

Vidyamala Burch
Week One, *Freeing the Mind When the Body Hurts*
December 5, 2016
“The Power of Awareness”



Welcome to this online retreat, *Freeing the Mind When the Body Hurts*. My name is Vidyamala and I'm an ordained member of the Triratna Buddhist Order. I'm also founder and director of Breathworks, which is an organization devoted to helping people who live with pain, illness, and stress live better lives using mindfulness and compassion. This work very much comes out of my own life experience. I injured my spine 40 years ago, and I've lived with pain and disability ever since. I had the good fortune to come across the buddhadharma 30 years ago. I've been a practicing Buddhist for the past 30 years, both in my own practice and also in teaching others. I've been interested in what the Buddha has to say about working with our minds and freeing our minds even when our body is suffering, is ill, or is damaged, as in my case.

I find the Buddha's life story really fascinating. He gained enlightenment when he was 35. Presumably, he was quite a fit and healthy young man. Then he taught tirelessly across the north of India for many decades after that. He died when he was 83. It's very clear from the Buddhist scriptures, the stories of his life, that he did experience physical pain, particularly towards the end of his life. There are stories where he asks his attendant, Ananda, to take over the teaching because his back was hurting. When he did die, he died of food poisoning, which would have been extremely painful. What's very clear, when you read the texts, when you read the scriptures, is that he had a very free mind. He maintained extremely positive states, mentally and emotionally, even when his body was hurting.

I find this kind of mixture of a painful body and a liberated mind really, really interesting. This is what we're going to explore over the next four weeks together. We'll look at various texts that draw out this theme, and hopefully you'll get some real tips about how you may free your own mind and emotions, even if your body's hurting.

This week we're going to look at the theme, “The Power of Awareness.” It's fundamental to Buddhist practice, this teaching to be present to your experience, to know what's

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happening in each moment. We're going to look this week at the *Satipatthana Sutta*. Next week the theme is “Letting Go of the Struggle” and we're going to look at the *Sallatha Sutta* from the Pali Canon. The third week is “And What of Love,” asking the question, “Did the Buddha say that love was important when we're doing this work?” He said, “Love is completely essential. Kindness is completely essential, if we are to free our mind and free our heart. Even when the body is hurting.” We're going to look at the Metta Bhavana practice that week and the other *brahmaviharas* (the four immeasurables) if we've got time. Then in the final talk, we're going to bring it all together and I'm going to introduce a six-step process that I've developed to help us gradually, through applied practice and continuity in our daily life, become more and more liberated, mentally and emotionally, no matter what state your body is in. Each week I'll give you little pointers that you can do at home between the talks to help embed the learning in your own body, in your own heart, and in your own mind.

What I want to do now is tell you a bit about a friend of mine called Annie, who is a young woman I met some years ago. She was diagnosed with lymphoma when she was 28 years old. She had a very high-flying career at that point and it was a diagnosis that turned her life upside down. She had some horrible, invasive treatments, including a stem cell transplant. She found it very difficult. She told me that she'd experienced a great deal of mental and emotional distress through this time. Then I met her years later, when she sought out mind-training, meditation, and the dharma to help her manage the ongoing health difficulties that she had.

It was obvious to me, getting to know her, that she was really applying herself to her practice. She was becoming more and more radiant and luminous. It was beautiful to see. Unfortunately, her condition deteriorated and she was told that she needed to have a bone marrow transplant. Again, this is a highly invasive, unpleasant treatment. She had the transplant and afterwards we had a lovely talk. She said her experience of the procedure was completely different from her experience of the stem cell transplant, even though the

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level of physical invasion and the physical suffering was quite similar. We had this lovely talk, trying to tease out what was it that was different. Of course, what was different was her mind. She had brought a completely different mental and emotional perspective to her suffering, based on her own mindfulness and compassion practice and using the Buddhist teachings.

This is what I'm going to introduce you to in detail this week, using the model of the *Satipatthana Sutta*, which is widely considered to be one of the core mindfulness texts in the Buddhist tradition. It is about the power and importance of awareness and how it's an absolutely crucial foundation if we are to move forward in our Buddhist life. There's a Buddhist scholar and translator, who's based in Germany, called Analayo. He's written a really beautiful book on the *Satipatthana Sutta*. What he does at the end is sum the whole sutta up in four words. These four words are, "keep calmly knowing change." He says that the whole of these teachings are contained in those four words.

The Buddha says that, "the *Satipatthana Sutta* is the direct path to your awakening." It contains all his teachings and he's got this really lovely prediction at the end of this particular text, where he says that, "Even if we practice this just for seven days with application, with effort, with continuity of purpose, then we can gain liberation and free our minds." It's a very optimistic text as well.

I'm just going to unpack these four words a little bit more to help you get a sense of what they mean and how we can apply this to our own lives. This word "keep" in "keep calmly knowing change," what does that mean? What this is pointing to is application of effort—the need to bring our mind from this practice to every moment of our lives in a flow that continues through individual moments.

