

The Five Pillars of Transformation

Containing the Emotions

Today I'd like to talk about the fourth pillar of transformation: the fourth important principle of our practice that will help us to create the environment needed for genuine transformation. That fourth pillar is called Containing the Emotions.

Through becoming familiar with our awareness we learn to open ourselves more to the experience of 'non-selfness.' Here there isn't a controller or manipulator which is always in a mode of looking after itself, always in a state of fear, alienated and lonely, trying to shore itself up one way or another by any means possible. When we come to that openness and spaciousness that constitute our awareness and true condition, we make the discovery that awareness is in our body. It becomes clear to us that we must now bring our practice into our body more because that's where awareness is, and where transformation and liberation take place.

No longer are we trying to seek liberation in the head with our dualistic thinking and our developed and conditioned intellect, and all of that stuff we've completely attached ourselves to. Now we're turning away from the seduction found in the head, which is of the immaterial and coming instead into the form, into the body and the material. Find where the heart of awareness abides and discover that is where you also are. It is where aliveness, openness and stillness have their home and the space where the ability to reflect is discovered; and where, through that ability to reflect, wisdom arises. Now you realise the importance of coming into your body, now you have the chance to see and ponder, "I've woken up at last, I realise all this time I've been searching in the wrong place. Now I realise I have to come into my body, into my form to find my release. When I'm in my form and my awareness I'm in the moment and in the here and now. I'm here before thinking of good or bad or right or wrong; before running away from my aversions and fears and always trying to protect myself".

All this coolness and spaciousness is discovered in the body so now learn to return there with ever-developing conviction and cultivate the ability to reflect. Now begin to see how this world that has entrapped you works; that dualistic world that we call samsara that is created by self and maintained by self; where we remain in a state of perpetual reactivity through our habit of always grasping. Grasping doesn't only mean running after desires: it also means grasping at our aversions and reacting to our general non-understanding of how things really are; all is grasping. See that this whole samsaric world that we are enslaved to is nothing more than a process of continual grasping, all coming from a basic assumption of a self or a me and mine. In a mode of constant agitation, constant insecurity, with the dark cloud of loneliness never far away. Now we're discovering an open cool space where we can begin to see and observe. Like a mirror that reflects all that comes into its field of vision, through your awareness, become such a mirror of reflection and seeing, and a mirror of wisdom and knowing. See that samsaric world and how we perpetuate it by buying into it and how we reinforce it by continually renewing the cycle of becoming and see that this is the cause of suffering. When we have the ability to see and reflect in this way we will begin to build what is known as the Dharmic environment.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EMOTIONS

Find out for yourself that openness and clarity are actually experienced by being in awareness and the body, and through that clarity you will begin to discover that there is a part of your makeup that has a major influence on your thinking, wellbeing, grasping and sense of self: and that is your emotions. Discover the part they have to play as all these ingredients become intimately intertwined allowing the samsaric world to be created. Come also to realise that it is the emotions that give the whole of that samsaric world its life and energetic volition to grasp. Now you will begin to see the importance of the emotions and the part they have to play in our aspiration to understand, and see that without their involvement and power this samsaric world probably wouldn't even exist.

We have thoughts and mental pictures, we have the whole world that we lose ourselves in and get carried away by, but without this other component we call emotions, our world would in fact be quite benign and transparent and have no power over us; our world would instead be light, playful and quite harmless.

Thoughts and our ability to reflect are a part of what we are as humans and what separates us from the animals, allowing us to make decisions and choices. Thoughts in and of themselves are an important tool but neutral and harmless in their nature and not a part of our emotions. Because it can become possible to go beyond the involvement of the emotions and self identity during meditation it becomes possible to see straight through thoughts, glimpsing their benign nature. Indeed so benign and transparent are they that we may even wonder if there are any thoughts there in the first place.

THE BENIGN NATURE OF THOUGHTS

If we gather ourselves up and become still we can see this very strange phenomenon called thought manifesting out of the void that abide for a few moments and then disappears back into the void. This will always happen to thoughts if we don't grasp at them with the assumption that these thoughts belong to me or I am these thoughts. But we don't do this very often, do we? Rather we look at them and say "This is me, these are mine" and reach out and grasp. This grasping is only possible because of self-identity, and self-identity and grasping is only possible because we give the process energy and volition. The self appropriates our emotional energy that before it becomes our emotions is actually the life force that keeps us alive and is at the heart of the mystery of life itself. The sense of a self cannot come into being without some sort of grasping so it needs the emotions to give it its volition and very life. The emotions become its property and it says "These emotions are mine. I am these emotions". So the emotions become the power, force and driving energy behind the grasping self.

