

The Five Pillars of Transformation

Taming Restlessness

Stillness

Yesterday I introduced you to the meditation that we train ourselves with. Some of you are already familiar with this form and have it as their practice; for some it is probably new and quite radical compared to your more dualistic forms of developmental practice. I hope with time you will come to see that this meditation is non conceptual, has no stages and has nothing to develop, but simply requires you to learn to be still and rest in your open and all-embracing awareness. When you stop running after your thoughts and pictures and learn to let them go, you will soon start to become familiar with what you discover to be your natural state of being.

Maybe you are thinking “I am going to create stillness. I will go to my meditation cushion and practise being still” and have the idea that you’re constructing and creating something. That is a mistake, because actually stillness is already there: stillness is actually your true and natural condition. This is what you really are, just beyond the mental turmoil that you create, below the agitation, below the chattering mind, underneath your attachments to greed, hatred and delusion. Beneath all this there is a stillness and spaciousness that you can discover as being there all the time.

Awareness is the door to that stillness, in fact you will come to see that awareness *is* that stillness. And slowly, through familiarity of coming to stillness and spaciousness, you will begin to awaken to your true condition. This awakening isn’t something you have to seek over there somewhere, nor do you need to do lots of things to create this state of being, that most of us would agree is a very desirable one to experience and be in; a selfless state of stillness where we’re free from our desires and aversions. We are tasting our natural condition and we Buddhists who feel an affinity to the Mahayana school give it the label ‘Buddha nature’ or ‘true nature’. You can come close to your true nature and get a real taste of it when you cultivate familiarity with stillness through the type of meditation that we pursue in our group. This is what we aspire to; this is called awakening. Awakening is a slow process but without doubt if genuinely in place will lead you to your true nature and to how things really are.

The Eternal Jewel

Imagine somebody saying to you that at the bottom of the pond in the park you walk through every day is a magnificent precious jewel, just resting there. This precious jewel has always been in the pond and is there right now, but can you see it? No, you can’t; and the reason why you can’t see it is because the wind seems always to be blowing the surface creating ripples and a state of agitation, so preventing you from seeing into

its depths.

This is how we are: just below our mental, physical and emotional agitation is a shining bright jewel, is something so magnificent that just to glimpse it would transform your life, and that jewel, that is inside all of us, aches for you to discover and know it, but you can't because of this agitation. And yet if, like looking into the pond, the agitation that prevents you from seeing were to settle and become still for just a few moments, you would smile and exclaim "Ahhh, I see." See right the way through, right through the veneer of the mind to the very heart of your being and find your very own jewel that has been patiently waiting there for you to discover.

Because you are beginning to bring your naked unconditioned awareness to the centre of your practice you now begin to realise, probably for the first time, the importance of learning to be still. To see that the need to bring stillness into the centre of your mandala of practice is such an important aspiration in leading you to your liberation and going beyond your dukkha, and the basic unsatisfactory nature of your life.

The Four Postures

Soon you will become aware that the true spirit of this practice cannot be fulfilled simply by staying on the cushion but needs also to be brought into all the postures of your daily life. The ability to cultivate stillness throughout your life needs to be at the forefront of your awareness as you live each day.

By bringing ourselves to this issue we can see how much we are consumed not by stillness but by agitation that we call restlessness, and how this characteristic is with us all the time. We have always been aware of how the mind is restless with its constant chattering, but now we become aware that restlessness is manifesting in the body also, and the emotions, and even reflects in our speech. The whole of our being seems to be in perpetual state of restlessness one way or another. So now you see that to get to grips and tame that constant agitation has to become a priority in your training if you are to aspire to the clarity of awakening.

We are now prepared to bring awareness to the whole of ourselves and accept that to begin taming our restlessness is not an option if we to be free. Our focus becomes more inclusive and we see with ever growing clarity that nothing in our entire makeup is outside of training; nothing in mind, body and emotions should escape our attention and be allowed to get through the net of awareness. Now our training takes on a spirit of totality. Not one experience or one second of our waking life can now be seen as being outside our practice.