I've got a helpful image for visualizing the kind of effort that we should be bringing to our Buddhist practice or to our meditation practice: it is the image of blowing on the

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embers of a fire. You just imagine that you've got this fire and it's just embers and you want the fire to be brought back to life. If you blow too hard on that fire, it will go out. If you don't blow enough on that fire, it will go out. If you blow on those embers with just the right amount of effort, that's quite delicate and sensitive, and yet purposeful and focused, then that fire will very gradually catch alight again and will become a blazing fire.

It's that kind of effort that we need to bring to our meditation practice. I think many of us, make the mistake of trying too hard or straining or being willful or trying to force concentration, or we do the opposite and are very vague and floaty and drifty. It's balanced effort. That's a nice way of talking about it, as well: bringing balanced effort to our practice.

Moving on to the next word, "calmly," what does this refer to in the Buddha's text? This is referring to the act of freeing ourselves from being enslaved by our likes and dislikes. I quite like that expression. Being free of being a slave to your likes and dislikes. When we're not aware, or when we're spiritually ignorant, what happens in life is experience comes towards us or it may be sensations in the body. Before we know it, we automatically react to things that we don't like with a pushing away response. It's like, "Oh. Go away." If something comes towards us that we like, we automatically pull it towards us like, "Oh. I want more of that." We end up being strung out between these two competing responses or reactions. It's like, "Go away. Go away," or "I want more of that." It's a bit like we're kind of crucified by our reactions of craving the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant.

When we're calm, in this Buddhist sense, in the way that is pointed to the *Satipatthana Sutta*, we're letting go of those two competing reactions. Something unpleasant comes towards us and we meet it with an aware mind, an open heart, a soft heart and we just let it be. Something pleasant comes towards us, we enjoy it, but we don't grasp onto it. We

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just let it be. The "calmly" aspect of the sutta is this restful, beautiful quality of awareness, where we're very open to everything, but we're not reacting.

The "knowing" aspect of the sutta is pointing to a very particular kind of awareness, a very special kind of awareness, where we're very aware of what's happening in our body, mentally, emotionally, and each present moment without every forgetting our higher purpose. Of course, our higher purpose from a Buddhist point of view, is this longing or this movement to completely free the mind and the heart. Our present moment awareness, if you like, is in the service of this higher ideal or a higher goal.

The "change" aspect of the phrase, "keep calmly knowing change," is pointing to the absolute core teaching of the Buddha about impermanence. One of his big insights is seeing that absolutely everything in this phenomenal world is subject to the law of impermanence. Myself, you, the world around us, everything is changing without any exception. He says that we suffer because we don't live in harmony with that. I think for those of us who have got chronic pain, we can see that quite directly because the pain feels so solid. We think it's going to be there forever. Then we get distressed and we fight against it. It feels like this kind of hard lump in our experience that we turn into the enemy.

The Buddha's saying, "No. This experience that we label pain, it's a flow. It's a flow of sensations rising and passing every single moment. No two moments are the same. Every single moment of pain is different." Rather than being caught in a battle with the enemy that we make solid through our inappropriate perception, rather than get this kind of tight contracted life, we relax, we rest in a much more fluid and open space. It can become really very beautiful, even when the body is hurting. There's this open heart, this open mind, a vast mind, where everything is arising and passing, arising and passing. That's what the Buddha's pointing to.

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These are the four words to take away this week, "Keep calmly knowing change." We're just going to do a little practice now to give you a sense of how we can use the breath and the body as a way of tasting the fluid nature of experience. Through tasting the fluidity in the breath, we can then taste the fluidity in our physical sensations. We'll just do this for a few moments. During your home practice this week you can listen back to the recording if you want to, but you can also use this in your daily life. Rest in the fluid nature of things, rest in the fluidity of the breath and allow the sensations that you find unpleasant to arise and pass moment by moment.

Let's begin by making ourselves as comfortable as possible. You can do this sitting. You can do it lying down. You can do it standing. Whatever works for your body. Perhaps take a few deeper breaths and on the out breath allow your weight to settle. Settle down in to the chair, the bed, the floor. See if you can rest inside gravity. Allow gravity to hold your body and to support your body. Just settle a little bit more with each out breath. Invite your awareness very deep inside the body. Then see if you can feel the sensations and movements of breathing deep inside the body. See if you can feel them in the back of the body and the sides of the body, as well as the front of the body. Notice how your breath is always changing. There's the in breath and there's the out breath, the in breath and the out breath, like waves on a beach. See if you can rest inside the fluid nature of breathing. Let your whole body be breathed by the natural breath.

If you've got any painful sensations in the body, include these in your awareness with a kind, tender attitude. See if you can notice how these are also changing moment by moment, just like the breath. Begin to edge towards the discomfort and feel the fluid nature of the sensation. Let go of the perception of solidity. Let everything arise and pass moment by moment. In your own time, at home, you can continue this practice for as long as you like, making sure that you bring this very kindly and tender attitude to your experience. We'll bring this to a close now, in terms of this recording. Just open the eyes.

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What I'd like to suggest is that you also bring this quality of awareness to your daily life this week. When you're sitting in a chair, remember gravity, remember breathing. Remember breathing in the back of the body, as well as the front of the body. Allow your body to be massaged by the breath. Every time you get into a battle with your pain, the enemy, see if you can drop deep inside these sensations and allow the sensations to arise and pass moment by moment. Hope you get on okay this week. I look forward to seeing you again next week. Thank you.