With such power and velocity the force can be quite tremendous at times as we all know, when for example, we're really angry or we really want something. That grasping power, that grasping energy just possesses us and carries us away; we lose all awareness during these times and often have little control. But now through practice we are beginning to have more awareness, we can now begin to see that without that energy, that power and emotion, this world we're trapped by would possess us much less. Now hopefully we begin to turn our attention to our emotions and realise that this practice cannot be just a mental exercise whereby all you need to do is think and figure your way out through all your stuff to enlightenment and nirvana, where all you need to pursue is some sort of meditation technique that has logic and a goal: now you realise this would not be enough.

What we need to focus on is the thing that gives this samsaric world life in the first place and if we can somehow tame and transform that power, then the samsaric world would begin to fade. So rather than get lost in mental duality, and the complexity of our samsara we now need to determine to turn our attention to the emotions and look at them to see where they come from and how they are created and become entangled with the sense of self.

THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS

In Zen there is an expression that describes all the dharmas and mental activities the mind creates as the ten thousand things. Many of us think that practice is about getting to understand the ten thousand things that we are continually creating and then get caught by and somehow understand each one and try to change them, or if not, always be giving them our attention. By doing this we think that we'll get to understand what they are about and that wisdom will come to make them fall away. But as soon as we start to play with or manipulate those thoughts invariably others arise followed by still more and so on it goes: ten thousand of them. Always mesmerised and caught by their constant flow, we are never able to become free. But now, because we are learning to come into the body and see our body as being at the centre of our mandala of practice, we've discovered we can now leave the ten thousand things alone and instead focus on that which brings the ten thousand things into life in the first place: our emotional involvement. Rather than concern ourselves with the mental pictures and thoughts, we now turn our attention instead to the emotional involvement we have with them.

THE COMPASSIONATE DHARMA

Because we are now bringing our focus into the body we can give up chasing things in the head and learn instead to be still, open and spacious. Now we're opening up to our emotional involvement and reactions and becoming aware of them. We don't have to be particularly conventionally intelligent and educated to do this, in fact we don't have to have had any sort of education at all. We don't need to be articulate and have those worldly qualities and social status that so many of us think we need in order to fulfill the aspiration for freedom.

Fortunately the Dharma in its compassion doesn't reserve itself for educated and so-called intelligent people, but rather makes itself available to all humans: this is why the Dharma is rejoiced in as being all compassionate. Because the Dharma is beyond the intellect and its manipulation it is fundamentally simple by its nature; and that simplicity of Dharma is focused on whilst learning to open to what is right in front of us at this moment. This has nothing to do with education but is direct experience. Because we are human what we experience in this moment will nearly always have some sort of physical aspect to it, even if it is the neutrality of a feeling. Emotions too can often be present as a part of a direct experience before thoughts of like and dislike or good or bad arise. It is in this direct experience before thinking where liberation is to be found. So now rather than trying to think our way out of our dukkha and create still more duality by chasing the ten thousand things with different practices, instead we're now opening up to the whole of the experience and giving our attention to this moment and our emotional reaction and attachment to it.

THE GAP

Rather than chase after the ten thousand things as we have always done in the past, with aliveness and our awareness we stay mentally still and bright rather than get lost in that world of dualistic thought. In that moment before a familiar habit attaches itself to that experience, usually a desire or an aversion, there is a

little gap whereby within that awareness we have a few moments before we fall into our old reactive habit and say “no”.

We have those moments before our conditioning takes us away: now through awareness we can stop ourselves and say, “No, I’m not going to do that, I’m not going to react, I’m not going to chase after that as I’ve always done in the past. Now I’m going to open and instead restrain myself and not go down that old familiar habitual road”. But if that habit is strong, if it is something that we are very attached to and see as something precious, containing the power of attachment becomes difficult as the self says “This is me, I exist, and I am alive”. Attachment is the only opportunity for the self to reaffirm itself. “This is my desire, this is my aversion, and this is my fear.”

The fact that we have such emotional attachment to our habits makes our containment that much more difficult. We can become blind to what we are doing; blinded by our emotions, as the saying goes. How very true this is. But now because we have awareness and commitment to our practice, we begin to say no when we are about to be caught and carried by our emotional involvement with situations. Now, when the emotions come up in whatever scenario involving the ten thousand things it may be, we learn to open and embrace the emotion as it does its best to run off into its familiar thoughts, mental pictures and actions, that allow the self to bring the world into being. Now we learn to say no. This is not in any way a rejection or suppression; we’re not pushing away, in fact quite the opposite as we learn instead to open to the experience and embrace it. We’re opening and we’re saying yes to an emotional fire and a precious possession of the self: to bearing with what is often a powerful frustrating experience containing desire, aversion, or fear and to allowing it to burn itself out and fade away.

