

The Five Pillars of Transformation

Recognising Our True Nature

So now we come to the last pillar: recognising our true nature. For these last few days I've been creating a form of practice for you that is based upon certain important principles that you're learning to cultivate: supportive pillars that create a structure that holds together with the inner strength that you've gathered through containment as you're learning to bear with your samsaric habits to create a Dharmic environment or Dharmic workspace, whereby you can slowly learn the skills that will take you beyond suffering.

To leave the world that we are normally caught up in and pulled around by and come into that spaciousness and stillness: this is the precious environment where change can take place. We touch this space occasionally and get a taste of what it is like but we've never been able to abide there for very long: soon the self comes along to fill it with its greed, aversion and delusion. To abide in that 'no-selfness' can evoke insecurity and fear because 'I' is not in control. We need to go back to the world we're familiar with and regain that sense of control: we always want to be in control but of course actually we seldom are. That's the problem with the self; it actually is never in control hence it is always in the mode of trying to be just that. If we could truly be in control, we would be able to relax and be content; but it's seldom like that, is it? Grasping at impermanence with the ridiculous desire of trying to make it permanent. Things are always shifting: hence we are always feeling insecure, full of tension, full of fear, indeed, full of impermanence. So rather than accept impermanence we spend so much of our time in this uncertain state of being, agitated and insecure. But now we're coming to a place where these existential states of the human condition are at least temporarily suspended and we experience openness and mental coolness. We begin to find the skills to come into that experience; so at this precious time we are not creating or manufacturing anything.

THE DHARMIC ENVIRONMENT

We're discovering within us a place of non-creating; a place of simply abiding. We've arrived here by learning to put the pillars in place, by honing them with commitment and diligence and by awakening to the reality that this place of abiding has been there since the very beginning. By putting in place these very important principles of practice we call pillars we come to discover what actually is already there, and now primarily through our meditation we're learning to come into that space with a little bit more confidence and trust because we know that this is the place of freedom where our liberation is surely to be found. Slowly we come to realise that liberation isn't to be found in the dualistic world we're familiar with, that we probably thought was the place where it would be found when we first came to practice. We thought that somehow wisdom, insight and enlightenment would be found in the middle of this dualistic confusion; and we've stayed here for so long because we were so convinced that this would be the place where all our aspirations would be fulfilled. Now we begin to see that this was merely a trick and play of the deluded mind.

Now we are bringing through awareness a whole new dimension to our practice and an understanding of the

totality of what we are. We are beginning to wake up and recognise what our natural state is, before the dualistic world that is created by the notion of a self comes into being. Now we really do arrive at the centre of our mandala of practice; now we can begin to see a space between the dualistic world that has always been our place of abiding and the present situation before that world arises, a place that is somehow not touched by the world of anxiety and confusion. Through ever-growing familiarity, learn to trust that space where you are not trying to control and manipulate but rather open yourself and even sometimes feel a sense of vulnerability. Contain that desire to possess the situation and the moment. Resist the urge to retreat into the familiarity of looking after yourself by manipulating the situation you happen to find yourself in. This really this is the place to be, this is the environment beyond the clutches of the self, where real and authentic change can happen, in this place that is your natural state of being before the self throws a veil of deception over it and makes the experience 'mine'.

BEING IN THE BODY

By willingly opening yourself to your experiences without retreating into your world of comfort and security you are actually living in your body. By learning to stay with the situation and contain the emotional volition that wants to take you back into your world, you are living in your body. Learn to stay there or learn to return there when you catch yourself back in the world, being carried away by habits, and become ever more familiar with the mirror-like quality of your awareness that sees and is bright and alive, and allow yourself to stay with that clarity that comes from living in the body.

By opening ourselves and containing our habits fuelled and driven by the fires of our emotions we are leaving our familiar world behind and instead learning to become familiar with that which is beyond and never touched by that world, and that is our true nature.

