

Patience / Virya

I found myself continuing to think about some of the points brought out in discussions last week and thought I'd tell a favorite story from the last retreat I went on:

The house we rented for this retreat was near a beautiful bay, shorebirds, falcons, flocking swallows in the summer. A real party house, in more ways than one, as our view of the bay was rudely interrupted by a silly golf course stretching across the way. Many of us were a bit put off by the golf course -- during one meditation session, a friend watched a golfer chip his ball straight into the artificial water feature and remarked, "I could almost hear him shouting DAMN IT!" (we later pulled the window shade). My own meditation was peppered by random mental gyrations and chatter that seemed almost impossible to quiet. But on the last day, it started to feel like a real retreat to me, and towards the last meditation session, there was something interesting popping up:

As we started our afternoon sit, I was wondering if I really belonged, if I wasn't just a nuisance in this group, and if this might be my last retreat -- maybe I started to tear up a little. But then I thought, why do I think that? It sounded suspiciously like a water element thing, though in my case, I was pretty firm about my opinions. I decided I'd better stay open to it before jumping to conclusions, just feel into things before deciding anything for sure -- basically try to put in place the advice we had been given throughout the retreat.

The water became a focus of my thoughts, and in particular the bay and the sense of outflow -- there was a sense that outflow is natural, a long slow pull (ie, the ongoing thoughts). By trying to anchor yourself in the outflow, you become like a bit of seaweed wrapped around a twig -- the little ends dragged and tugged by the water, very easy to slip loose and into the flow again. Somehow, this did not seem like the kind of problem it usually does. Still, as the water continued to ebb away, there was a feeling of things becoming quite dry and I started to feel anxious. Another thing to stay open to; with a patience, the water would certainly return and it was not difficult to have some confidence in that. Sure enough, after a while, the sense of water's fullness arrived again. And the second time the water flowed out, I noticed that the water never really goes away -- the mud absorbs water continues to hold it -- there was a real sense of stability in this.

I started to realize that this retreat was more about the bay than I realized. The golf course seemed to cut us off, but basically the retreat was still about the bay.

So for me this the sense in which patience can be a real boon to practice -- not patience as in "waiting for things to be different", but just patience with the way things are, the way things reveal themselves over time.

As for the virya part -- There were many moments before, during and since this little story where it was necessary to ask myself, am I just indulging in some nutty/weepy/hysterical story, or am I staying open to the reality of the situation? The way we usually blob along seems quite innocuous, not like something we can help at all, and it takes a few reminders and a bit of discipline (joyful effort) to remind ourselves not to drive ourselves (and the people around us) so crazy all the time. Once that commitment is made, the power of water can be acknowledged as part of us / our situation too.

Noting that virya is often described in relation to the bodddhisattva vows:

Beings are numberless; I vow to awaken with them.

Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.

Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.

Buddha's way is unsurpassable; I vow to become it.