Now we see it is important to become alive and tame through discipline and commitment so much of the life-force that through its countless manifestations and expressions is in a state of constant agitation, and understand why taming restlessness is one of the pillars of transformation.

The Body

When we observe the three major aspects of our makeup: mind, body and emotions, we see that they are

seldom still. In fact one of them at least is always on the go, and that one we all know is the chattering mind. It doesn't matter what we are actually thinking, does it? As long as there are thoughts the mind seems to be fulfilling itself. Often what is going through our chattering mind has little to do with what we are engaging with at the time, including the thoughts we may occasionally have that we wouldn't even dare tell our best friend about - isn't that true?

The chattering mind is an obvious manifestation of restlessness, but now learn through awareness to observe the rest of your being, and come to realise that although it may be bordering on the impossible to tame the restless mind, taming your emotions and your restless body becomes a definite possibility.

Restlessness in Meditation

To expand I will use as an example the sitting meditation practice that we are now engaging in together over the next few days. We are sitting for several hours each day which I think for a lot of us is quite a challenge. Some of us have been here before and can deal with the difficulties that come up through just trying to be still, for others this is not so easy.

We are coming here each day sitting and crossing our legs and simply trying to remain still so we can engage with our meditation. We are not here to learn acrobatics, are we? We are not trying to find some way of walking along the ceiling or learning to do somersaults or training ourselves into doing all sorts of very difficult things, are we? All we are doing is learning to be still so we can engage with our meditation; yet how difficult is this? Just learning to be still, that's all. Yet we can all see what we are dealing with.

There are energy forces inside of us all that seem to be saying "No, sorry, you can't be still!", and there is reason why these forces seem to be saying this. When you become truly still something inside loses its sense of being and that is the self or ego. Keeping you in restlessness is one of the ego's primary tools in retaining its sense of being, and having the effect of keeping you away from seeing the truth. It is as if it is saying "If you are still, I will no longer be in control, I will be disempowered and fade away, so I must keep you in a constant state of distraction and agitation, if not mentally then physically".

I've found it hard to believe on some retreats I've led over these past few years how many practitioners shuffle around on their cushion. Meditation takes place in stillness, it does not take place when you are giving in to restlessness and move around, which is what many of these practitioners were doing. Maybe they were thinking "Oh well, it doesn't really matter, I am still doing my meditation technique". But that technique, whatever it may be, will never be fulfilled.

Clearly many do not realise that to be still is very important, even crucial, to the transforming process that they are all hoping for. I wonder how many of you here think this; think it unimportant if you shuffle around? As it happens this group is pretty good at keeping still, but nevertheless after a few minutes some of you do start to move. Some of you change your posture or start to move your blanket around because I imagine it doesn't feel

quite right, or is it because the pattern is slightly out of line? Or scratch your arm that has an itch. But this urge to move is something you need to learn to resist and bear with; bear with the emotional frustration that can come with trying to stay still. Begin to learn to bear with rather than give in to something that actually is not really that important, something that you could actually stay with but don't. Always be on your guard and realise the nature of self is very clever and is continually manifesting through restlessness; always looking for ways to get you to move, always getting you to give in.

In our society we have been brought up with always having options with almost anything we experience, and human nature being what it is we will invariably take the option that is the easiest. We are seldom encouraged to stay with things, to bear with things, to see things through. When things get a little difficult, a little bit uncomfortable or boring, we are seldom encouraged to just stay with, to open ourselves and see it through. Our desire to move on the cushion is of course because we are experiencing dukkha and to bear with dukkha may well compound that suffering; but because of our cultural habit of always having options we are tempted to take the easiest option and move. But Dharma practitioners should learn to take the first option. If we begin to train ourselves to remain with the dukkha we will be training ourselves to be still, not only to become still but also to open the door to transforming wisdom. Let me go further.

