

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 05-03-2016.

Last week during our discussion of mindfulness, one of you commented on the courage that it takes to repeatedly meet the unpleasant or painful experiences that arise so frequently throughout the day, rather than allowing oneself to space out or be distracted. As I reflected further on that, I thought I'd explore what the Buddha's discourses have to tell us about courage and fear.

I looked in the indexes of the four sutta collections that I own and not one of them had an entry for either courage, fearless or fearlessness. I think of the Buddha and his early disciples — especially the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis — as having been courageous, so this was a surprise. But apparently courage and fearlessness are not words that they used when describing their own experiences or the practice.

There is, however, a sutta in the Middle Length Discourses on the topic of fear and dread. This is sutta number 4¹. In this sutta the Buddha is asked whether it is difficult to practice, to develop concentration when meditating in remote places in the jungle. The Buddha acknowledges that it can be difficult and described his own experience:

I dwelt in such awe-inspiring, horrifying abodes as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines. And while I dwelt there, a wild animal would come up to me, or a peacock would knock off a branch, or the wind would rustle the leaves. I thought: 'What now if this is the fear and dread coming?' ²

But then he describes having the strong intention to face the fear and dread and to settle the mind. He describes the importance of virtue, of engaging in skillful or wholesome actions (thoughts, words, and deeds) in being able to settle the mind.

But this isn't just about having skillful actions, it is also about recollecting, remembering the extent to which one's actions have been skillful. This is not about building up a big sense of self, of "I'm such a virtuous person". This is about gladdening the mind, which is a condition for the development of concentration.

And then the Buddha describes, through the remainder of the sutta, developing concentration to the point of jhāna. Specifically experiencing the "rapture and pleasure born of seclusion" which is a characteristic of the first jhāna. Shaila Catherine describes

the experience of the first jhāna as being a "fearless abiding."³ One of the ways in which it is a fearless abiding is that the first jhāna is firmly secluded or protected from the hindrances arising into the mind, so one doesn't have to be on guard to protect oneself from the hindrances.

In the remainder of the sutta the Buddha describes how he developed the other stages of jhāna, in other words how he purified the mind of all agitating and distracting things that he could. Then he used this very settled, very clear and focused mind to investigate his experience and see for himself the things that lead to letting go and to freedom from *dukkha*.

For those of us who don't have the strength of intention or the courage that the Buddha did, I think facing the difficult stuff is a lot more challenging than this sutta makes it sound. There's a phrase that Matt Flickstein would use when he taught mettā practice. I think he probably learned it from Bhante Gunaratana. It goes like this:

May I be well, happy, and peaceful. May no harm come to me. May no difficulties come to me. May no problems come to me. May I have patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome the inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.⁴

I especially like that last part because it so clearly addresses the realities of our lives: May I have patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome the *inevitable* difficulties, problems, and failures of life. This mettā phrase can serve as a daily reminder to be courageous, patient and determined in bringing mindfulness and compassion to our difficult experiences.

Perhaps the most helpful thing I found on courage was in Joseph Goldstein's book *Mindfulness*.⁵ He discusses courage as a facet of the Awakening Factor of Energy. Energy is the third of the Awakening factors, and it arises because of the presence and development of mindfulness and investigation. Joseph wrote:

"Another aspect of *virīya* [energy], one that we might not immediately associate with energy and strength, is that of courage. This is a quality that powerfully energizes our heart as we walk on the path. ... When courage is present, we rise to meet different challenges for the sake of what we want to accomplish, and we're not discouraged by thought of hardship or by the length of the undertaking."⁶

How do we arouse courageous energy? A crucial thing Joseph says is "we rise to meet different challenges for the sake of what we want to accomplish". This is about having an intention and having it be strong enough that we follow through with it again and again.

One way courageous energy is manifested is in the way that was mentioned last week. This is a quality of energy that we each must call upon again and again throughout our days.

Another expression that draws on courageous energy, an aspect of the practice that is also crucial, is self-honesty. There has to be a willingness to acknowledge to ourselves: This is what I am thinking. This is what is present in my mind and heart right now. This is what I am doing, or what I did. These were the consequences of my actions.

It's only when we have the courage to acknowledge the truth of our actions and intentions that we're able to change them to something that will be more skillful the next time around. That more skillful action may simply be meeting it with mindfulness rather than getting absorbed in some form of greed, hatred or delusion.

I think there's also a hint about courageous energy in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta where the Buddha says:

...one dwells contemplating the body in the body ... feelings in feelings
... mind-states in mind-states ... phenomena as phenomena ardent,
clearly comprehending, and mindful, having subdued longing and
dejection in regard to the world.⁷

The word *ardent* is a reference to the quality of energy and effort that we bring to establishing mindfulness. I think of the word *ardent* as suggesting a passion for practice, a very strong intention, and the quality of courage.

So moment-by-moment our practice is to meet whatever we experience with the strong intention and courageous energy to directly know it, to clearly understand it with wisdom. This clear, direct knowing allows us to tell the difference between what is unwholesome and what is wholesome. As part of this we're mindful, we keep remembering to take this current momentary experience as our meditation object, and we keep remembering to meet it without grasping or longing and without dejection, avoidance or rejection.

We use our courageous energy to let go of the unwholesome and to cultivate the wholesome. But it needs to be a balanced effort. If the mind is dull then we need more energy. But if we have gaining mind, if we are wanting something other than what is here right now, if we don't trust that the practice will lead us to the wholesome things that we wish for, then we need an effort that relaxes into the present. That relaxing and opening is, in many ways, part of the courage or courageous energy that was spoken of last week.

I'd like to close tonight with a quote from the Burmese master, Sayadaw U Tejaniya. The quote is cited in Joseph Goldstein's book.

Avoiding difficult situations or running away from them does not usually take much skill or effort. But doing so prevents you from testing your own limits and from growing. The ability to face difficulties can be crucial for your growth. However, if you are faced with a situation in which the difficulties are simply overwhelming, you should step back for the time being and wait until you have built up enough strength to deal with it skillfully.⁸

This is a form of courage too. Being willing to step back so that we can build up the strength of virtue, intention, mindfulness, energy and concentration, and then to come back and face the difficulty once again.

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Notes

1. Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, <https://suttacentral.net/en/mn4>; also: Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, pp. 102-107.

2. MN 4.20, *ibid.*

3. Catherine, Shaila, *Focused and Fearless*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2008, p. 129.

4. http://www.dhammadownload.com/index.php?title=Metta_meditation

5. Goldstein, Joseph, *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, Boulder, CO: Sounds True Publishing, 2013.

6. *ibid.*, p. 241.

Note: Text in brackets is my own.

7. MN 10, adapted from Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, pp. 281-282-287

Changes: replace "bhikkhu" with "one"; added each of the fields for establishing mindfulness to one set of instructions; changed "mind in mind" to "mind-states in mind-states"

8. *ibid.*, p. 242. Source cited as Tejaniya, *Don't Look Down on the Defilements*, p. 57.