Buddhism likes to call our emotional reactions fires and puts those fires into categories that are labelled greed, hatred and delusion. With our form of practice we let those fires come up because we see them as the heart of transformation. We pay little attention to the ten thousand things nor do we try to figure them out as we did in the past with other forms of practice: now we give our attention primarily to that which gives the ten thousand things life in the first place. Now our attention is with the emotion, so, when an emotion arises, we learn to open and embrace it and catch it before it catches us and to develop the ability to embrace that energy and all its manifestations with the ever-present aid of awareness. If you lose your awareness the fire will rise and become hot and you will once again chase after the ten thousand things. You will be lost in one of your habits creating karma and no doubt creating difficulties for yourself and for others and spinning the wheel of becoming.

THE WHEEL OF BECOMING

The wheel of life or becoming is regarded as a very important concept in Buddhist philosophy and teachings. The wheel or cycle is created and kept in motion by the volition of our habitual actions and reactions, and it’s at the time of our volitional actions that we create this cycle and perpetuate its momentum. It’s exactly at those moments when we create those actions that karma is created and bondage to the cycle of rebirth is reinforced. By seeing your actions in this way and by learning to bear with your habit and say no, you’ll be doing something very profound because you are beginning to change the course of your karma and the course of your cycle of becoming.

AT ONE-MENT

You're learning to open and embrace what is a direct experience, and by doing so you'll, as the analogy I've often used puts it, taste the ice cream. Tasting the ice cream before thinking is a direct physical experience in your body and in the moment. This isn't a mental exercise; this is real absolute direct experience. There are no dualistic creations. No theorising, no space between you and the object, only being at one.

This containment and your willingness to stay with the experience are truly at the heart of transformation. If there is an emotional fire, then learn to stay with it and bear with it. See your emotions as fires, because fires can blind us to our actions; they reinforce the self, and can wreak havoc both for ourselves and for others. Here, right now, right in front of us in this very moment, is where we can change all that. This is why retreat environments like this are so useful. Do you realise how profound these situations can be if we are only prepared to use them to their full potential; and make full use of the opportunity of sending that whole wheel of becoming into permanent and everlasting change?

THE ANALOGY OF THE FIRE

I will give you a simple analogy that should help you understand how we can transform that often times destructive and powerful energy that grips us so tightly into a force for real change.

Imagine you come across a fire; maybe one that is burning outside here on open ground, fuelled by old branches and leaves. You decide you would like to extinguish this fire so you ponder how you could best go about the task. As you're here on retreat and practising the Dharma and beginning to discover the difference between the Dharmic way of dealing with life situations and the worldly way of dealing with things with its life time of conditioning that you're more familiar with, you decide to make use of the situation and ponder the difference between the two ways of achieving your aim.

The worldly way of dealing with the fire is fairly obvious; you'd do something like throw water on it or maybe stamp or smother it somehow. You would for sure achieve your objective but realise in doing this the fuel that is responsible for the fire in the first place would still be there, so at some time, when it recovers from your actions, it would return to the condition whereby it could be reignited. On pondering this outcome you realise that the task wouldn't really be finished properly as the cycle could once again return and there would be another fire that you or someone else would have to deal with. But now with a growing understanding of the Dharma and of how things work you realise that there is an alternative way of dealing with the fire, and you could draw lessons from this experience that could easily be applied to other situations in your life.

Now you decide not to give in to your normal worldly reaction and habit of doing something to quell the fire but instead just to leave it alone to burn itself out. You remain with the fire and stay on guard to see that it doesn't get out of control and to make sure that you don't need to take any drastic action. Discover all you are now 'doing' to extinguish the fire is staying with it and leaving it alone, and in time, and because you are not throwing more leaves and branches on it, it will burn itself out.

Now for the first time you are discovering a new way of dealing with fire and a way that has quite far reaching consequences.

Any fire, whether big or small if left alone and seen over with diligence and patience will come to the same end by naturally burning itself out. If fuel isn't thrown on the fire there can be no other outcome but eventual extinction.

THE WORLDLY WAY

Our emotions are powerful fires and easily possess us to the extent that when they flair up they catch us with their intensity and we react according to our ingrained habits. These habits have the effect of reinforcing those very same habits so that they may return again in the future. Using our fire analogy, this not only keeps the fire burning but also stores away fuel for a future fire. Whatever our reaction is, be it a fire of desire that we run after, or a fire of aversion that makes us hit out one way or another, or a fire created by fear that may make us hit out in defence or recoil and run to hide, we are in these moments effectively throwing fuel on the fire, and storing up still more fuel, so prolonging the emotional fire's life and power. Emotion fires come in all shapes and sizes but however they manifest if we react we will only be storing yet more fuel for our fires so they may return again and again to reinforce our habits and our bondage to the cycle of becoming.