TAKING REFUGE

When we are still in our meditation we can begin to identify our chattering world and the stillness that becomes present when that chattering stops. Begin to see that the stillness and quiet is what we should be becoming more and more familiar with and learn to take refuge there. See this place of refuge as being the gateway to your real home and freedom from all the angst of life. Whilst you abide in stillness there is no greed, aversion and delusion, no fear nor loneliness: no self. Now you are beginning to discover the real meaning of going for refuge. We are told that going for refuge is not an option if you wish to walk the path to liberation: now you understand why this is so. For going to this place of refuge means to let the world of attachment go and rest in the place beyond that world. Here is a real taste of your real home, to where your heart desires so much to return. So return to this space that not only gives you relief from the incessant attachment to the chattering mind but a real feeling of rising warmth and contentment. This place of refuge that you're awakening to is not a creation of the still mind but a discovery of what has always been there just waiting to be found.

In this place of stillness you will become alive; and that means not just alive to an experience that is new to you but you will realise that this space also embraces all that comes into your field of experience: your body, feelings and thoughts that may arise, any emotions that are waiting to express themselves through one of your habits and things that are still further into the outside environment. Here in this retreat situation you may hear and even sense the bodies that surround you; hear the occasional sound of someone moving; smell the incense; hear the sound of the breeze as it rustles the leaves on the trees outside or hear the chirping of the bird sitting on a branch. All of this comes into that space and is experienced in harmony because you are not attaching yourself to any of those experiences and creating a dualist world around it with your desires,

aversions and opinions. Free of your attachments, your awareness is like a mirror that reflects all that comes into its field of vision but never perverts any of those things' true aspect by isolating them from the whole and attempting to possess them.

This can be your experience right here on this retreat if you just let go of the chattering mind and learn to be still. This will be the experience of your awareness; but beyond that you will come to see that this thing called awareness which is also a part of you doesn't seem to have any discernible parameters unlike your self, which when looked into seems just like a caged prison; and you will come to realise that what you are discovering is different from all the other bits that go to make you up; and by doing so begin to get an inclination of something different that we begin to call our true nature.

This place of no-self is a part of you that you find when you don't chase and try to possess and is returned to over and over again when you don't grasp. Nurture that experience by bringing into being the other pillars of our particular practice. The fruit of bringing these pillars into being will have the effect of creating spaciousness and stillness, but these qualities will not have been created but rather discovered, as they have always been there; but in the same way as the sun although obscured by the clouds is nevertheless present behind them. Now learn to return and abide over and over again in this innate quality of openness and stillness; whether on the cushion or in your daily life. Learn to let go of your world of attachment and take refuge in the spaciousness of your awareness; which you will come to see is the gateway to your true nature.

THE SPIRITUAL PATH

Now we come to the characteristic of this pillar that for me defines the five pillars of transformation as a spiritual path. Until now the other pillars that I have introduced you to could easily be extracted and used by other forms of therapy and so called self-help activities. Countless systems that focus on curing many of the defects of the human condition that bring suffering to our lives have sprung up over the recent past here in the west and no doubt there will be plenty more new ways to look forward to in the future. But I believe the fifth pillar doesn't fit easily, if at all, into these systems because it is seen as 'spiritual' and therefore doesn't constitute any sort of structure that is acceptable to the dualistic approach of a doer trying to achieve something. This fifth pillar is about awakening to an aspect of ourselves that is beyond our normal dualistic construction so reaching into the part of our makeup that transcends manipulation.

Because of this, and even if you wanted to, there isn't a system or method that you could employ to finally gather and integrate all of the pillars. There are no methods or systems that would allow you to put that part of yourself that is beyond designation neatly into compartments and pigeon holes so as to make you feel in control and able to manipulate. Our aspiration to return and become truly whole and complete cannot be fulfilled by any dualistic method. This estranged aspect of our being doesn't even exist on a metaphysical level for us to investigate and burrow into outside of dualism. The dilemma before us is truly the essence of the spiritual crisis facing those of us that want to become whole again, be free of the self, and be at one with the fountain of creation, however we may perceive that. We come to realise that if we try to do something to achieve this in any way it will be akin to trying to lift ourselves off the ground by pulling on our boot laces.

