

Becoming Real – Meditation as a Gateway to Wisdom

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Introduction – the value of wisdom

So thank you to Parami for that introduction. Encouraging to hear that she considers me real and authentic – so that was a good start. So, becoming real through meditation. So whilst writing this talk, I remembered a fairy tale that had really touched my heart when I was a child; I'd forgotten it actually and it just came to mind in the process of writing the talk and thinking about wisdom. And I don't remember the title of the fairy tale or even much about what it was about. But in the fairy tale there's a scene where a boy and girl are walking through the mountains and they're going to seek a wise person, perhaps there was some tragedy in their lives, I think, and I can still see the image of them walking through quite rugged mountain territory and it's the Spring and there are some, I think, almond blossoms and they ask the birds and animals the way. So I've just got that little image in my mind. And I can remember, I suppose what's really stayed with me is the feeling of joy that that gave me - that there was wisdom in the world. I remember thinking "Gosh, oh right, there's somewhere you can go and you can find a wise being" - that there was a way out of the... I think I was very confused as a child by the meaninglessness of life, and actually I remember believing the story was true. And then as time went on and I grew up, realising it was only a fairy tale, and how disillusioning that was, how disappointing that was. And then, in my adolescence just forgetting about the story and getting on with life, as one attempts to do, and then, by chance in way, coming across the Dharma and thinking, "Well, it was true after all: there's wisdom," stumbling really on a source of wisdom in the world. And then I was thinking to myself how wonderful that is and then how easy it is to get complacent about that, well, there is wisdom in the world and that's great and well do I, do we do our utmost to work towards it, to become it? And thinking that actually it requires people to embody wisdom for there to be wisdom in the world. So for future generations, if we're not really working hard to grow into wise beings, to grow into wisdom, well there won't be wisdom in the world any more. So wisdom, well it's just so important it continues to be alive in the world and the Dharma is there as a path to wisdom. I was just thinking how amazing it is actually that such a rare and a beautiful quality, well that is something that we can approach in ourselves, in our practice. So, in my talk, as you know I'm going to be exploring just a little bit (I've only got twenty minutes) of how meditation can be an approach to wisdom, how we can become real through meditation.

Wisdom as something to become, not something to find

But first of all before I talk directly about meditation, I thought I'd just share with you something Bhante has said about wisdom, something about reality which I just find really inspiring. It's from one of my favourite seminars which I keep going back to and, again,

it's just gone into my heart, this seminar, it's called *The Nature of Existence*. It's from a chapter in *The Three Jewels*, and Bhante says in it that, "Reality is not a thing out there," so seeing reality is not like seeing something Real, with a capital R, sort of over there somewhere in glowing lights, in bright lights, in fact it's not a thing at all, it's a mode of experience. And it's from that mode of experience, that way of being that we see things differently. We see them more as they are. And how is that? Well he says, "We see them from a sort of breadth of experience." And he says that seeing reality is more like seeing things as a whole, it's seeing things much more broadly. The perception of the Real is more like the perception of mundane existence itself in its totality. And to do this, he goes on to say, is to see things differently and as they really are, it's not just a question of developing or adding on a quality, like wisdom actually; we can't think in terms of developing a new faculty, in that sort of simplistic sort of way. He says it's as though you can only see things differently if you are a completely different person. As you are, so you see things. As you see things, so you are. So if you want to see things in completely different terms to the way you see them now, you must become a completely different person. Which means, well, if we want to see reality, we must ourselves become real. We have to grow into the very thing that we're trying to see. We have to become real. He says an unreal person cannot see reality, or a person whose outlook is restricted by unrealities cannot see reality itself. So I find that quite an exciting way of looking at wisdom, at reality. So it's not that we aim to *see* reality, we aim to *become* it, to become real. And so you could say, you could look at the whole spiritual life as that being the task of the whole spiritual life. And meditation practice in particular is going to be what's going to help us to do this. So we can think of our meditation practice as an aid to remove our unrealities, to become more real. And I was thinking perhaps this is a bit like that admonition we say each morning before the meditation, we're talking about removing our obscurations and removing our taints, and perhaps that's one way of removing our unrealities: removing our obscurations, removing our taints, letting the wisdom of the gentle Buddhas enter in.

