

connect.empower.liberate#2

This article is a combination of transcript and notes from the talk: connect.empower.liberate#2/3. It is the second in a three part series delivered by Guhyapati at the Buddhafield event – Green Earth Awakening in 2014. There is an audio version on the ecodharma website.

Introduction

So this is a series of three talks called Connect.Empower.Liberate. Yesterday I was talking about connection. Today I will focus on empowerment.

Yesterday I pointed to **three dimensions of connection**: The connection of people to themselves, of people to people, and of people to nature. And I was saying that we need to attend to all three dimensions. When we do we find that we are empowered by those connections, and each level of connection empowers us in different ways. And that empowerment is needed to energise the process of liberation.

Connecting with ourselves we discover deep resources and qualities within us. You might call them inner resources, but in a sense they are not merely personal resources or qualities. When we really connect with our depths, it's more as if we connect with a power that moves through us. And that potential can be far greater than our small selves can imagine.

Connecting with others – in community and through social action – we discover the empowerment of collaboration, the magic that arises when we come together with others. Recognising ourselves to be fundamentally social beings, we also discover within us the courage and wisdom of many generations that have gone before us.

As individuals we are formed in the context of social relations. We require community and the collective social dimension to really flourish. The complexity of human consciousness, our language, our emotional intelligence, our culture all comes from social interaction. The social dimension is integral to what we are.

Connecting with nature we open up to the support and nourishment that comes from the ecological networks we live amidst. Finding that we are not separate from the ecological web we find that the power of life, flowing through countless species on a vast evolutionary journey, continues to run in our veins, to sparkle and fire in our synapses and nervous system.

Communities and societies are all rooted in the ecological. The ecological is the most basic identity of the human animal. The ecological is our fundamental economy. The ecological is the soil our roots have grown in and been nourished by. It remains the most basic source of nourishment, for each of us and our society – despite the way contemporary economics hides that fact.

To really unleash the power of these three dimensions of connection, we need to attend to all of them. Recognising that there is no final separation between the layers of connection at a personal, social and ecological level is more empowering than attending to any one of these alone.

Spiritual bypassing

John Wellwood coined the phrase “spiritual bypassing”. He’s a psychotherapist, whose work is influenced by Buddhist approaches. During his career he noticed that there can be a tendency in some approaches to spiritual practice to view the aim as a kind of negation of the ego. Often spiritual practitioners can set their aim on the goal of overcoming the self, going beyond the self. But, Wellwood points out, freedom from self-grasping cannot be achieved on the basis of aversion or attempts to deny the self. In fact, to really approach the liberation that comes when we see the true nature of self and learn not to hold onto it with attachment, requires that we first develop a healthy sense of self – that we become deeply emotionally and psychologically integrated. This healthy sense of self is the only basis for going beyond the self.

In the challenging conditions of our times, in a society where social violence, abuse, and exploitation are so pervasive, many people are launched onto the spiritual path by the pain of their personal wounding. Much of that wounding comes out of dysfunctional relationships (personal and social), and in turn leads to all sorts of further dysfunctional relationships, which themselves produce more wounding – in ourselves and others. It’s natural to want to get out of that experience. We can naturally want to get away from a self that suffers. Sometimes, a spiritual practice that claims to enable us to overcome the self can seem to offer a solution. But all too often, sadly, the motivation can be a kind of aversion to the self and a desire to negate it.

Consequently, Wellwood has noticed, people can engage in spiritual practice in a way that tries to leap towards self-negation (through notions of no self) without taking the time to address the unintegrated aspects of their psyche, without healing the wounds in their hearts and minds. In this way they can end up clinging to a view of no self simply to protect

themselves from the pain of their own unintegrated self. It's a false and superficial freedom, and it's results are very limited and shaky.

Wellwood points towards the personal history of spiritual teachers who appear to have a kind of spiritual charisma, and levels of insight about no-self, and yet their abusive, exploitative behaviour suggests that a range of unresolved psychological conflicts continue to operate within them. This bypassing of the process of psychological healing is what Wellwood calls spiritual bypassing.

