moments the harmonization of body and mind deepens. All the causes and conditions that brought about our birth and the eternal Buddha Nature are drawn together within the great mystery that is training.

Now we can confidently sit with what arises, feel it fully without being driven by it and know joy and content in its midst. A deep longing to fully resolve the karma arises and we know, beyond a shadow of doubt, that the help we need to do that work will come. This confidence in the Refuge enables the body to gradually release residual karma into our consciousness so that it can be seen and resolved within the flow of meditation.

Finally that little dot vanished, like water dissolves stone and nothing was left. Where that dot, that sense of "me" had been was an opening to the universe, to limitless vastness. Here there is no me, no male or female, life or death. We know both our own completeness and that there is nothing from the first. If a feeling arises that disturbs me I see it as the ringing of the meditation hall bell calling me to reflect within, it is an opportunity to do the work of training.

Buddhism tells us the truth. It tells us that feeling is the reaper of karma and that if we do not sit still and train with those difficult feelings they will become our reality and we will create a character and personality that we mistakenly believe to be real around that unresolved pain. We create our own suffering through the choices we make. Training enables us to make wiser choices and to turn our lives around. It shows us that all the troubled feelings within us are the raw material of enlightenment, the diamond in the rough, the mud from which the lotus grows. If we turn away from them we turn from all that we truly long for.

Training leaves us content to be ordinary people who can love laugh cry and let go. We see that it is normal to have feelings and that they need neither create nor re-enforce a sense of self. They are no more than phenomena, arising and passing and, like a mirage, have no fixed substance. They are as writing on water where the water (the true nature of our mind) does not hold the imprint.

It helps to remember that the reason we have a human life at all is to do this spiritual work and, because of this, every one of us has what we need within us to complete the task. It is hard work, not quick and requires patience, trust and above all a willingness to let go of both all that we think we are and on a moment by moment

basis. When we feel the effects of training, when fear is transformed into content and delusion gives way to clear sighted vision, when we come to see and understand what made us the way we were and that we no longer have to go on being that way we never, for one moment, doubt that it was worth the effort.

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