

Affectionate Awareness in Vipassana

When we practice vipassana, the importance of equanimity cannot be overstated. Equanimity supports the investigation of the Dhamma. In order to investigate impartially, without aversion, fear, preference or expectation and clarity, we need to establish a very open-minded, open-hearted attitude. This we can call pure vipassana.

However, sometimes while sitting, stuff comes up which is scary or very painful. Fears, anger, guilt, shame and so on. Our normal reaction is to shy away from them. We try to push them away by using the noting word as a pointing finger, stabbing at them. Or we simply bounce off them into happy daydreams. Or we push them down by falling asleep. If these mental states are too much to bear, we become very restless and go for a cup of tea.

Here is one way we can help ourselves bear with these heavy emotions and moods. We bring the heart into play. Imagine yourself as a physiotherapist with a suffering patient who needs to stretch and exercise their limbs after a severe car accident. The excruciating pain is a necessary part of the healing process and the physio has to be firm, but also kind, gentle and encouraging.

So it is within ourselves. Should an intense emotion or mood arise, we note it, and create a distance from it. The noting word, e.g. fear, fear, helps us to create that distance. Once that objectivity is there, not matter how tenuous, raise that old TLC, tender loving care, and as it were, hold the mental state in a warm embrace. You might even imagine your hands surrounding it. If you find this difficult, don't stop trying. At first it may even feel false, but eventually the willed intention will move the heart.

Then once that feels stable, move towards the feeling of fear or nausea in order to explore its qualities. What subtle sensations are involved in such emotions or moods? We do this to deconstruct an emotion and in so doing it loses its solidity. When we see that emotions felt in the body are 'just' sensations, it helps us to lose our fear and aversion towards them.

If you find you still cannot stay with the mental state, then pull back again and gently breathe that TLC into the emotion and saturate it. It is most important not to do this to get rid of it. That is just a manifestation of aversion and it will only subtly suppress it. Do it in order to undermine the reaction of aversion and fear and begin to feel at ease with the presenting mental state.

Needless to say if it all gets too much, change posture, go for a walk, have a cup of tea. Remember we're not trying to defeat a mental state!

When we become adept at doing this, these mental moods and emotions will stop hijacking our lives. We shall still have to deal with them in vipassana, but now they are truly beginning to burn out. Over time they will not be so painful, so insistent and so long lasting.

Eventually, of course, come the moment of liberation, they will disappear for good. That's the Buddha's good news!