Extending spiritual bypassing

I think it's interesting to extend this idea of spiritual bypassing beyond the personal. Instead of seeing bypassing as merely pointing to practice rooted in aversion to the self we can extend it to notice an aversion-based turning away from other dimensions of the interconnected self. If we acknowledge our interconnected relationship with the social and the ecological, any practice that fails to stay in an engaged relationship with these dimensions of the interconnected self can also be a kind of spiritual bypassing.

Unless our spiritual practice simultaneously seeks to heal the wounds in our society and the ecosystem, (which are integral to who we are) as in the case of attempts to bypass the psychological dimensions of ourselves, our practice only leads to limited results and a limited simulacrum of liberation.

At the same time, spiritually bypassing the healing of the social and the ecological, we will be cut off from the energy and nourishment that comes from healthy connection with those dimensions of life. Consequently, our practice will only ever be superficially empowered.

Empowerment

The three-fold path of ethics, meditation and wisdom is sequential. If we want insight to arise we need to tend to meditation. If we want meditation to have depth, we need to attend to ethics. The same is true with the three terms: Connect, empower, liberate.

Liberation requires empowerment, and empowerment grows out of connection.

Empowerment grows out of connection, just as meditation grows out of ethics.

Connection, as I was saying yesterday, depends on the development of an intimate caring sensibility. In a sense we are always connected. It is just that we often fail to be aware of that! But in addition to awareness, healthy connection also depends on the structural aspects of our relationships - the infrastructures of society, economic relations, and community processes.

We need supportive structures, relationships, communities, and institutions, as well as a connecting personal sensibility to experience empowerment.

Task, process, relationships

At the Ecodharma centre, I live in a community and work as part of a team. We're achieving a lot. And all of it depends on the collaborative efforts between us. No doubt many people here have had that sense of empowerment that comes from working with others. When it goes well we can feel the synergy, and achieve things so much more than any one of us could achieve alone. And not only do we experience the results, but also the potency that is collaboration. When we collaborate effectively with others it can be as though our self is enriched.

Getting it right is tricky. Working well together requires us to attend to many things. A simple framework we use at ecodharma is to ensure that we attend to three aspects of collaboration: Task, Process, and Relationships.

1. **Firstly, task:** Clearly there needs to be clarity about task. What are the aims? Do we share them? What are the steps necessary to achieve them? All of this is basic. We need processes that help define task: vision, strategy, objectives, and the specific actions required to realise them. This is what defines our purpose of coming together in a specific setting with shared vision.
2. **Secondly, process:** We also need to give attention to process. How do we make decisions? How do we coordinate our efforts? How do we evaluate what we are doing and how we're doing it? At ecodharma we put a lot of effort into our process – different kinds of meeting structures, definition of roles, careful shared decision making when it is needed. These all ensure a cooperative coordination. And we also ensure a clear delegation of authority to individuals in different areas, to balance cooperation with sufficient autonomy to enable people to get things done.

These two aspects, task and process, are very commonly attended to in many of the activist circles I have worked within. It is often clear what groups are trying to achieve, what the task is, at least in the shorter term. And very often activists can be super focused on process, because that is one of the places that issues of power, inclusion, and diversity, can be addressed. But all too often what gets neglected is the third aspect of effective collaboration – which is relationships.

3. **So, thirdly, relationships:** No matter how good your processes are, unless we attend to the quality of relationships we will still find ourselves bogged down in power

struggles, conflict, and misunderstandings. All too often people think that just by tweaking process they can iron out difficulties that actually run at a deeper relational level. And often, under the pressures of the moment, when tasks get urgent, what most suffers are the relationships. But it's a false economy. Taking the time to attend to relationships empowers our groups. It builds trust, forgiveness, and mutual understanding. And to be effective we need that trust and understanding to underpin task and process.

It is so important to attend to all three: task, process and relationship. Attending to all three ensures that everything flows – as best it can.

Empowerment as deep collaboration

As a result of the work we've done on all that over the years, I currently feel deeply empowered through collaboration with the team and community I am part of. But it is not only the community and team who I feel I am collaborating with at the ecodharma centre. That is not the only kind of collaboration that empowers the project. Of course, there are the other people, volunteers, friends and so on. But that is not what I mean either.