What is needed to return to our innate freedom devoid of self is a spirit and willingness not to 'do' something but instead to surrender the doer and all that he or she is made of and possesses back into this unknown: the Buddha within and our true nature. This surrender or giving away requires a special human quality that makes surrender possible, called humility. The cultivation of humility allows us to slowly develop the ability to hand over this conceit of self in favour of something within that is greater than me. That 'something' which is

mysterious, great and unknowable that can never be dragged into the dualistic world to become a possession of the self, is the challenge we face and the essence of the spiritual dimension of our practice that unites the other pillars.

HUMILITY

We need humility to acknowledge that there is that within us that is greater than us and we need the understanding that in order to make complete our spiritual journey we must cultivate this ability to give away our preciously held possessions that when bundled together create this notion of self and ego. Cultivate the willingness and humility to hand all of yourself back into that which isn't 'me' is the way to unload the conceit of me and reunite yourself with the whole of what you really are and go beyond the suffering that we all want to be free of. And that handing over of all that you cling to with true humility means you never expect anything in return.

To cultivate these human qualities essential to authenticate the spiritual journey is a great and often insurmountable challenge for many of us westerners. So many of us are prepared to make this journey only so long as we understand all that we are doing and it fits our logic and reason. So for many of us even the thought of surrender through humility is irrational and humiliating and a step too far, so we turn our backs on any such idea. Yet I'm convinced that until we can break through that impasse of thinking of this path as being essentially a rational one and begin to nurture these 'irrational' spiritual qualities, the breaking of the tap root of ignorance and our awakening to inconceivable liberation will never take place.

Begin to develop a relationship with your true nature that abides deep within your body, and see it as Buddha nature: so now you can begin a relationship with Buddha. Learn to open and trust that part of you that doesn't belong to the selfish self and invite it more into your life and give it a space whereby it can begin to have an influence on how you live your life and decisions that have to be constantly made. Let go of that which always wants to be in control; that grasping that carries tension and anxiety because what you are always trying to own and possess keeps slipping through your fingers as it shows its impermanence. Realise you are on the threshold of discovering a part of you that is unfathomable and unknowable yet that relationship can be so personal, intimate and warm. Maybe you can see your inner nature take the image of a Buddha so you can relate to it and learn to respect and surrender yourself and all your precious views and opinions, grounded in self-conceit, that you hold so dearly to that which is greater than you could ever be. Begin a dialogue and talk to the Buddha, and especially in the quiet moments when you let go of your busy life and go beyond the crude thoughts in your head and instead ponder and reflect; and know that in these moments you are truly in your body. Recognise your inner teacher that aches to help and support you and point the way through many of life's challenges if only you and that self can just get out of the way and give it the space to carry you through.

SURRENDER

This is a deeply personal cultivation and one that you have to experiment with, with that openness and humility which are the key to this relationship. The relationship and coming together that is forming has a characteristic that doesn't apply to ordinary worldly relationships. With a normal relationship there is always an element of give and take and often compromise so that you and your new found friend form a bond; but the relationship forming with your inner teacher and guide has quite a different quality. Never expect your inner teacher to come and meet you half-way and make compromises. Never expect that the relationship that is being formed can ever be on your terms, whereby you pick and choose how you'd like it to be. If you have this attitude, you will never meet the Buddha and unite with your true nature. The qualities you need to nurture are those of

acceptance and the willingness to surrender yourself completely and wholeheartedly: two qualities necessary for the giving up of the self but two qualities which for many of us westerners pose a great and difficult challenge to take on; and, for some, a challenge too far.

