

The Story-telling Mind

June, 2001 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu

We've all read how the practice of meditation can dismantle our sense of self as we take a good hard look at the things we identify as *me* or *mine*. When you meditate you're supposed to come into the present moment and drop all reference to the future or the past and simply look at things as they arise. But some futures and pasts are easier to drop than others. Even if you can drop them for the time you're in meditation, you've got to come back and live with them when you come out of meditation.

This whole issue of the narratives of our lives, the stories we tell ourselves: If we could just drop them and be done with them, life would be awfully easy. Meditation would be easy. But some narratives are stickier than others. We know that the Buddha's teachings involve learning to drop a lot of things, but in some cases, before you can drop them, you have to learn how to do them skillfully. The stories you tell yourself about your life are among the things you have to learn how to do skillfully. Otherwise, you can come out of a nice, peaceful meditation, and meet up with the same old rotten story all over again. You'll find yourself relating to it and getting tied up in it again and again and again. Or else you find that you can't even get into the meditation to begin with, because no matter how hard you try to drop the story it stays stuck to your hand.

So a good part of the meditation is often not just being with the breath but — if you find you've got a story that keeps obsessing the mind, stirring up greed, anger, delusion, fear, whatever — learning how to deal with that story, learning how to tell yourself new stories. Learn a corrective to the old stories. One of the basic ways of doing this is to reflect on the passage we chanted just now, developing thoughts of goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity. Try to develop these attitudes with respect to those stories so that you can tell yourself new stories that are easier to let go of in a liberating way.

In other words, you don't just push the stories away. You weave a new story and then you get to the point in the story where it's time to settle down and meditate. That way the story will leave you alone. When you come back out of meditation, the story may still be there but it's not the kind of story that's going to get you all worked up. It's been refashioned.

Learn to get more and more skillful at the way you tell stories in the mind, starting out with an attitude of goodwill. First, goodwill for yourself. You realize that if you sit here telling yourself bad stories over and over again, you're going to suffer. Do you want to suffer? Well, no. Do you want other people to suffer? Well, maybe. You may think about people who've wronged you, and of how much you'd like to see them get their just desserts. In cases like this, you have to ask yourself what you're going to gain from their suffering. You don't benefit in any way from their suffering. The fact that you're sitting there wishing suffering on them is harming *you* right now, getting in the way of your meditation.

So what you want is a story for yourself that ends up with your being happy and their being happy. That's your wish. That's the basic foundation for all the rest of the sublime attitudes.

Now in some cases you see where people are actually harming themselves, harming you, harming others. That's where you need compassion. Think about it. You really wish they could stop. And of course the same thing applies to you. When you're harming yourself, you wish you could stop causing that harm. "It would be good for that harm not to happen. It would be good for those people not to suffer." Remind yourself of that attitude.

For appreciation, you remind yourself of your goodness, of the goodness of other people, the things you've done that make you deserve to be happy, the things that other people have done that make them deserve to be happy. You're not jealous or resentful of their happiness and you don't downplay their good points.

Finally, equanimity, when you realize that some things are simply beyond your control: No matter how much goodwill you feel for other people, no matter how much appreciation and compassion you feel, some things lie totally beyond what you can change. Number one, the past cannot be changed. You have to develop equanimity toward the past. Look at what the Buddha has you think about to develop equanimity: the principle of kamma. Old kamma is old kamma and cannot be undone. What's important is your new kamma, what you're doing right now. Now, that can effect some things, but there are other things beyond the power of new kamma, largely through the continuance of old kamma. You've got to think about that and learn how to develop equanimity in cases where equanimity is appropriate.

The Buddha isn't saying that equanimity is better than the other three attitudes. You just learn which situations require which attitude: which

situations require goodwill, which require compassion, which require appreciation, which require equanimity. In this way, equanimity is not simply passive acceptance. It's an ordering of your priorities, telling you to stop wasting energy on things that can't be changed, and to focus it instead on areas where good will, compassion, and appreciation can make a difference.