The project was set up in a remote valley in the Pyrenees. When I first arrived there the buildings were in ruins and the land had been largely abandoned for generations. I remember someone, who was obviously impressed by what we were achieving, asking me, "so, was there really nothing here when you first arrived?" I looked around at the forest, the valleys, the limestone ridges, circling vultures, and said, "well actually most of it was here already; those mountains, the streams, the woodland, the rocks; they were all here when I arrived!"

What we are doing, as transient human animals with our little plans and projects, is only a small and momentary intrusion into much bigger processes. When I feel that humility, it opens me up to the support of the land, the majesty of the limestone, the steadfastness of the evergreen oaks, the playfulness of the streams, the exquisiteness of the orchids, and the elusiveness of the wild pigs. And I feel that both myself and the project are empowered by all of that that each day.

There is more than that too. We are rebuilding the houses. We have rebuilt three so far and right as I speak there is stone being placed on stone as we rebuild a new kitchen and dining space for the community. As we rebuild, which is hard work, we are deeply conscious of the debt we owe to the peasant farmers who had gathered these stones and first placed them, building homes and terraces. We owe a debt to them even for the stones that are in ruins. If

you have ever had to find, quarry and transport large chunks of limestone, you will know what I mean. Even though many of the walls are collapsed, just having the stones gathered by previous generations on site is a great gift! Our efforts are continuous with the efforts of those historical ancestors of the place. They dug out the springs and planted fruit trees we still eat from today. In a sense, we collaborate with them through deep time. When we forget our connections and indebtedness to the past we disempower ourselves terribly.

As we build, as our hands choose and place rocks, one upon another, we also work alongside the chemical and compressive processes that had turned the lives of microscopic algae into limestone at the bottom of a shallow sea. Each stone we place has been on a long journey and process of transformation, made deep in the earth and carried to the surface by unimaginable forces, eroded and tumbled down by millennia of weathering and erosion. In a sense, we are collaborating with all that too! And we are empowered by those forces.

Even in our own bodies, the rhythms of breath and heart that drive energy through the muscles which work with those chunks of primordial seabed, are in a sense not just the activity of a small conceited “I”, but are rhythms that run long and deep through co-evolving channels and pathways, way back and way deep, through evolutionary journeys we can scarcely imagine. When we open up to this we can feel that whole evolutionary journey also empowering our efforts.

Power gets a bad press: the need for training

Power gets a bad press. And perhaps rightly so. So often we appropriate power to our self. We use it abusively – harming both ourselves and others. Power corrupts, they say. But it need not. It all depends on how we understand power, the training we do in preparation, and the social structures we set up to keep us alive to its dynamics.

For power not to corrupt we need an initial training in connection. Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes this. It insists that the spiritual path starts with bodhicitta. It states that the basic motivation for our development on the spiritual path needs to be the liberation of all beings. This sense of solidarity with life is not an add-on to the dharma. It has to be at its heart. And right from the beginning. Otherwise we can compound our self-referential tendencies that trap us in isolation and arrogance.

It is the same with the Vajrayana, which offers very powerful methods of transformation. But before we practice those methods we first need to train in the ordinary preliminaries of:

- Gratitude and appreciation of the preciousness of life,

- an awareness of impermanence – the way life is fundamentally about flow,
- a recognition that ethical acts are the basic building blocks of our experience,
- and again an emphasis on bodhicitta.

After these come the extraordinary preliminaries, in which we open our self up to really acknowledge that our spiritual development is not something we do alone. We leave our self in no doubt that our practice depends utterly on the support of our teachers and spiritual friends, and on powers that are deeper than the mere ego-grasping self. All these trainings are required to ensure that we don't seek to appropriate to ourselves the deeply empowering methods of Vajrayana – which would cause us serious harm. If we want such practices to empower liberation, rather than ensnare us more deeply in self-serving habits, we should be very wary of taking short cuts!

Without an adequate ethical training, without paying enough attention to connection, power will tend to be used as power over – in attempts to control others for our own benefit. But this is always at a cost and ultimately goes against our self – because we are not really separate from others. Power used for control alienates us from others and, as such, alienates us from ourselves. What we do in the world we are also doing within ourselves to ourselves!

