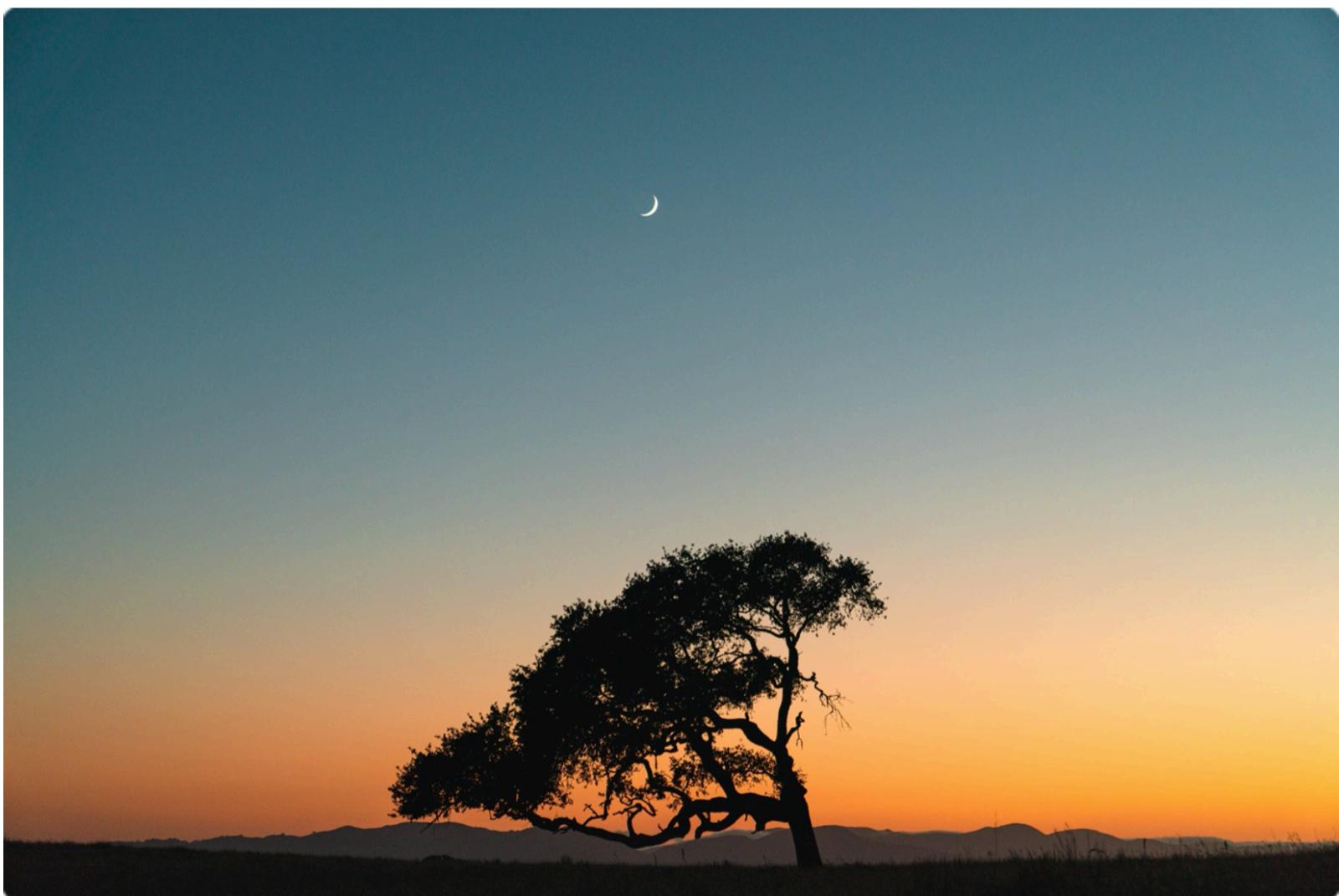




Questions & Answers

ALBA Day of Practice 19 December 2020

'Here and Now'