So you look at the stories you're telling yourself and try to inject them with these attitudes, and especially the teaching on kamma. There's no wrong that goes unpunished, no good that goes unrewarded. That's simply the way kamma is. Therefore, we don't have to carry around ledger sheets — which person did this, which person did that — with the fear that if the ledger sheet disappears then that person's not going to get the retribution he or she deserves. The principle of kamma takes care of that. But remember that it also takes care of you as well.

When you look at the satisfaction you get out of unskillful storytelling, you realize that it's pretty miserable. It's nothing you really want. It's nothing that stands up to any real scrutiny. When you see this, you find it easier to let go. You've got these other attitudes that will bring you into the present moment in a way that allows you to feel good about yourself. You're not allowing yourself to be victimized. At the same time you're not wishing ill on anybody. You do what can be done given the situation. And when the time comes where the mind needs a rest, the mind needs to settle down, that's what should be done right now. That's the best thing you can do right now. And that way the narrative leads you into the present moment.

You want to look at the attitudes you're fostering in your mind and make sure they're skillful ones — because the whole issue of kamma boils down to this: What you do right now is important. What was done in the past may have some influence on what you can do right now, but what you do right now is what's really important. And the possibility of doing something skillful right now is always present. When bad things come, you accept them as the results of past kamma, but if you realize you're doing bad kamma in the present as well, that's something you can't have equanimity for. You've got to change it. You can do your best in whatever the situation is, confident that it will work out — that if you keep on doing and saying and thinking skillful things, the results will have to be good.

So no matter how bad the situation, your hope lies in what you're doing right now. And the more you think about this, the more it brings the mind into the present moment. That's when it's ready to meditate.

If you look in the texts where the Buddha talks about the past, some of them go back many aeons, many cycles of the universe, describing how this happened, how that happened, where this came from, where that came from: long stories about past lives or cycles of lives. But these texts all end up by pointing to the basic principle that has shaped these things and is going to shape the future: the principle of kamma. And where's kamma being made? Right here, right now. So focus right here.

The same with all the cosmologies. When the Buddha describes the levels of being, the discussion comes down to where these levels of being come from. They come from the mind, from what the mind is doing in the present. Right here, right now.

Whatever the narratives are, when you tell them skillfully they bring you back to the present moment. So learn how to be a good storyteller, telling yourself the right stories, stories that will bring you into the present with a sense of confidence in your own abilities, with a sense of wellbeing, a sense of the importance of stilling the mind. No matter what the stories are — no matter what other people have done, no matter what you've done — there's a way of looking at them that can put the mind at rest. To try to find that way: This is what all the teachings on kamma, all the teachings on the sublime attitudes, are about. You weave new stories in the mind, stories in which you have a change of heart, new stories that come together right here, enabling you to stay right here with a sense of wellbeing, clarity, concentration, mindfulness, and discernment. Without anything tugging you back into the past, pulling you into the future, you're able to just be right here, right now, aware right here, right now, healing the mind right here, right now.

That's how you use the mind's storytelling ability to bring it to a point where it can just stop telling stories and look at what you've got. Learn to be skillful with what you've got right here, right now.

That's what the Buddha's teachings all come down to, this principle of skillfulness. How skillfully can you relate to the different things going on in your mind, for your own wellbeing, for the wellbeing of others around you? Meditation doesn't mean that you're cutting off any mental faculties. The mind has to tell stories. Even arahants can tell stories, can reflect on the past and plan for the future. They've simply learned to do it in a way that doesn't cause any suffering. And it's not just from their bringing the mind into the present moment. It also comes from reflecting on things in a certain way, using the Buddha's teachings as proper tools to weave skillful narratives. Let all the ways that the mind relates to itself in terms of past, future, narratives, stories,

worldviews, cosmologies — all your views — become skillful. Let them no longer be a cause for suffering.

Think of the practice as an all-around way of training the mind. You're not here just to get very skillful at noting or at being with the breath. You want the mind to become very skillful in all its activities. Ajaan Fuang once said to me, when I went back to reordain, that being a meditator requires being skillful in everything, not just sitting here with your eyes closed.

You approach everything as an interesting challenge: "What's the most skillful way of dealing with this? What's the most skillful way of dealing with that?" When you have that attitude, when you've developed it and trained it in your daily life, then when you come to the meditation, things go a lot easier.