Exploring power

What I am calling “power over” is often what people think of when they hear the word power. But power is more nuanced than that. Instead of “power over” we can learn to become proficient in using “power with”, to empower ourselves and other simultaneously.

Abusive power pervades so much of our lives – often invisibly. Mostly we are socialised to accept it as normal. But inevitably that abusive power wounds us and those around us. When we meet power in the world around us it can touch into some deep patterns in ourselves. Sometimes we kick against power. Sometimes we collude with it. Sometimes we try to manipulate power. Sometimes we confront it. Sometimes we try to take it from others for ourselves. Very often our responses to power or authority come from quite unconscious struggles within ourselves. Power is complex and our relationship to it can also be complex. But we can learn to work wisely with power.

If we are serious about working well with others it's very important to take a closer look at power and ask what it really is. It's a term with many connotations, and a bit of a map for exploring it can be useful.

I was recently running a course with Nick Osborne, who is a colleague of mine. We're developing trainings on Effective Collaboration to help people work in teams and organisations better – both through learning skills and tools, and also using dharma inspired understandings of the deeper psychological and emotional capacities that are needed. During the course we ran last April Nick unpacked a way of understanding power that I found elegant and useful. So, I'm going to share an adapted version of it with you.

Understanding power (see flipchart)

1. What is power?

- a. Ability to influence:
 - i. People
 - ii. Things

2. What aims do we use power for?

- a. Constructive
 - i. Supports purpose of the group
- b. Destructive
 - i. Personal gain
 - ii. Dysfunctional strategies
 - iii. Not supportive of purpose of the group

3. How do we use power?

- a. Controlling
- b. Collaborative

4. Types of power:

- a. Personal power
 - i. Charismatic
 - ii. Expertise
 - iii. Motivational
 - iv. Presence
- b. Position
 - i. Reward (influence by)
 - ii. Coercive (influence by)
 - iii. Bureaucratic (power invested in a system)
 - iv. By relationship (bestowed)
 - v. Mainstream
 - vi. Margins
- c. Socio-economic/structural
 - i. Gender
 - ii. Race
 - iii. Class
 - iv. Property

5. Is authority:

- a. Imposed?
- b. Earned?

- c. Collectively distributed?

6. Patterns

- a. Concentrated - pyramids
- b. Shared - circles
- c. Distributed/agile - networks

It can be important to open up conversations within our groups about power. Using a map like the one above can help us to name the dynamics, to see if they are serving us, to see what needs to be transformed to empower us more effectively. It's never enough to simply think we have got a handle on how we work with power. There needs to be an on-going conversation.

Chapatti diagrams

Having those kinds of conversations in our groups requires courage. Talking about power can feel uncomfortable, we can deny our power, we can be ashamed of it. It can feel awkward naming the power others have. And if we feel disempowered, that too can be difficult to raise. But the more transparency we can bring to power dynamics the more healthy our groups will be. Both at Ecodharma and our colleagues at Seeds for Change use a range of useful tools to explore these dynamics in groups.

One tool we use is called chapatti diagrams. It involves everyone in a group creating an image that represents how they see the balance of power in a group. Basically you take circles of coloured paper of different sizes and put names on them. The bigger the circle the more power we feel someone has. It can be exposing, frightening even, so needs to be done with care and trust. But done well it can be an excellent way to explore how all these different dimensions of power are functioning, and help to open up useful (and challenging) conversations about what's going on.

Becoming more literate about power dynamics in our groups is necessary for our working with others to be effective. It can help us to transform "power over" to "power with", where each individual is empowered appropriately within the group. (You might notice I didn't say equally empowered, which is often an idea that actually masks actual power dynamics). Having the courage to explore power in our groups really supports the shift from control to collaboration. But if you are going to use these kind of tools – be careful to watch out that you don't use them just as a weapon in your own power struggles! As Dana Meadows says, always "go for the good of the whole".

Empowerment is not an individual thing

So, to be empowered as individuals is not just an individual thing. We also need our communities, teams, and other social relationships to be empowering. In a sense it is only

when we take responsibility to “go for the good of the whole” that we truly benefit from the power of collaboration. Only when we begin to help to empower each other are we really empowering ourselves.