Itches and Discomforts

Often in the quiet of a group meditation period suddenly comes the unmistakable sound of someone scratching themselves. We all get an itch from time to time, don't we? It's what happens to the body. If we are aware of our body we will notice there is always some little irritation going on somewhere, but we practitioners have to learn to stay with those irritations and leave them alone; we have to learn to stay with and endure the discomfort. Let's face it most itches we experience are hardly anything serious but we've got ourselves into such a habit that even the tiniest little thing like an itch gives us an excuse to give in and move. But remember if you give in so easily to scratching yourself when meditating you are going to disturb whatever mental stability you managed to cultivate. You disturb that and then you've got to come back and probably start gathering up your mind again. And all of this just for the sake of indulging an ingrained habit to move.

If your legs are uncomfortable, are you prepared to put up with it, or are you going to give in and move or change your posture? Many of us aren't prepared to put up with it. We move, shift our posture and think about the pain we are going through "Oh my leg, oh this pain... my leg... I'm going to do damage to myself... I'm sure I'm going to end up in a wheel chair and without question, there is nobody in this room who is suffering more than me." Me, me, me, all this self-identity that we buy into. This is me, this is mine, this pain is me, this pain of mine. Actually, it is not your pain at all and to wake up to this fact is a major step along the path of insight.

In our aspiration to tame restlessness we see ever more clearly that bearing with the dukkha of frustration and discomfort is something we can no longer avoid by side-stepping or ignoring it. Now we bring right into the

centre of our mandala of practice the aspiration to bear with so much of our dukkha as manifests itself in the physical form through restlessness. We see more clearly that bearing with is a crucial feature of transforming our bondage and attachments; simply learning to bear with. In time it will become increasingly clear that the environment for transformation and awakening actually includes the dukkha you are now experiencing. So it becomes vital you accept the importance of no longer trying to avoid it, no longer trying to get rid of it because it's now the way of your practice and the discovery of liberation, freedom and awakening.

No more 'ducking and diving' avoiding stuff that I don't want but learning to stay with the clarity of awareness and a willingness to open to and accept the experience, and by doing so you will soon come to discover the most important principle of liberation on the Buddhist path - as the thing that you are staying with eventually goes into inevitable change - and that is that all things are impermanent.

Impermanence

Most of us would say without much hesitation that we understand what impermanence means, wouldn't we? But actually I think most of us don't know what impermanence really means; because if we truly did know the nature of everything that came into our experience as being impermanent we would not grasp at things the way we do. I think if we did really know impermanence we would have a much more circumspect attitude and tend to allow things to follow their natural course of change, without our habitual desire to grasp and control.

We don't see the truth of impermanence as being an impersonal law because if we did we would realise that, because everything is in a permanent flux, nothing could really ever become a tightly grasped possession. It would also make us doubt our absolute conviction of a solid and fixed 'me'.

So because we don't know the true meaning of the impersonal law of impermanence, when we sit on our cushion we don't let the itch come to be and cease to be, we don't let the pain in our leg come to be and cease to be. We grasp at the experience and make it 'my itch' or 'my pain', compounding the experience still further thus creating even more suffering and reaction.

As these particular experiences are unpleasant we try to avoid them by giving in to restlessness and frustration, and in doing so disturb our meditation. We are not prepared to remain still and stay with these experiences and let them show their impermanence, are we? We don't seem to be willing enough to bear with these experiences until they pass away and allow ourselves to remain in the non-grasping mirror-like nature of awareness, where the clarity of wisdom can arise and transform. If we really knew about impermanence this is what we would do, learn to just sit and contain restlessness, because we would know that to let things be and remain still is to be unattached, and in being unattached and beyond restlessness we find freedom and liberation from dukkha.

