

Working with the stuck places.

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Stuck places

Have you noticed, as you scan your mind, that there's a lot of things that nag you? Unfulfilled projects and wishes, grudges that you know you shouldn't have, topics of current concern that keep coming back...and around all that, the sense of being stuck in, or with, all of this.

It's more apparent when you sit still for a while....memories and fancies that gnaw at the heart. We don't always acknowledge them. Sometimes trivial, sometimes poignant, they're trivial, we don't know how to respond to them. Brush off the minor hurts; think about the feelings..and then analyse the thoughts...? It's a bind, because the topics can seem of another time, or of years gone by...or really messy. And meanwhile life rolls along more or less ok and we can get by provided that we don't look too far ahead (and don't look at what's driving us). Like a horse with blinkers on. We don't see the ignorance, don't see the Unknowing.

But it's a fettered kind of life, if our minds don't widen and deepen beyond what can be seen straight ahead with no effort. We build a reality out of the sense-world; out of what's outside us and what's broadcast to us via the media, and assume that's the real thing. but large areas of what's happening to us in the domain of the mind are not being acknowledged and responded to. It's hardly surprising, since most of us live in a context wherein the mind gets overwhelmed by input that is beyond our scope to control or even comprehend. You know...urban life, media saturation, global crises..on top of the usual stuff of personal ups and downs. So the management program tends towards blinkering and narrowing attention to only certain aspects of life.

But in Dhamma-practice we're aiming to widen and deepen, at least in our own domain. Life might be surprising and we might have more resources than we imagine...The presentation of the Buddha is that with a trained attention and a change of view, problems that seemed solid can melt. Things that one felt oneself as stuck with don't have to be that way. There's a process that we can undertake. But it does require the resolution and the aspiration to attend fully, comprehensively and wisely.

Direct attention to the mind takes us into what's lodged there. It's not always so pretty: moods that feel lumpy and stodgy, feelings that harden until they seem rock-like. And there can be a sense of having to carry all this, of a me that is trapped in all this psycho-emotional stuff. The sense of having stuff, and of being someone who has a lot of stuff they have to work out - all that is what I mean by 'stuckness.' It's that very sense, not just the topics that it forms around, is what we aim to meet and release in meditation. But the way the Dhamma-process goes is that when we can get light enough, and free enough from that sense, then we can see and address the moods and topics from a wiser steadier place. And in a lot of cases, just by dropping the weight of it all, some topics fade out altogether.

Release, through attention

What meditation offers, then, is a process of releasing the basis of all this by exercising attention to the problem, rather than by ignoring it or searching for a solution. It sounds counter-intuitive at first...you mean, you don't try to fix the problem? Not in meditation you don't. You change the way of attending to the problem, and this allows another aspect of ourselves to come into play...this aspect, full awareness, will address the stuck sense. Then you can take it from there regarding topics - sometimes that's the end of the story, sometimes you make adjustments to how you're living, your aims, goals and expectations, sometimes there's a shift in who you assume yourself to be.

But the process begins with paying attention, stabilising attention, keeping attention attuned. So we train attention to refer to the body; we exercise it in that way to get it tuned up. And we refer to the body because it's steadier than the mind, and its free of attitudes and opinions. Establishing attention in the body can be done by asking 'How do I know that I have a body? What tells me that my body's here?' and witnessing what comes up. Sensing it directly, we experience sensations and energies that can be summarised under four headings: a sense of solidity, of a pressure that resists movement; a sense of warmth and vitality; a sense of movement, a pressure that pushes; and a sense of fluidity, of sensations flowing and flooding. These are called the 'elements'

of earth, fire, air and water respectively. With this training, you shift attention away from the visually-based impression of the body to the impressions that come from direct bodily experience. That's what's meant by paying attention. It's not a rigid or microscopic focus, it's more fluid, inquiring and responsive. What do you notice? Changing patterns of warmth and pressure; and an overall sense (the 'water' cohesive element) that flows through and harmonizes all this.

Then you look to get comfortable: is there any tension I'm holding that I don't need, and excess pressure? Any place that feels absent, numb, asleep? And by attending to these with no push and no attitude apart from the inclination towards well-being, we notice where we need to relax and where to firm up and where to let things find their own balance.