Our own development and the development of our communities are bound up together. We do ourselves a great disservice when we forget that. We need to work simultaneously with inner process and the processes of creating social settings (teams, groups, and communities). And it is vital that those social settings reflect the values of connection and collaboration – not the values of control! Those settings need to be empowering in themselves.

Myles Horton: the connection between individual and social development

The ecodharma centre draws on the inspiration of many people. One of them is Myles Horton, whose approach to popular education informed the work of the Highlander Education Centre, which he founded in Appalachia in 1932. Highlander played a key role in the Labour Movement and the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1950's - training civil rights leaders like Rosa Parks, before her historic role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the likes of Martin Luther King.

Empowering and caring education

Horton's approach to education focused on empowering people and their communities. Rather than feeding people information, it was about equipping individuals to learn from their experience, to bring out their own capabilities to benefit themselves and society. In expressing his approach as an educator he said: “I don't know what to do, and if I did know what to do I wouldn't tell you, because if I had to tell you today then I'd have to tell you tomorrow, and when I'm gone you'd have to get somebody else to tell you.”

(Despite the purely didactic format of this talk) this is the kind of participatory and empowering education that informs the approach we take at the ecodharma centre - equipping people to learn from their own experience – not offering all the answers. It's education that is grounded in a deep care and a profound sense of human potential.

In conversation with Paolo Freire (another inspiring radical educator, and author of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) Horton says, “I think if I had to put a finger on what I consider a good education, a good radical education, it wouldn't be anything about methods or techniques. It would be loving people first.”

Our development as individuals is wrapped up with social development

The trainings at Highlander started with deep respect for the potential that individuals have to become agents of beneficial social change. It was also grounded in the belief that social engagement is a necessary context for personal learning and development. They recognise that, as intrinsically social beings, our own growth, development and maturation are deeply wrapped up with the development and maturation of our communities and our society. Consequently, Highlander worked mostly with people connected with organisations. They saw that it is through collective organising, through institutions, that society is transformed and that the contexts that support the transformation of individuals are created.

“If it starts on the inside...”

In the same conversation with Freire, Horton went on to relate some observations he made during a period at Highlander when the focus was placed more on self-development at the expense of the organisational and social context. Horton says it was a period “where people thought that consciousness was limited to their own conscious, something inside themselves. I guess some people thought it would start there and spread to society, but most of it kind of dead-ended there, as far as I could find out. If it starts there it stays there.”

There is something important to learn from this idea, that “if it starts on the inside, it stays on the inside.” Drawing on the insights of systems thinking, as I was talking about yesterday, we see how the interconnections between the self, the social, and the ecological, exert reciprocal influences in each direction, between each systemic level. To understand the self we need to attend to the social and ecological. To understand society we need to attend to individual consciousness and to the bigger ecological context. Although we can usefully talk about what’s happening at any one of these levels, it is important not to forget that there is no strict separation between them, but rather a continuous flow of influence from one level to the other.

If we get too caught up with our own consciousness we run the risk of cutting ourselves off from who we really are – from both the social and ecological dimensions of our identity. We end up with a reduced and shrivelled self, unable to respond to the challenges, or be enriched by the nourishment that comes from these fundamental aspects of an interconnected self. Getting stuck on the inside is a developmental dead-end.

Not just a personal matter

This is not just a personal matter. It has social and ecological implications. The fact that society is highly conditioned by the agency of individuals, also means that if people are getting stuck on the inside, social development suffers too. The fact that human potency expresses itself

through socio-economic forms which are currently having enormous impacts on the environment, also means that if people are getting stuck on the inside, the health of ecological systems also suffer.

The wellbeing of the individual, of the social, and of the ecological are all bound together. Individuals require the outer context of engagement to support their learning. Society requires the inner work of individuals to dynamise social agency and wellbeing. And the resilience of ecological systems is damaged unless society honours its dependence on the ecological.

