

The Essence of Practice

by Rodney Smith

The essence of Dharma is living without resistance. All problems and difficulties arise when we move toward (grasping) or away (aversion) from the present moment. The sense of “I” is formed within this movement. Since everything has occurred and will always occur within the present moment, what can possibly move away? Thought perceives itself outside of the here and now and thereby presents the illusion of movement into the past or future. Nothing ever really moves away and therefore freedom, in actuality, is never disturbed. Living this understanding is the Buddha’s teaching.

As the Buddha said, “For one who clings, motion exists. But for one who clings not, there is no motion. Where no motion is, there is stillness....this, verily, is the end of suffering.” (Udana 74)

The Theravada or Vipassana Tradition teaches stillness (non-movement) to all aspects of life. The teaching frames stillness in words the mind can understand - allowance, letting be, nonjudgmental awareness, relaxation - knowing full well that the mind will make a project out of these words. Practice is seeing how the mind inevitably puts the movement of thought between itself and stillness. It is incapable of being still. Practice becomes full of strategies as the mind tries to direct its own course to freedom. But each strategy fails to bring more than temporary relief to the struggle at hand. All strategies eventually fall short and the mind stops. From this quietude stillness is acknowledged. This glimpse of stillness shows the futility of establishing our own agenda within the moment. The glimpse becomes all consuming as we release more and more of our failed strategies into stillness. Stillness begins to literally consume us.

Insight meditation works on two fronts. First, most of us cannot release ourselves unequivocally into stillness without skillful means. Skillful means is preparation for merging with stillness. It is using practices to deepen our acceptance and understanding of the mind and body processes, and thereby dropping all resistance to being who we are. Secondly, Insight Meditation shows who we are not (we are not thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, etc...) and allows us to relax with the

impersonal process of life. We will never know what we are, but we do learn to release ourselves from what is not true. It is the release that is important and both fronts work toward that end. Without self-acceptance there will never be non-self-acceptance. When both are present skillful means is no longer needed, and we are ready for stillness.

But too often, skillful means becomes an end in itself. Relaxation is what many of us want - to be at home in our body and mind. We yearn to be soothed and have a peaceful life. We arrest our path within skillful means. We stop with the Metta, the humanism, the kindness, the softening heart. Though we may practice diligently, we can easily become misguided within the practice.

Practice ends in the field of the heart. When the "I" is seen for what it is, the heart opens to all that is. Compassion and love arise naturally when there is no movement toward the multitude of forms and experiences of life. Resting in stillness, the heart knows its way. Living the heart is living our awakening for all Beings. That way is The Way of all traditions.