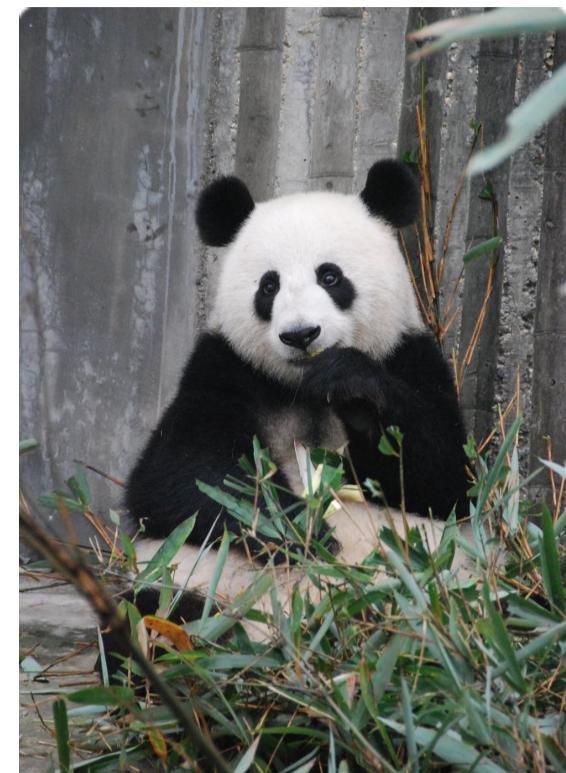
Nick Carroll

Thoughts taking me away from the here and now

What term in Pali did Buddha use for a mind that keeps generating thoughts that take me out of the here and now?

The Pali term is *papañca* – usually translated as mental or conceptual proliferation.

You may want to read the introduction to the Madhupindika Sutta (The Ball of Honey Sutta) as translated by Thanissaro Bikkhu which offers a thorough explanation of the term (see it in www.accesstoinsight.org)



Every day activities and the here and now

Can we be in truly Here and Now whilst performing everyday activities? Or are we distracted by thinking what we do next?

All of life is taking place Here & Now, all of the time. This of course includes all our daily activities. Thinking can help but it can also distract us. Awareness with discernment enables us to recognise whether our thinking is helpful or unhelpful. Being mindful we notice what we are doing, what we are feeling and what we are thinking. The more mindful and discerning we are, the more we can skilfully adapt to what we are experiencing.

Pain and the here and now

I and a colleague had a lot of online harassment to deal with this week. My mind today keeps dragging me into the past, so though I am physically in the here and now, I am aware of this drag into the past. How did Buddha describe & explain what is going on for me, and how do you suggest one deals with negative emotions, trauma, pain & grief in the here and now? What advice might Buddha have given around dealing with cyberbullying and cyberbullies, in order for one to say in the here and now? How can I deal with bullies, the pain of which seems to be keeping me away from the here & now?

We have an aversion to pain and are drawn to what is pleasant, as you have noticed yourself. But by avoiding pain we often compound it and make it worse, often prolonging it. The practice of being present in the Here & Now and allowing ourselves to experience it and accept it using the breath eventually transforms our reaction and helps ease the pain.

Being aware of what we are feeling and how it affects us is key. The general injunction is to practice Right Effort, i.e. to avoid the arising of unskilful states and overcoming them when they arise, and arousing skilful states of mind and maintaining them when they arise.

How does this work in practice you may ask? Whenever we notice the arising of a negative state of mind and notice how it feels in the body we can STOP and PAUSE. Take a deep in-breath and SLOWLY breathe out, pausing at the end of the outbreak for two or three seconds. We do this three or four times, and then allow our breathing to find its own pace and rhythm and observe it as it flows through the heart region and continue to keep our attention on the heart and belly region.

Every time the narrative of the situation arises in our mind, we notice and accept it, but we do our best not to stay with it by bringing our attention back to the in-breath and the especially the out-breath as it flows through the heart region.

Do your best not to speak or act when in a negative state of mind. Stop and pause in the Here & Now and go through the breathing cycle as described above three times before speaking or acting.

Talk things through with a good friend who is able to listen and understand how you are feeling, a friend who will not reinforce negativity around the topic. Being understood how we feel by another helps us understand and accept how hurt we feel without reinforcing the cause the pain. This is one function of spiritual friendship or *kalyanamitta* in Pali.