Socially Engaged Buddhists are generally very aware of this interplay, and engage in a practice which honours all three dimensions. But I have found it interesting that amongst all the engaged Buddhists I know, almost all of them were already politicised or ecologically conscious before encountering the dharma. There are very few who began with dharma practice and then began to recognise the importance of the social and ecological dimensions later. I find that curious. For sure there are exceptions – but on the whole, just as Horton observed, “if it starts on the inside, it stays on the inside”, seems to bear out.

This is why at ecodharma we emphasise the need to attend to all three levels, right from the outset of our path. If there’s a danger that if we start on the inside we are likely to get stuck there, we had better take extra care to guard against that danger. All our efforts to heal ourselves need to sit within efforts to heal society and ecological damage.

Attending to the inner: the power of dhyana

None of this means we should neglect the inner. Without the inner work, all our work in the world will be severely compromised. We do need to learn how to cultivate courage, compassion and awareness from within ourselves as gifts to the world.

Perhaps the most important method for this inner empowerment is meditation. Meditation is deeply empowering. Through meditation we can cultivate clear and integrated awareness and the emotional capacity, the resilience and robustness needed to keep meeting the world with tenderness and care – again and again.

A source of empowerment in meditation that seems to be inadequately attended to is the power of dhyana. Dhyana is the deep meditative concentration that is the aim of samatha meditation. Sometimes it is called samadhi or tranquil abiding. The term tranquil abiding doesn’t really do justice to the source of creative energy and joy that are integral to dhyana. It is a state of deeply integrated, clear and energised mind.

Sometimes people put emphasis on meditation as calming. At other times they emphasise insight or vipassana, but it's useful to really acknowledge the energising power of meditation that is dhyana. Dhyana refreshes the mind. It releases a brightness and clarity which is so unlike everyday consciousness. If we really want to offer our gifts to the world, giving sufficient attention to cultivating this in our own experience is priceless.

Dhyana can often be regarded as a lofty achievement for meditators. But it need not be very distant. Dhyana is simply the natural condition of the mind when we set up the right conditions. It is just a matter of attending to those conditions. When we do, dhyana arises as naturally as warm air rises on the south facing walls of a limestone cliff.

Ethics, connection and skill

As I have mentioned, the principle conditions to support deeper meditative experience is to attend to our ethics – and to really feel our connection with the world with an intimate care. This has to come first if we want dhyana to become part of our daily experience. We also need to be clear that meditation is continuous with our everyday life. Accessing dhyana regularly is really a matter of choice about what we do with our life, how we live it day to day. The balance of attention we create for it in our lives.

But then there is also the acquiring of skill. We need to approach meditation is an art, not as a chore! And as an art it requires careful perfection of the skills to practice it.

There's lots of good meditation teaching in the Buddhist world today. But I just want to take a moment to share a beautiful set of similes that have been passed down from the meditation instructions of the Vajrayana Mahasiddhi Saraha, from ancient northern India, which I find very useful.

Six similes of Saraha

Saraha says that these six similes can help us deepen our meditation towards deep concentrative abiding:

- Settling the mind like the sun unobscured by clouds
- Settling like a garuda circling in the sky
- Settling like the still depth of the ocean
- Settling like a small child staring at the wall paintings in a temple
- Settling like the trail of a bird flying in the sky
- Settling like fine, good quality cotton thread