Meditation as a means to becoming more real

So I had a few general points as to how can we be more real in our meditation practice. Well, I could make a few points. I think that's a question we have to ask ourselves as we sit down to meditate over and over again, in this meditation practice, well how can I be a bit more real, a bit more genuine, a bit more authentic? And just wait to see what comes, what comes from that. I think one answer to that is really trying not to compartmentalise meditation, not try to, well, I don't think we try to do it actually but it just happens, but meditation and the person we are in the shrine room is rather a different person than we often are outside the shrine room. So we can sometimes find we're a bit dry or a bit bored or lacking in energy or stiff, we get physically very stiff sometimes in the shrine room, we get very tired, but we leave the meditation room and immediately we start chatting with somebody and we're lively and happy and that's interesting isn't it? [laughter] So what's going on there? We can ask ourselves, well, why can't I bring all of me into the shrine room, onto this meditation cushion? What's the point in being unreal on our meditation cushions when we're trying to seek for reality? And one of the ways of doing this of course is just trying to be as honest as we can about our own experience in the

present moment, just acknowledging what's going on, whatever it is. We can't be real and be untruthful about ourselves, about our experience, so there's no point hiding from ourselves really in our meditation practice.

Wholeness and breadth

So, Bhante talked of these two hallmarks of what it would be like to see things more as they really are: "seeing things as a whole" and "seeing things with a breadth of perspective" so I thought I'd say a bit about that, open up the area a bit. So what does it mean, what could it mean, to see things with a breadth of perspective, to experience things more as a whole? So I thought if you like you could shut your eyes and we'll have a little opportunity here to go into another world. So, just imagine it's night time at Taraloka – maybe it's like last night if you're walking outside about midnight in the depths of the night and it's a very clear night, so all the stars are out and we walk right out into the open, where we're just surrounded by open space; it's very clear and there's no light, we've walked away from the buildings, and so it's just completely dark around us, the stars are very clear, we can see the whole of the Milky Way above us, and the grass is just very dry and warm so we think let's just lie down and we're going to lie down and look at the stars in the sky. So we do that, just gazing up at the sky. And after a while we notice one star, one particular star above us which really attracts our attention and we focus in more on that star, that one star, just getting, you may be quite curious, interested in that star. But then, after a while, we just broaden out again and look at the rest of the stars, we broaden out our vision to encompass the whole of the galaxy, the whole of the Milky Way. And then, even further: just expanding out to take in the whole of the sky - the whole of the vastness of space. And then, just opening our eyes when we're ready.

So, Bhante was using that analogy in that seminar and he was saying that our experience of life most of the time, quite often, is like we're just focussing down on one star, whereas we could be having an experience of the whole sky. So, however beautiful that one star might be, it is, after all, just one star. So, we're not experiencing how the sky really is, its vastness and its majesty. So, our perspective is just a bit too narrow and too limited. And he goes on to talk quite a lot about self-centredness and self-referentialness as being one of the main factors that contributes to this narrowness of perspective and it also contributes to distorting our experience. And I think we probably all recognise the tendency to regard ourselves as the centre of the universe – it's rather hard not to do this, isn't it, to see everything in relation to us and our experience. I guess you have to be pretty close to Enlightenment before you stop doing that but yes, everything tends to revolve around us and what we're thinking about, what we're feeling, our concerns: we can get very caught up in our personal concerns and worries and immediate emotions, experience. But yes, to get a true perspective, a real perspective, we do need to broaden out from that, we need to stand back, as it were, or rise above this self-referentialness.

So another analogy is if you imagine you're walking across a flat landscape and then you come to a mountain and begin to walk up the hillside. When you're on the flat ground it's very hard to see, in a way, the whole perspective of where you're going or how the land

lies. But when you start walking up the hill you can immediately begin to see things in perspective, can't you, in context and you see where you're going and the higher and higher you get you can even see beyond that plane you were walking on, you can see into other valleys. And when you get right to the top of the mountain, your view is really quite immense and Bhante likens that to, well, our experience in meditation. So, as we go higher, in terms of higher states of consciousness, we see things from a much broader perspective, we see things more truly. And when we see them like that we can understand them more, we can understand things more fully. Just quite naturally really, it's just because we're higher up we can see things more, can't we? We get it also when we go up in an aeroplane where you suddenly have, you think "that's how the coast of England looks" and it's really quite nice to see it for yourself isn't it, rather than read about it in a book.

