OPEN EYE
Meditation Group
See for Yourself

March 16 2021

Stability- Abiding with our Own Energy

The Stability of Ease
Three qualities every practitioner should cultivate
- Sogyal Rinpoche

These days, many people are very enthusiastic about the dharma, the teaching of the buddhas. What is so important, I feel, is that initial stage, when you're really in love with the dharma, when you feel inspired and enthusiastic. That's the time to go all out and get a good basis in the dharma and stabilize it.

What the dharma brings us, what it teaches us, very essentially, is to be pure, authentic, and natural. The first and most important thing is pure motivation. There's a famous story about a hermit long ago in Tibet called Geshe Ben. He was in retreat, and one day he heard that his sponsors, who were financing his retreat, were coming to visit him. So he cleaned his room, arranged the shrine very neatly, set out all the offerings perfectly, and then sat and waited for his sponsors to arrive. Suddenly, just before they arrived, he reflected on his motivation and said to himself, "What am I doing? This is all fake. I'm just hoping to create a good impression, that's all!" He snatched a handful of ash from the stove by his side and flung it all over the shrine and the offerings. A great master called Padampa Sangye who heard about this called it "the greatest offering in the whole of Tibet."

Pure motivation and a good heart are fundamental. I remember how Dudjom Rinpoche [1904–1987] always used to say that a person needs three qualities. The first, he said, is sampa zangpo—a good heart.

The second is tenpo—to be stable and reliable. One of our greatest problems is that we lack stability. However much we want to be stable and reliable, everything is so impermanent that things are always in a state of flux. Then, if our mind is not strong, we can be swept away by circumstances and changes. When everything is so impermanent, we become unreliable.

It seems that many people are all too stable when it comes to being negative—stable in their wrong views. Sadly, often that's not the case in terms of the teachings; the teachings have not become a part of us, so we don't have that stability.

For example, a string of beads has a thread running through all the beads, keeping them together. What we need is a thread too—of sanity and stability. Because when you have a thread, even though each bead is separate, they hang together. When we have the teachings in us, stabilizing us, there's a thread to keep our life together that prevents us from falling apart. And when you have this string, you have flexibility, too. That's how you can have the freedom to be unique and special and individual and still have stability and humor. This kind of character is what we need to develop; this character is the thread.

Without discipline, it's very difficult to develop stability; that's why we have a practice. And when we live according to the dharma, when we follow a teacher, when we follow the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, what it really does is bring us stability within ourselves. So, for example, when we have taken refuge, we find a refuge in ourselves; when we need ourselves, we are there for us. So often when we need ourselves, we're not there.

The third quality Dudjom Rinpoche spoke of is lhöpo—to be spacious, at ease with ourselves. If we are at ease with ourselves, we are at ease with others. If we are not at ease with ourselves, then we will be uncomfortable, especially in company. Imagine you find yourself at a smart party in Paris. All kinds of people are there, from different backgrounds, slightly different from you, and one very suave and successful person turns round to greet you. Even the way he says "bonjour" has a supercilious air about it, as he looks down his nose at you condescendingly. If you're at ease with yourself, there's no problem. He can drawl "bonjour" and look down on you, and you feel completely fine, because for you it is actually a bon jour, since you are well with yourself.

When we are well with ourselves, then whatever happens, it really doesn't matter, because we have equilibrium and stability. We don't feel any lack of confidence. If not, we're always on edge, waiting to see how someone reacts to us, what people say to us or think about us. Our confidence hangs on what people tell us about how we are, how we look, how we behave. When we are really in touch with ourselves, we know ourselves beyond what others may tell us. So these three qualities—a good heart, stability, and spaciousness—these are really what you could call basic human virtues.

Unlimited Friendliness
Three steps to genuine compassion
- Pema Chödrön

I've often heard the Dalai Lama say that having compassion for oneself is the basis for developing compassion for others.

Chögyam Trungpa also taught this when he spoke about how to genuinely help others—how to work for the benefit of others without the interference of our own agendas. He presented this as a three-step process. Step one is maitri, a Sanskrit word meaning lovingkindness toward all beings. Here, however, as Chögyam Trungpa used the term, it means unlimited friendliness toward ourselves, with the clear implication that this leads naturally to unlimited friendliness toward others. Maitri also has the meaning of trusting oneself—trusting that we have what it takes to know ourselves thoroughly and completely without feeling hopeless, without turning against ourselves because of what we see.