- **Settling the mind like the sun unobscured by clouds**
 - This means that we need to look for a mind unmixed by conceptual thoughts or mental sinking. As conceptual thought reduces, becoming more refined and slight, the danger is that the mind can sink towards dullness. Instead we need to be looking out for the natural brightness of the mind, and be attentive to that. In relation to dhyana, mindfulness of breathing or the metta bhavana are access practices – not ends in themselves. Of course, paradoxically, we need to practice them as ends in themselves for them to be effective. When we practice them we can begin to notice the bright, clear, energised quality of the mind. And when we do we should turn our attention to that, letting go of the breath or the metta, and settle directly into the lucidity of mind.
- **Settling like a garuda circling in the sky**
 - Garudas are enormous mythical birds. But what Saraha is getting at here can be learnt by observing the flight of vultures riding on thermals. We can learn a lot for them. Just as they adjust their soaring flight with the slightest adjustments of their wings, we need to be attentive to the influence of tiny and subtle adjustments in our approach. By making the smallest effort we can steer into the uplifting current of deeper meditation. Then the thermals of deep mind will carry us!
- **Settling like the still depth of the ocean**
 - Single pointed is not a superficial focusing. It is more like an imperturbable settling.
 - We should not be focusing just a narrow part of our mind on the object of meditation. Instead we need to develop an approach which draws our entire mind and body towards unified settling with the object. Single pointedness is more a fullness of presence than a narrow focusing.
- **Settling like a small child staring at the wall paintings in a temple**
 - Saraha suggests that when a small child enters a monastery complex and sees the wall paintings, the child begins by taking in the whole picture and only later begins to take in the details.
 - Similarly, in meditation, we should begin with a rough perception of object, and then gradually allow the details to become sharper.
- **Settling like the trail of a bird flying in the sky**
 - Saraha says we should allow distracting thoughts to pass through like this - trackless. As distractions arise, we don't need to chase them, or allow a trail of other discursive thoughts to be left in their wake, but notice the clarity of mind which is always undisturbed by those thoughts.
- **Lastly, settling like fine, good quality cotton thread**
 - Cotton thread is soft, fine, and strong.
 - Our mind in meditation should be comfortable and relaxed, but strongly tied to the object. As we practice we keep looking for the soft, pliable, and fine qualities of the mind. And yet we keep this subtle and gentle quality of mind tied strongly to the object.

If we explore these six similes in our practice we can get a sense of the kind of skill that is involved. Sure, there is subtlety to it, but we can train in those skills until dhyana becomes an everyday part of our lives. If we do that we will access incredible resources, discovering the riches of the mind and body – which each of us has, even if it seems to be hidden. We talk about “balancing outer activity with inner sustenance”. Personally, I think that to sustain the daily challenges of conscientious engagement in the world, the empowerment of dhyana is vital.

Metta, karuna and mudita

As well as dhyana, another important source of empowerment that comes from meditation comes out of the practice of the brahma viharas. Yesterday I talked about the power of kindness, of metta. Metta sits within the meditation system known as the brahma viharas. It is a four-fold practice, sometimes called the four immeasurables. As well as metta there are three other qualities that are involved in that system, and really we need to practice them all. It is not enough to only practice *metta*. As well as *metta* it is important to also train consciously in *karuna*, *mudita*, and *upekka*.

Our training in the four immeasurables begins with *metta* – or loving kindness, fostering a caring intimate connection with the pulse of life, in oneself and in others – human and non-human. When this intimate caring is turned to face suffering in the world, it meets that quite naturally with *karuna* or compassion. And when we turn the intimate caring of *metta* to meet the happiness and wellbeing of others, it unfolds as *mudita*, or sympathetic joyful appreciation. Together these three lay the foundation for *upekka* or equanimity.

Metta, *mudita* and *karuna* augment each other. *Metta* offers the starting point of gently opening the heart. But it is compassion, the turning of this this open heartedness consciously towards suffering in the world, that protects *metta* from degrading into mere sentimentality, and that stirs us to action. It gets *metta* off the cushion and out into the world.

The appreciative joy of *mudita* keeps us alive to the potential for joy and fulfilment in the world, it provides essential nourishment, feeding our efforts to alleviate suffering – so that we do not become overwhelmed. If we only turn towards suffering we may lack the nourishment to keep going. By consciously turning our awareness towards the flourishing, creativity and well-being in the world (which in fact is all around us), we uplift our mind. And when we turn it not only towards everyday joy in the world, but also specifically to the deep joy that arises on the path of dharma practice, and intentionally allow ourselves to feel within us a joyful appreciation for that, we deeply energise the mind and body.

Both karuna and mudita add power to metta. Mett alone is not enough. To empower ourselves and others it is a good idea to give each of them some time in every meditation session we do.

The fourth of the four immeasurables is equanimity. It is what finally brings the other three to full fruition. But while equanimity grows out of the other three it also requires to be perfumed with the insights of liberation. And, even though this does leave it hanging, as “liberate” is the theme for tomorrow I will leave it until then! It is a series after all!