So, if we can raise our states of consciousness, well I'm sure we've experienced that in meditation, glimpses of a higher state of consciousness, we come out of that with a different perspective on ourselves. I often say to people on retreat, if you've got a big decision to make when you're coming on this retreat, don't try to think about it during the retreat, wait till you've come to the end of the retreat because by then your whole perspective will have changed, you'll be in such a much more positive state and it's much better to then make a decision at that point and just try to drop it, drop the anxiety about it.

The Metta Bhavana practice as a path to wisdom

So in meditation practice, a very direct way of helping us broaden our outlook, broaden our mind, of course is the *Metta Bhavana* practice. I'm going to talk quite a bit about the *Metta Bhavana* practice. I don't know if it surprised you to hear that my feeling is that it's very much a way to wisdom. It's got a strong wisdom aspect and I've related to it a lot in that way myself, I've found it very useful in terms of just maturing my emotionality, seeing things a bit more clearly. I think it might have been sparked off, particularly my faith in the *Metta Bhavana* practice from that point of view on the only seminar I went on with Bhante and at one point hearing him say that when you see things with *metta*, you see them more objectively; when you see people with *metta*, you see them more truly than if you see them without *metta*. And then thinking "Oh right, yes, that's actually how it is, isn't it" and that just stayed with me and I bore it in mind over the years and I've got quite a lot of faith now that from *metta*, from that standpoint, I'm going to be approaching the truth - I'm going to be seeing things and people much more fully. Yes, so I think *metta*, the *Metta Bhavana*, is as much a path to wisdom as it is a path to love and compassion, and perhaps it's obvious how that works but I think the way to wisdom in the *Metta Bhavana* lies in the opportunity we have throughout the practice to break through our self reference; it's very directly there in front of us in every stage of the practice. We try to see others more clearly and we try to put aside our strong likes and preferences and our strong dislikes and just see the person as a person don't we, when we we're on the ball with our *Metta Bhavana* practice and it's not going all over the place. We do try to just bring in a little bit more reality, perhaps. So, as we get to see people a bit more clearly I think we also get a sense of what people have in common as well. I

think the *Metta Bhavana* practice, well when we relate to people from what they've got in common, we just realise that, well, everybody really, when it comes to it, they just want to be happy, and people just don't want to suffer. And everybody has got that as a very deep motivation, and it's not just every human being, it's every sentient being: all animals, all insects, all birds have got that in their base. That is the motivation from which we act, quite often. So, we begin to see more essentially what's identical in our experience with other people, with other beings, see what we have in common and that opens our hearts to quite a new perspective, I think. If we can really stay with that and believe in that, we're going to lose that very narrow self-absorption; we're going to begin to break through the dichotomy between ourselves and others and move to a much more real *metta*. And this is what leads to the wisdom of interconnectedness, the wisdom that actually sees the interconnection between all beings as I've been saying, the identical aspirations of all beings, and from that wisdom arises the love and compassion of the Bodhisattva, and the *Bodhicitta*. So, I think the *Metta Bhavana* really is a pretty direct path to the arising of the *Bodhicitta* if you really work at it and have that aspiration at your heart.

I was thinking sometimes when I'm feeling a bit caught up in a very narrow mental state, a particular mental state, going round in circles with it, well I'll actually bring in a bit of *metta* to try and work with that. So what I do quite often is just bring to mind the other women who I'm meditating with in the community shrine room and just try and focus on them and their lives just for a few moments, try to empathise with them and invariably I find, well, my mind just begins gradually to open out and soften and become less narrow. There's something humbling in a way, maybe it humbles the ego to see that other people are as real as we are - there's a softening and a humbling of the ego I think that goes on, which in a way is a basis for insight. It puts my mental states into perspective too because I know, well, that person may not be having such an easy time and here am I getting all wound up about when I should buy my flight ticket for my round-the-world tour [laughter] and actually, in the scheme of things, perhaps it isn't such an awful state to be in. Yes, this is a current one of mine. This particular week I've been thinking quite a bit about broadening my perspective in relation to reflecting on this topic for the talk and at the beginning of the week I was experiencing quite a strong sadness and at the end of the week lots of excitement about this world tour, and I was working with them both in the same way with the *Metta Bhavana*, working with them both trying to go out into other people's worlds. And it made me realise that they were both really narrow states – even the excitement was actually so subjective and so narrow and so inward-looking – it was no better; I thought it was better, I enjoyed it more [laughter] but it was no better than the sadness in terms of the effect it had on my inward-lookingness. So that was fascinating. So I suppose the excitement was more like intoxication really, which made me realise that, ok, so when we haven't got a balanced perspective, well, when we're caught up in a strong emotion like that, we haven't got a balanced perspective on ourselves, let alone on others. So we can't take in other people when we're caught up in the anxiety or the excitement about the air ticket, we're not really interested in other people and we're not seeing ourselves very fully; we're quite narrow, we're just seeing a bit of ourselves, we're just experiencing something very intense in a very limited part of ourselves. So the "real us" is much more like this vastness of the sky and perhaps that intense emotion is