It takes some skill to support the process. The first is by moderating attention itself. We may assume that attention is about having a tight focus and holding things steady. Which it can be. That's one end of the spectrum, the sharp end. That's the kind of attention we might use in work or in high-performance situations, it's 'brain attention'. But there's also 'heart attention' which is broad and inclusive. It's connected with healing, bearing with, and giving things space. It sits down with the topic, widens to include all of it, and doesn't try to change or analyse it. This is the kind of attention associated with heart qualities such as calm, compassion and deep listening. It's the optimal kind for soothing and easing the whole system.

I don't say that we never need to use the sharper end of attention, but often it's the case that people have lost touch with the other end of the spectrum. This gets to be the case when we meditate, and get the idea of being *more* attentive. So to be more means to do more, to try harder, and so we use the end of the spectrum that's most associated with making a deliberate act of the will - the sharp end. Now one can be sharp without being forceful, but it often takes a maturation of practice to weed out the pushy tight-hearted attitude that comes from years of using focus to get something done that had no real heart in it. However, a gentler form of attention doesn't mean that we drift and daydream. Paying attention in this way means tuning into the direct experience of body, feeling and being with that and gradually spreading attention over the whole body. Over the pressures, the firmness, the suppleness, the vitality, the warmth and the flowing qualities of embodiment. And then the sum-total, the interrelatedness of the parts. It also means quietly inquiring 'Is there anything here that can be relaxed? Is there anything here that's being overlooked?' By sensing the specifics and the inter-relatedness, we are mindful of the whole bodily experience in these elemental ways.

So adjustment of attention, using its more flexible and inclusive mode is invaluable...it can be a turn-around to discover a way to be with yourself that is quiet and yet goes deep. In fact attention like this can get past the hardness and the driven senses, and take you to an easeful still centredness. On the other hand, the greater the push of the will, the tighter the body gets. But when you can loosen what needs to be loosened, the whole body opens up; then you can focus with ease and precision because the armour slips off. And the bodily aspect of the stuck sense goes with it.

There's something to learn there: the contacted impression of the body is bound up with the intention behind attention. A shift in the approach, an adjustment of focus changes what touches you. This is an aspect of what the Buddha called 'inter-dependency.'

Attention applied and groomed in this way is a condition that opens awareness - the receptive aspect of mind - the aspect which carries spiritual, rather than functional, potential. Awareness is attuned to the larger sense of ourselves where we are compassionate, assured, spacious and at ease. These are precious qualities; they are the most accessible references to what I mean by 'spirituality.' Basically the 'spirit' is a mental awareness that takes context and mutuality, rather than an isolated personality, as its foundation. It sees the large picture, so it isn't embroiled in the present topic. It senses the welfare of self and others, so it is ethical and compassionate. It carries the breadth and depth that attention can't. However, it only becomes available through paying careful and full attention.

Developing attention through the body

For many people, tuning in to the rhythmic process of in-and out-breathing will be a useful place where attention can open into full awareness. But we have to learn to land there by putting aside the attitudes and messages that cause attention to contract. We can lose awareness in a 'got to get this done' functional trance ('more wil-power, harder, quicker'). So the reminder here is: **don't lose touch with the receptive**. Stay in your body and wait for the breathing to meet you there. This is calming. Things may seem fuzzy at first (because you're not used to focusing this end of the spectrum of attention) but you keep asking yourself 'Am I breathing?

How do I know I'm breathing? How does breathing manifest in my experience?' Why bother? Because the breathing process can spread awareness through the entire nervous system, through the body and mind which share this channel of intelligence. And by doing so, it blows out the dull, stale and contracted (in areas that you didn't even know existed) and it carries the potency of ease, assuredness, and compassion, to the whole of your being.

But no hurry. Stay in the body and as it comes into wholeness, let it lead the way. When the body begins to come alive then the breathing is much easier to discern because the body's energetic system is centred on it. Breathing is more than an event at the end of your nose. It includes that, as well as the whole respiratory tract; and it includes the flexing of the diaphragm and the chest. But more directly, its rhythmic and suffusive energy blends and massages the elements of earth, fire, air and water. And when they come into harmony, they set up the conditions for unification of mind and body. (also called right concentration or *samadhi*) So you can't do samadhi; but you can arrive there. It's the natural resting place of awareness attuned to the body. And then you can really see through and let go of a lot of unnecessary stuff.