Step two in the journey toward genuinely helping others is communication from the heart. To the degree that we trust ourselves, we have no need to close down on others. They can evoke strong emotions in us, but still we don't withdraw. Based on this ability to stay open, we arrive at step three, the difficult-to-come-by fruition: the ability to put others before ourselves and help them without expecting anything in return.

When we build a house, we start by creating a stable foundation. Just so, when we wish to benefit others, we start by developing warmth or friendship for ourselves. It's common, however, for people to have a distorted view of this friendliness and warmth. We'll say, for instance, that we need to take care of ourselves, but how many of us really know how to do this? When clinging to security and comfort, and warding off pain, become the focus of our lives, we don't end up feeling cared for and we certainly don't feel motivated to extend ourselves to others. We end up feeling more threatened or irritable, more unable to relax.

I've known many people who have spent years exercising daily, getting massages, doing yoga, faithfully following one food or vitamin regimen after another, pursuing spiritual teachers and different styles of meditation, all in the name of taking care of themselves. Then something bad happens to them, and all those years don't seem to have added up to the inner strength and kindness for themselves that they need in order to relate with what's happening. And they don't add up to being able to help other people or the environment. When taking care of ourselves is all about me, it never gets at the unshakable tenderness and confidence that we'll need when everything falls apart. When we start to develop maitri for ourselves—unconditional acceptance of ourselves—then we're really taking care of ourselves in a way that pays off. We feel more at home with our own bodies and minds and more at home in the world. As our kindness for ourselves grows, so does our kindness for other people.

The peace that we are looking for is not peace that crumbles as soon as there is difficulty or chaos. Whether we're seeking inner peace or global peace or a combination of the two, the way to experience it is to build on the foundation of unconditional openness to all that arises. Peace isn't an experience free of challenges, free of rough and smooth—it's an experience that's expansive enough to include all that arises without feeling threatened.

I sometimes wonder how I would respond in an emergency. I hear stories about people's bravery emerging in crises, but I've also heard some painful stories from people who weren't able to reach out to others in need because they were so afraid for themselves. We never really know which way it will go. So I ponder what would happen, for instance, if I were in a situation where there was no food but I had a bit of bread. Would I share it with the others who were starving? Would I keep it for myself? If I contemplate this question when I'm feeling the discomfort of even mild hunger, it makes the process more honest. The reality gets through to me that if I give away all my food, then the hunger I'm feeling won't be going away. Maybe another person will feel better, but for sure physically I will feel worse.

Sometimes the Dalai Lama suggests not eating one day a week, or skipping a meal, to briefly put ourselves in the shoes of those who are starving all over the world. In practicing this kind of solidarity myself, I have found that it can bring up panic and self-protectiveness. So the question is, what do we do with our distress? Does it open our heart or close it? When we're hungry, does our discomfort increase our empathy for hungry people and animals, or does it increase our fear of hunger and intensify our selfishness?

With contemplations like this, we can be completely truthful about where we are but also aware of where we'd like to be next year or in five years, or where we'd like to be by the time we die. Maybe today I panic and can't give away even a crumb of my bread, but I don't

have to sink into despair. We have the opportunity to lead our lives in such a way that year by year we'll be less afraid, less threatened, and more able to spontaneously help others without asking ourselves, "What's in this for me?"

A fifty-year-old woman told me her story. She had been in an airplane crash at the age of twenty-five. She was in such a panic rushing to get out of the plane before it exploded that she didn't stop to help anyone else, including, most painfully, a little boy who was tangled in his seat belt and couldn't move. She had been a practicing Buddhist for about five years when the accident happened; it was shattering to her to see how she had reacted. She was deeply ashamed of herself, and after the crash she sank into three hard years of depression. But ultimately, instead of her remorse and regret causing her to self-destruct, these very feelings opened her heart to other people. Not only did she become committed to her spiritual path in order to grow in her ability to help others, but she also became engaged in working with people in crisis. Her seeming failure is making her a far more courageous and compassionate woman.