just like that little star. We don't deny the emotion – it is there and it is part of our experience but it's not the whole of our experience; it's much more real to be in contact with the whole of our experience. Yes, so looking for this breadth of experience doesn't mean cutting off from our own experience in order to be involved in other people's experience, it means paradoxically having a fuller experience of ourselves, a broader and fuller experience as well as a very broad experience of others and a very broad experience of everything, including us.

So I did think it could be surprising to hear the development of wisdom linked with *Metta Bhavana* practice, but Bhante does tell us again and again that insight isn't just a conceptual thing. Kulaprabha in her talk yesterday talked about approaching reality using thought but this was using thought to go beyond thought. So again because reality is non-conceptual, it's an experience and we can't describe it using words. And on another favourite seminar of mine on Right Livelihood, Bhante says "Insight is not just a conceptual thing, it's something you experience in your life" and in ordinary terms it's connected with unselfish, selfless behaviour because insight is insight into egolessness, into *sunyata* and the test of whether you've really developed insight is that you behave selflessly – that is the crucial test. So I remember reading that for the first time and thinking "Oh right, yes" and I was sort of encouraged and sort of sobered at the same time. I thought well that's quite down to earth but also it's very demanding, isn't it? And in this connection there's a little story which you may have heard of a Dharmacharini who went to visit Dharpo Rimpoche, who was one of Bhante's main Kalyana Mitras, one of his main teachers and when she saw him she asked him, "Well how can you tell if your meditation practice is working?" and he said to her "Well you can tell if it's working if you're experiencing yourself becoming a little kinder every day." So, it's the same thing isn't it? We have to really get down to these very basic, work on these very basic emotions in ourselves and see ourselves more broadly in that way.

So, I thought it's sort of simple isn't it, but it's not very easy to transform the unrealities of our mental states. So, just thinking about becoming a bit more real as we sit down to meditate, broadening our perspective of ourselves, of our experience can seem quite a concrete thing to do but we inevitably come to the limit of our ability to do that and things like our resistances and our limitations start looming very large. I guess we get to the point where we've had enough reality really, we've got to the point where we can assimilate a certain amount and that's it really. And again, perhaps encouragingly, according to the Dharma (or perhaps not so encouragingly) he says the delusions which prevent us from just seeing things as they really are are attitudes as deeply rooted as sentient existence itself. And the only way we can remove and see through them is by systematic prolonged meditation on the fact that the world as we know it is unreal. And then Bhante goes on to say but the word "meditation" here doesn't necessarily mean only sitting meditation but it means a sort of attitude of determination, sort of really meditating on something, really thinking about it and reflecting on it very strongly, focussing on it and doing that in whatever way we can, both in and out of our formal meditation practice.