Become alive to your restlessness. Become aware of the emotional frustration and boredom of having to sit still and that urge to move. Resist the temptation to look around the room to see if others are sitting still and

upright and meditating properly. Even though someone has given up so much and is prepared to keep the time and ring the bell for you, you still want to check the time on your watch, maybe after convincing yourself that the time-keeper may have fallen asleep and now you're going to have to endure still more boredom and restlessness if you all have to sit past the end of the meditation period! Wake up to your restlessness and learn to bear with this habit that is so ingrained and manifests in countless ways. The monkey inside all of us is looking to keep you continually agitated, jumping around, ducking and diving. "I must scratch myself, I must move my legs I must...I must...I must..." Open to these karmic habits so ingrained in the sense of self; so powerful. Learn to bear with, learn to say "no". Learn to tame, learn to train.

Look at your restlessness and see how you are enslaved to something that's always pulling you around. The quiet environment we are in just now is a perfect place to reflect on this aspect of our makeup. But don't confine that reflection exclusively to your meditation but take this opportunity to reflect on the rest of your life as well; I am quite sure you will soon see how restlessness pays such a big part in it.

Busyness of Life

View all the things that you're involved with in your life, and ponder how many of those activities you have put there to fill your life so completely that you never have to face the uncomfortable prospect of being with yourself when you find there is nothing to do.

Reflect on the difficulty you have in staying with what goes on in your life. Reflect on how difficult it is to see through many activities you engage in during a normal day. How difficult it is when engaged upon a task to see it through to the end. To realise that everything you do has a beginning, middle and end. How many times do you start something and get bored or side-tracked half-way through and leave it, only to engage yourself with something else? See how difficult it is to just stay with one thing until it's finished because there is often a little monkey inside that wants to pull you away from what it is in front of you and take you on to something different. "Oh, I'm so busy I've got something else to do, I'll come back to that in a minute. Um, no, I'll come back to it tomorrow" Isn't this true?

Multi-tasking

There is a concept in society called multi-tasking which seems to carry great virtue: the ability to be engaged with several things at once. Of course we all have to be able to engage in multi-tasking from time to time; the busyness of our society demands we have that skill. But to be engaged with multi-tasking all the time is something people on the spiritual path need to be very careful of.

To be so caught up with things to the extent we are in a perpetual state of agitation, confusion and stress is not conducive to clarity and understanding. We need to take control of our lives. We need to have the clarity to restrain the untamed energy that will have us running this way and that until we exhaust ourselves. We need to be able to say "no", stop and take a deep breath and do each thing we have to do with single-mindedness and

wholeheartedness. All things we do have a beginning, middle and end. Restrain that restlessness that wants you to exit half way through with thoughts like “Oh, come on, hurry up, there is so much to do!” and get you to start something else. See that gaining awareness of your habitual restlessness in your daily life is something that needs your utmost attention, that will make you bring discipline and restraint to all that you do, allowing you to become the master of your circumstances rather than their victim.

In your daily life create a space whereby you have at least one hour, preferably two, that you spend completely on your own and do nothing. Let go of being busy and the need to be productive: learn to be with yourself and enjoy your own company. Potter around and relax; maybe relax and ponder the Dharma and your life. Yes, you have your daily period of sitting meditation when you’re on your own but that can easily be seen as doing something and being productive in a sort of way and is definitely something that is fixed into your daily routine. But being alone and not doing anything in particular has a different quality and should be seen as a crucial and important tool in getting to know yourself, being comfortable and making friends with what you are.

You can ask anyone on the street if they know what restlessness means and of course everyone would be familiar with this experience and would have a comment to make. But don’t regard this subject as being so mundane that you don’t need to give it much consideration because you’re only interested in the deeper aspects of Dharma. For I believe to do this would be to dismiss such a crucial feature on the path of transformation. Learn to tame restlessness in whichever way it manifests until the agitated waters of your own ignorance and delusion become still and clear, allowing you to see into the depths of your being, and discover the freedom of your true nature.