When your whole body wakes up, your whole body knows the breathing, feels the breathing, feels the flow it feels the changes going on every time we breathe in and breathe out. And all of that is an expression of basic life energy, the raw material that we draw from with every movement. thought, act of the will and emotion. If there were no other result from mindfulness of breathing than calming, cleaning, relaxing and brightening our energy at source, this alone would be reason enough to practise it. Another memo: **at the level of energy, body and mind are not separate.** They use the same nervous system. Therefore, stressed body equals stressed mind; easing the whole body equals easing the whole mind. And the mark of wholeness is that it is that which is encompassed by receptive awareness. This is where we return to health and sanity. Therefore we spread attention carefully over the body, and by connecting awareness to the breathing we take its qualities through the whole of the psychosomatic reactive, affective, habit-forming release potential that's called 'me.'

Yes, this includes all of that, a little at a time. 'Me:' that experience of being affected and reacting to that; the sense of being a series of moods and behaviours that I'm not in control of, and try to shepherd as best I can. And the overview of that process that senses that I'm not doing it that well, that I'm overwhelmed or afflicted with wacky thoughts and feelings...and maybe I should sort this out, but maybe I'm not up to that...Thus the stuck sense comes in and starts forming stuck places; places where I get flustered or defensive; places where I space out; places where I bristle or go into a spin of stories and inner monologue.

So...the fine-tuning is to use attention to come out of the stuck places without losing awareness. That is, we acknowledge the contraction of the heart, or the spin of regurgitating personal history again, and we pause and check that move into the habitual pattern. And right there, we can do a number of things from full awareness, rather than from a reaction and an old personal strategy.

The role of intention

How to act from awareness? Well, many of our normal volitional tendencies - our wishes, our drives, our hopes, our spiritual quest, our aversion or craving - takes their lead from unawareness, from unknowing. This isn't a lack of information - 'unknowing' in this context means that our awareness is not fully open, and our attention is not complete. In this half-awake state, the mind works from the basis of being somebody. The sense is that I'm a lasting something at the centre of this experience. And maybe I'd like to get to something else, be in another state or another. So if something is getting in the way, maybe I try to get it out of the way, push through it, figure out where it's coming from, get rid of it, stop it and so forth. All this self-view makes the mind busy and often frustrated, because I don't get to the good place, and can't get away from the bad places. Although a certain amount of stuff can just be brushed away, the stuck sense lingers and takes a different form. I get stuck in life, wondering what to do and what's the point. A stuck doubter. Then I get stuck in meditation, trying to get to the good place and get rid of my defilements. A stuck warrior. Or I feel besieged by all the bad kamma I've committed. A stuck prisoner. Or I hang onto my accomplishments, stuck in conceit. This is because the tightness of the attention is carrying a stuck sense, a personal blueprint, with it. When there's unknowing, the state and the attention that's noticing it come with the same energy, and from the same place.

Have you noticed? When the mind is numb, the attempts to fix it are numb, or clumsy, not agile, not clued in. Then again when one is restless, there is the 'try this, try that' fluttering attitude towards restlessness. These are the two extremes of the hindrances. One is that you get flattened and weighed down with something and sink; the other is you're overactive, trying to get hold of and tightening around things, contracting around this, that and the other. We can stop being attentive and dive into a comfort-zone, but that just sidelines the problem.

Therefore it's important to shift attention to a place where the energy isn't stuck...but stay attentive. Walking up and down, or accessing a bouyant posture for example. But even within that, it's good to flex attention: to spread one's attention and steady it with a wider focus - like adjusting your gaze from a detail on a picture to the whole thin, or like widening your stance when you stand on the deck of a ship. We still use the focusing power of attention to be specific in the present moment, so we don't get spacey or numb. Then you flex to find ways of releasing and steadying. This is the intention that calms and steady the mind. You can then go wide, go narrow, come up close to things, or step back for a while, wait and see what happens; then check out your attitudes and intentions. That's the first way we bring clear intention into the mind.

Shifting to a brighter mental place is more important than shifting to a more alive physical place. Because it's only this shift that leads to full awareness. Full awareness is what will dissolve the hindrances and stuck places, because it isn't involved with topics, or with being somebody. It doesn't carry the sticking blueprints. From its calm and steady place, ethical joyful and compassionate intentions arise to further the practice.