The value of integration & concentration

But yes, meditation, particularly, especially practices like the Mindfulness of Breathing and Just Sitting, they definitely help us collect ourselves and focus ourselves. And all the different aspects of our conscious being come gradually together and that gives us the opportunity to have a deeper and broader experience of ourselves as we actually are, from our own experience, rather than how we think we are, or how we hope we might be. And this deep broader experience of ourselves, this collecting of all the aspects of our being can be a very strong and powerful experience – the unified “us” is quite powerful – I’m sure we’ve all had small experiences of times when all the bits of our being have just really come together in a meditation practice and we’ve just felt that much more strong and focussed. And it’s this sort of very steady clear focus has quite a deep base to it, there’s an unshakeable quality to it. That’s going to be the sort of quality that’s going to help us stay with our penetration into the unrealities that are stopping us from seeing things as they are. There’s another quite different aspect of meditation also which also helps us to approach reality as our minds do become more collected and still. There’s a sense of (which I’m sure we’ve all had again) a sort of relaxation and expansion and stillness and peace. So that can become stiller and deeper as we become more concentrated. And there’s a very beautiful thing that Kamalashila said on a retreat recently, well last year, that for insight to arise in meditation there needs to be an openness and a transparency in the mind and sometimes I’ve wondered what’s the point of getting into *dhyana* because really you can reflect on insight both in and out of *dhyana* so long as you’re fairly concentrated, so I sometimes think I don’t really know why we bother, it’s quite a hassle isn’t it, trying to get into *dhyana* and it only gets you all goal-oriented [laughter] and stuck and rigid. But he was speaking in favour of *dhyana* and saying well *dhyanic* experience is very helpful because it opens you up, it leads to a sort of loosening of the ego which again he said was quite a humbling experience, *dhyana*: you become very quiet, very open and receptive and transparent and he said at that point it’s as though insight pierces into you – I thought that sounded a little bit dangerous but I guess it is dangerous [laughter] for the ego. Yes, so you don’t pierce into insight, it comes to you. Actually we don’t have to go around looking for insight of course, it’s all around us all the time. In fact, reality is just us here and now isn’t it? I guess if we can allow our minds to become transparent and open and receptive to how things are then we’ll be able to see how things are. Just like that [laughter]! And hopefully meditation practice will help us get there. And he also said actually that the value of meditation practice is it can make us more open and sensitive to life and more sensitive to seeing the *bardos* in life and making use of them. And also I think it can give you a different experience of yourself, it can open you up to how you can be, the nature of your mind, what that can be, what it can be like.

Insight as a gradual process; importance of cherishing our “smaller” insights

So I thought I’d just conclude now by just saying that, well how important it is to realise that the experience of reality, of insight, isn’t just something that lands on us in a great flash of vision at stream entry. We may have heard this said to us perhaps in classes and on retreats but it is very important to realise that insight is a gradual process. Kulananda gave a talk a while ago, talking about there being levels of insight, so it’s not just Insight with a capital “I” which happens at stream entry - we have small insights or bigger

insights all the time, and maybe from the very beginning of our experience of meditation and the Dharma we've experienced insights, and perhaps that's why, that probably is why, we're drawn to stay on the spiritual path, because of those insights that we received. We may think of them more as thoughts or intuitions or just reflections that have come from our meditation practice. But we have a sense that they've been important to us and they've maybe directed some change in our lives. There's often an element of insight in those, in just seeing something a bit more clearly or a lot more clearly. And I thought well probably in my very early days when I first learned to meditate I had some sort of experience like that and nothing amazing at all happened in my early meditation experience, no bright lights, no *dhyana*. Some people talk about having a year of *dhyanic* bliss when they first meditate but no, [laughter] I didn't have anything like that. But I did experience myself very differently, much more broadly and the experience that really comes to mind is sitting down to meditate and realising that I'd never actually sat and done nothing else, as far as I could remember – I'd always have the television on, the cat on my lap, a cup of coffee, somebody else sitting there who I might talk to if I needed to and a book, perhaps, open, or sometimes you'd turn down the TV and have the sound system on, you know, it was all going on at once. So I'd had no undiluted experience of myself and when I sat down to meditate and suddenly there was just the naked me without anything else, well I realised I was ok. I realised I'd been hiding from it and that it was actually ok to do that, and suddenly there was an openness to seeing myself more as I really was, and that was a great relief, actually. So I hadn't realised I had been consciously avoiding anything but obviously I had been and with this relief came a great feeling of gratitude and a love for meditation and a sense that it was going to help me become more real, more authentic. And there was a faith in meditation that came from that, that it was a path to wisdom actually, that it was a path to being more true and more authentic and I've always thought well that must be what wisdom's about – becoming more true and more authentic, moving in that direction. So it's incredibly important to follow up our insights and those intuitions and visions that we have and when I've not done that I've felt a lack of self-respect in myself and when I have done that it's been so important to augment and build on, well those insights are often what we hold most dear – they come from the depths of our heart. It's so important just to stay with them and act on them.

Conclusion: recap of main points

So yes, just to recap slightly then on this: let's meditate to become more real, to become more who we really are, more authentic and more genuine, to have a broader perspective on ourselves and to really work at being less self-referential, less self-centred and do that by dwelling in our own experience as fully as we can, paradoxically, as well as really opening out to experience of others and experience around us. So we need to really appreciate that lovely star that we are, we need to let ourselves really shine, don't we, and glow and get to know us and what sort of star we are, but we also need to go beyond that and open up to the wonder and immensity and the vastness of the sky all around us, so full of a variety of stars and constellations, all resonating with the beauty and the truth and the reality of life.

[Applause]