THE DHARMIC WAY

We are surely aware that our untamed emotions can so often lead us to unethical behaviour that is negative and destructive to ourselves and others. So transforming these powerful forces must always be at the heart of our aspiring to the spiritual path, and transforming the emotions has a particularly important part to play in the desire so many of us have to fulfill that path and become a true human being. By pondering the analogy of the fires we can discover the Dharmic way of transformation and bring that principle to our training and learn to contain them and let them burn themselves out; and by so training ourselves in this way not only does the fire burn out but also has the transforming effect of not creating and storing fuel for future fires.

As with the training applied to all of the pillars, awareness is the key and the way forward. Awareness is the one that sees and knows; it is intelligent and ever-present, so we bring awareness to an experience that in a few fleeting moments' time might become an emotional one. With the aid of awareness we give up that experience by containing it and by being on guard; and we continue to function as skilfully as possible in whatever situation we are at the time.

During our containment we avoid having opinions or trying to manipulate what we are containing in an attempt to make it go away or rationalise it. In short, we avoid having any sort of mental or physical input of any sort. We begin to discover the Dharmic way of dealing with it and that is to leave it alone: but always retain that mirror-like quality of awareness that is fully present, fully attentive but never gets involved - so revealing the central characteristic of our 'practice', which is to do nothing!

The mirror-like quality that is our awareness never tries to manipulate but only sees and knows, and from that seeing and being present we can aspire to contain the emotional reaction and retain it firmly in its home which is the hara found below the navel in our body.

Our habit has always been to get emotionally and mentally involved with experiences. Our emotions take control and off we go in a familiar way with all the mental habits associated with it. Now we are aspiring to stay with the experience and contain the volition created by the fire. We contain that habit and by staying with

awareness we de-clutch from being carried by the mental and physical habit. By entering the training and retaining awareness of the experience, we are less inclined to be carried away by the mental habit: if we allow ourselves to be carried away, we will lose awareness. By retaining awareness and containing the emotion, we will soon discover that this training is far more physical than any practice done before. Now it is about continually returning to the body and containing the emotional reaction to prevent it from flaring up in its all too familiar way.

THE DHARMIC ENVIRONMENT

Here we apply the principle that defines our way of practice in the clearest and most direct way. Now we begin to learn not to react and allow one of our habits to come to life again but to rest in awareness so that it creates a space and, rather than react, do nothing. Here lies the key to change right here in these moments before the self rises and expresses itself through an established habit. That space is called the Dharmic environment and it is this environment that we need to nurture and bring to our life over and over again. When we can stay in this space before we react, we can begin to open and become steadily more familiar with that self-created world and get to understand what makes it what it is. Through a willingness to contain the emotional thrust and be alive to the mental thoughts and pictures that we create around the event, the path of insight begins to unfold. With awareness that allows you to contain the emotional habit, learn to carry that physical emotional reaction that will hit you in the lower part of your body that we call the hara or emotional seat of being, and to open to that spacious environment with clarity and to become ever more intimate and familiar with the world you are creating around that habit.

By training ourselves in this way, clear seeing begins to arise as to the reasons why we are the way we are. With the Dharmic mind of clear seeing and insightful penetration, we learn through intimacy to make friends with the habit, which almost certainly is born of conflict and reaction, so our attachment to the habit begins to fade and fall away. Through containing the thrust of the emotion and, in time, through letting go of the thing it is grasping at, the emotion will turn back into its true nature before it was appropriated by the self and its world of ignorance and non-understanding, and you will be free of the bondage that has been your master for so long.

The key is non-doing. Learn to bear with and stay with the emotional thrust that gives life to the habit and attachment; through that non-doing the world that we create will begin to go into change. By bringing the qualities of awareness' mirror-like nature of seeing, non-attachment and non-involvement, we allow the world to play itself out through containment on the stage of awareness without giving it the life-blood of emotional reaction.

With the fading of our attachment to those habits we've been caught by for so long, we begin to become free. So when life's challenges unfold in their unremitting way we will have not only the inner strength that we have gained through containment and bearing with, but discover that we no longer need the things that we had to defend ourselves with because those things no longer bother us. When someone says something to you that in the past would have made you put up your defences, this will now pass through you without affecting your emotional wellbeing. You will now be able to reflect back to the time when you were on this retreat and learned the Dharmic principle of dealing with the fire you discovered, and rather than do something to it to make it go out, instead stood guard over it and allowed it to burn itself out, leaving no residue. Then you will have seen how you've taken that Dharmic mind of non-doing into your life and found the freedom you've always desired.