Intentions in this context come from openness rather than something that we deliberately do. And they start to be felt when we do the basic flexing of attention that allows for openness. They carry energies and modes of understanding that abolish unknowing, and so dissolve the stuck places. Skilful intentions such as calming and kindness allow attention to meet an object without pushing it, or scattering away from it. They create the space in which things can shift. For example, with an intention of kindness, then whatever arises, whatever we contact, we are meeting that. We're not having an opinion about it, we're not recoiling from it, we're not infatuated with it. We're not trying to analyse it, or blame anybody, or swamp it with sentiment. It's just the modest precision of non-aversion to allow the attitude behind attention to shift - without implanting another attitude.

Kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) are good intentions to consider and practise at any level. To practise extending awareness in this way, we get in touch with that fundamental wish for well-being. It may be something that we've given up on: one aspect of contraction is resignation, getting by, putting up with life and not making a fuss. But when these intentions come from awareness, we're not trying to fix or solve anything, but just to come out of the stuck state, even if it's a manageable kind of stuck state. And a simple way to begin this is by imagining and aspiring, by allowing ourselves to bring forth a simple wish.

Imagine how it would be if one could feel well, happy and unobstructed. "May I abide in well-being." That's an intention, but it's not about searching for a happy state; nor does it even have to be fulfilled. But the very quality of allowing, of aspiring and imagining, brings an energy that is bright. To for a moment be free from resignation, free from "Why bother?" free from the sense of "Well you're always this way and you always have been..." It feels so good to know that those cramped states aren't fixed and immutable! And with that you kindle the inspiration that's latent in awareness. An intention is not a particular object, it's a way of operating, a context that you allow things to arise within. You do it, rather than speculate about it. Then, even if nothing ever changes, (which would be an extraordinary) it would still be ok, because all we want to do is bring up that intention, know that we can express that intention and let it run through our hearts.

The four spiritual dwellings

These gestures of awareness in *this domain* have four inflexions. Kindness is the quality of bestowing well-being. Compassion is the protector, and repels anything that could damage, belittle, harm, dismiss, or abuse. One is that which fills up and one something that empathizes with the vulnerable aspects of ourselves and others. Compassion has a certain courage and resolve, because a lot of what we all seem to be is subject to pain and vulnerable, yet moment after moment the intention is of compassion to not be weighed down by that.

Also to be added to kindness and compassion is the ability to appreciate and enjoy well-being - a quality called *mudita*. Attitudes that get stuck in focusing on what's wrong, and what I need to get, are loosened by the ability to notice what isn't wrong, the degree of freedom from pain that is present in the body, or topics that don't bring fear, or aversion in the mind. And to complete the set, there's the widest and deepest intention of them all, which attends without wanting something to happen, go away or change, but isn't bored or indifferent. This is equanimity, *upekkha*. It's the intention that supports being present, being attentive and fully aware of whatever arises.

As a set, these four qualities are called *brahmavihara* or 'spiritual dwellings' (as distinct from stuck places). They're extensive, abundant, and uncramped; free from hatred and ill-will. Awareness is extending, bestowing, it's abundant, it's not starving or needy. We're not trying to add all kinds of sentiment or personal touches, we're not trying to add thoughts, ideals, principles, or mission-statements to that. Awareness comes before all that

contraction into a personal imprint. It just doesn't tighten up, doesn't contract. Being free from hatred, it doesn't attack, being free from ill-will. It's not cynical, bitter or depressed. It doesn't jab and it doesn't pull away. Being abundant, it's not grabbing at pleasure.

Whenever we touch into ourselves, we need to touch with intentions of this kind. It's rather like smoothing out the crinkles of unknowing. You don't hammer, you have to give warmth and allow the heart to unfold, allow it to breathe in and breathe out. We regard even our sense of mistrust or nervousness with a kindly, patient eye. "What's needed here? Does it need to be like this? What would it be like to be without this?" There's an energy there that's caring. So these *brahmavihara* are not just social virtues; they carry an energy which doesn't contract. You could call it 'spiritual love' as opposed to love that carries attachment. It is the fundamental potential to be present with experience without fondling it or criticising it. We all have this potential, though we may have limitations in opening the heart. Defending oneself on the hard earth of the intellect may seem to offer more control and clarity. But anxiety, irritation, and erotic impulses aren't subject to the light of reason.