Because understanding how we learn to recognise our true nature and bring it more into our life isn't learnt by some method or other, the only way I can think of that will help you understand how this journey back into wholeness is taken is to relate to you how I began to awaken to that which is beyond the self and how I learned to trust and allow it more into my life, and how on at least one occasion my growing trust in and respect of my inner teacher rescued me from a situation of great mental and emotional trauma

Some of you are familiar with a particular experience that I related in my first book that I had when I was living in Sri Lanka as a novice monk. It was at a time when I was staying at a large forest hermitage and it was a time of intense meditation and insight. During this time I entered a period of great inner conflict that attached itself to a minor monastic training rule that I sometimes broke and the guilt and self-loathing that arose out of breaking that rule. The intensity at times was so great it surpassed anything I'd experienced in my entire life as I found myself seemingly hell-bent on destroying myself mentally and emotionally, and quite incapable of preventing that self-destruction.

I was mentally split in two, one half creating self-loathing, the other half defending itself against this incessant power of hatred. Mara was manifesting as an uncontrollable evil force trying one more time to push me off the path of liberation that was slowly but surely breaking his vice-like grip and control. I was totally at my wits' end. All the mental discipline and strength that had matured over the years that saw me through many difficult situations just buckled under this onslaught. I was about to go insane, but nevertheless determined that I'd come too far to retreat and give up my commitment.

As I struggled with my dukkha I remembered the support and guidance I had experienced from the inner guru that has pointed the way so often in the past. The divine, other-power, Buddha, god, or whatever other name you prefer, that I came to trust and allow into my life to support me when the twists and turns of life came and I had to make decisions. I again turned to this mystery that I knew wasn't me yet wasn't apart from me. I'd learned to develop a relationship that matured sometimes in meditation, but mainly at times in my daily life when I was quiet and on my own and when it was possible to ponder and reflect.

This relationship started when I first came to practice and developed a growing awareness and conviction that I was being supported by something that wasn't me. I was developing a respect towards something I certainly didn't understand but I knew it knew far more than I did and had my wellbeing in its heart, so I came to trust it more and more. I was learning to get out of the way and stop trying to be always in control of everything in my life and give space to that which seemed to know all the answers. This brought lightness to so many things and removed the burden of always having to know the answers to everything, and having always to be making the right decisions. Just get out of the way, bow the head and trust.

This was so much the key to the relationship; learning to bow. This was the doorway, the way into this mystery that carried and supported me so often in my life. I learned to bow not in a ritualistic way but in a way of reverence and surrender. Beginning to learn how to give myself up to something deeply mysterious yet so personal, warm and loving which seemed only to exist to help me on this journey through life – if only I could trust and get out of the way.

It was whilst pondering my relationship at the time of this great trauma that I realised I needed my 'friend' more than ever before. I began to bow with a sense of surrender I'd never experienced before; genuinely giving myself up and also giving up that which was doing the giving up, and asking for help. Despite my conflict my meditation was very strong and whilst in a period of deep absorption wisdom arose and spoke in my tongue and put mara in his place so making him seem vulnerable and not the powerful figure he would like me to think he was. On returning to duality my heart was buoyant and light and with growing inner strength, able to withstand the power of this inner negative force. Absorption and communion happened again and with the comfort that I was being supported with guided wisdom by 'that which knew' I managed to bear with my inner darkness that was so intent on destroying me. During this time the intimacy with my inner nature was so complete it spoke at a time I was actually bowing my head towards my little rupa and told me I should ask for forgiveness as I make my first bow and for help as I make my second and to be accepted back into the womb of my true nature as I made the third bow. This I did and have done so ever since. Shortly after receiving the love and guidance of Buddha through these difficult times mara's power began to wane and finally left me and a beautiful peace took his place; and I have never experienced that form of self conflict since, now more than 25 years.

Faith, trust and the humility to surrender this preciously held conceit of self are the qualities needed to take refuge in the Buddha, for that is really the essence and spirit of this pillar, so that, over time, you may reunite little by little with that which isn't me, yet paradoxically not for one moment ever apart from me. A part of you that is mysterious, unobtainable, warm and loving, with a wisdom that only wants to help you set yourself free, that wants to support you with practice and your life, is a tremendous companion to have. It is so easy to feel lost, confused and alone with life and your practice, but the comfort of being with that which will do all that is possible to help you be free from the burden of self cannot be valued with words.