Right before the Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, he was tempted in every conceivable way. He was assaulted by objects of lust, objects of craving, objects of aggression, of fear, of all the variety of things that usually hook us and cause us to lose our balance. Part of his extraordinary accomplishment was that he stayed present, on the dot, without being seduced by anything that appeared. In traditional versions of the story, it's said that no matter what appeared, whether it was demons or soldiers with weapons or alluring women, he had no reaction to it at all. I've always thought, however, that perhaps the Buddha did experience emotions during that long night, but recognized them as simply dynamic energy moving through. The feelings and sensations came up and passed away, came up and passed away. They didn't set off a chain reaction. This process is often depicted in paintings as weapons transforming into flowers—warriors shooting thousands of flaming arrows at the Buddha as he sits under the Bodhi tree but the arrows becoming blossoms. That which can cause our destruction becomes a blessing in disguise when we let the energies arise and pass through us over and over again, without acting out.

A question that has intrigued me for years is this: How can we start exactly where we are, with all our entanglements, and still develop unconditional acceptance of ourselves instead of guilt and depression? One of the most helpful methods I've found is the practice of compassionate abiding. This is a way of bringing warmth to unwanted feelings. It is a direct method for embracing our experience rather than rejecting it. So the next time you realize that you're hooked—that you're stuck, finding yourself tightening, spiraling into blaming, acting out, obsessing—you could experiment with this approach.

Contacting the experience of being hooked, you breathe in, allowing the feeling completely and opening to it. The in-breath can be deep and relaxed—anything that helps you to let the feeling be there, anything that helps you not push it away. Then, still abiding with the urge and edginess of feelings such as craving or aggression, as you breathe out you relax and give the feeling space. The outbreath is not a way of sending the discomfort away but a way of ventilating it, of loosening the tension around it, of becoming aware of the space in which the discomfort is occurring.

This practice helps us to develop maitri because we willingly touch parts of ourselves that we're not proud of. We touch feelings that we think we shouldn't be having—feelings of failure, of shame, of murderous rage; all those politically incorrect feelings like racial prejudice, disdain for people we consider ugly or inferior, sexual addiction, and phobias. We contact whatever we're experiencing and go beyond liking or disliking by breathing in and opening. Then we breathe out and relax. We continue that for a few moments or for as long as we wish, synchronizing it with the breath. This process has a leaning-in quality. Breathing in and leaning in are very much the same. We touch the experience, feeling it in the body if that helps, and we breathe it in.

In the process of doing this, we are transmuting hard, reactive, rejecting energy into basic warmth and openness. It sounds dramatic, but really it's very simple and direct. All we are doing is breathing in and experiencing what's happening, then breathing out as we continue to experience what's happening. It's a way of working with our negativity that appreciates that the negative energy per se is not the problem. Confusion only begins when we can't abide with the intensity of the energy and therefore spin off. Staying present with our own energy allows it to keep flowing and move on. Abiding with our own energy is the ultimate nonaggression, the ultimate maitri.

Compassionate abiding is a stand-alone practice, but it can also serve as a preliminary for doing the practice of tonglen, the practice of taking in and

sending out. Tonglen is an ancient practice designed to short-circuit “all about me.” Just as with compassionate abiding, the logic of the practice is that we start by breathing in and opening to feelings that threaten the survival of our self-importance. We breathe in feelings that generally we want to get rid of. On the out-breath of tonglen, we send out all that we find pleasurable and comfortable, meaningful and desirable. We send out all the feelings we usually grasp after and cling to for dear life.

So we start by making friends with our experience and developing warmth for our good old selves. Slowly, very slowly, gently, very gently, we let the stakes get higher as we touch in on more troubling feelings. This leads to trusting that we have the strength and good-heartedness to live in this precious world, despite its land mines, with dignity and kindness. With this kind of confidence, connecting with others comes more easily, because what is there to fear when we have stayed with ourselves through thick and thin? Other people can provoke anything in us, and we don’t need to defend ourselves by striking out or shutting down. Selfless help—helping others without an agenda— is the result of having helped ourselves. We feel loving toward ourselves and therefore we feel loving toward others. Over time, all those we used to feel separate from become more and more melted into our heart.