As we settle down in meditation, we bring intentions such as these into the very core of being here. This core may be sensed as a certain balance, a certain silence, a certain stillness; it's something that seems to be a continual reference beneath the person. This is the ground of awareness. From this settled centre, we can extend to meet whatever arises. This can be external contact – the floor, or the coolness of the air, but most usefully it will be internal contact where the sense of the body carries residues of tension, or withholding, or what is called 'tissue memory' such as of shock or bereavement. And of course there's the stuff of emotional memory too. This is where we want to meet what arises with an abundant and uncontracted mind.

Take it a millimetre at a time. Sometimes we leap out too far and lose the centre, or lose attention. With the *brahmaviharas* it's important to maintain a strong connection to your own bodily presence, your mindfulness, and then work coherently with what's really touching that, rather than something that's three steps away, like tomorrow, somebody else or whatever, but really touching it here. It's like you're beginning to clear through. Just as when you're driving a car, you need to clean the windscreens before you start looking at the road-signs outside, you clean the very stuff that immediately affects you. "What's this about? What's needed here? What would it be like to be without this?" Work through that and keep moving, letting the energy and the theme of the intention spread out and around, to the point where you can begin to introduce thoughts and concerns - thoughts of beings, thoughts of people, thoughts about oneself in the present or the past. It's a kind of prayer whereby you put themes into that sphere of calm, good-will and compassion. But you have to establish the sphere before you can put this material into it. And then make it solid, make it substantial, make it workable, healthy and unwavering.

To others as to myself

The practice with all of these is holistic, because that's the way that awareness is. So these intentions are "towards others as towards myself". They extend to whatever may touch me, affect me, look at me, speak to me, whatever that may be, whatever that is. Then to the area of being affected, by others – can we receive that in a way that's not brittle or dismissive? Can we make that place available to receive that which comes without a reaction? "To myself" means we take on clearing residues and habits – recognizing that many times awareness is restricted by inner tension or fearfulness, sadness or depression. So how I will respond is going to come from that, isn't it? What I am affected by, and then how I'm going to respond to what affects me, is going to come from a basic sense of where I'm at. If right now I am uptight or anxious, then my responses to people are always going to be brusque or worried; they're not clear, not in-line with what is actually happening. So we use *metta* and *karuna* to clean out the base of the mind, that which receives impressions. "To myself" - is not some narcissistic self-affirmation; it's about cleaning our receptors from tightness, numbness, and anxiety. And that will help others.

For Awakening, we have to meet myself with the blinkers off. To meet the worry, the forcefulness or the unwillingness without an opinion, but with attention and intention. Put aside the 'after all these years, still like this.' Maybe it's the effect of taking responsibility wanting to get things right, then getting tired that the results aren't as we expected. All human enough. But I know that if I don't clear those, then I get irritable, impatient, resentful...And it's because I've come from "I'm one of these, I have to do that, I want to get it right." And even if my wish is for other people's welfare, not just my own" when the intention has come from me being someone, it's coming from the me place, the stuck place, and that's where it will lead to. Can I accept that most of my life, my good ideas, and my efforts, are mixed with unknowing? Can I learn from the residues, by meeting the residues, to tune in more deeply and come from awareness. It's humbling to realize that the fundamental

responsibility one has is to attend to one's mind and heart with awareness and empathy.

Because even when we get the idea of opening and being with what comes up in our minds, still there are the places where habitual reflex takes over - where we shut off in ourselves where there's mistrust or unwillingness, dismissal or resistance. These are the stuck places where attention, awareness and intention have to work together. No point in taking it personally. So we use a bodily sense, such as breathing, or the elements, to establish attention, widen that attention into awareness and meet what arises with those precious gestures of spiritual intention. And then attention gets to the point. with disarming accuracy. The point is generally not the topic, but the way the topic is being held. And it deepens to great simplicity. The point is not the story of the fickle and ungrateful nature of others, but the sense of resentment; and maybe then it's not the resentment, but the need to be respected and loved. That was what's needed. And who else is going to do that so accurately as your own awareness?

This is the way the process of Awakening works. You can't leave anything out. You have to include all the me bits, all the stuck places. It's a process of purity, of cleansing. But it's not a wipe-out or annihilation: each time that we encounter and work through the hindrances in this way, we find a return to and a strengthening in the qualities of awareness. This is how the me sense, the stuck sense gets transmuted into a mind of great blessing.