Depression and the here and now

If someone had depression & anxiety, did Buddha advise anything about being in the here and now to help with this?

Being with body sensations brings us to the Here and Now. The Buddha pointed out that all states of mind come and go, that they are not permanent and that this can be witnessed in the Here & Now.

We can reflect on this and see how this takes place in our own experience. We can observe how our mind gravitates to the stories we tell ourselves that reinforce our negative state of mind. We can notice how what we think about affects how we feel, and conversely see that how we feel affects what we think.

Through trial and error we can learn what helps alleviate a depressed state of mind. Movement and physical activity that engages attention and speeds up the heart rate will help, whether it be yoga, tai chi or chi kung, or going for a walk in nature. Contact with friends and supportive situations will help. Taking care of one's immediate environment by keeping it clean and tidy will help.

If the depression becomes chronic then seeking some external help might be advisable. If it is a serious long standing depression we can skilfully support the process of recovery with the help of appropriate medication, be it naturopathic or allopathic whilst we work through the causes of the depression. This can be compared to having the helpful support of a life belt whilst we learn or remind ourselves how to swim.

For anxiety, stopping and pausing and coming into the Here & Now using the breath as outlined in the answer to Q1 above, is the best and most immediate way to help downregulate anxiety.



Trauma and injustice and the Buddhist teachings

Terrible things happened this year re: Black Lives Matter. And there are many other forms of injustice, e.g. homophobia. If one is subject to generations of personal family trauma and harassment and bullying, did anything happen like this in Buddha's time, and Buddhism help heal?

Suffering in all its forms has gone on for millennia. The Buddha's teachings start with a recognition and acknowledgement that suffering is a fact of existence which he declared as the First Noble Truth. He also declared that the root cause of our suffering is craving, or wanting things to be different than they are, the Second Noble Truth. He declared the Third Noble Truth, that an end to suffering is possible. He also declared the Fourth Noble Truth, the eight-fold Noble Path that leads to awakening or enlightenment.

Buddhist principles support all skilful means that alleviate suffering including interventions that have been developed since the time he taught.

Buddhist practice repeatedly points to the causes and nature of suffering and how best to alleviate it. Buddhism teaches that there are many external causes to our suffering over many of which we don't have much control over, but Buddhism does teach that we can train our minds and hearts to change how we react and respond to what we experience. The short AA serenity prayer sums up the general principle beautifully "grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

"The Four Noble Truths" by Ajahn Sumedho - a highly recommended read
available in pdf and other formats on the internet at www.Amaravati.org



Taking the three Refuges and five Precepts daily - is it necessary?

Today we started with taking refuge in the triple gem, then taking five precepts. Is this what one has to do every morning to practise Buddhism?

There are no obligations imposed on one in Buddhism. Whatever we decide to do is our choice. We don't have to take refuge in the triple gem and the five precepts every morning in order to practise Buddhist principles and teachings, but it can be a wonderful support and daily reminder of the values we decide to live by in our daily life and they are a wonderful foundation for meditation practice. Taking the Three Refuges and determining to observe the 5 Precepts defines one as a Buddhist, as someone committed to waking up to the way things are.



Introducing Buddhism

How can one explain the 8-fold path to someone new to Buddhism, and the concepts around being in the here and now?

Keep it simple. The best concise summary of the Buddha's teaching is found in the Dhammapada - "Do good, avoid evil and purify the Mind" which sums it up in a nutshell. As you put this into practice in your own life you will naturally begin to communicate this to others by example and with time with helpful explanations based on your own practice and understanding.

Faith and Wisdom

Could you explain some more about the balance between the faculties of Faith and Wisdom. Do we need Wisdom to have Faith? Is the word Hope a deception?

Faith in Buddhism is better translated as 'trust' or 'confidence' in something, in this case the teachings and our capacity for awakening. It refers to our emotional relationship to our practice. But whereas Faith or Trust can be blind and lose its way, Wisdom is more discerning and able to clearly assess the implications and consequences of cause and effect. Faith and Wisdom balance each other out and work together as a pair, mediated by mindfulness, in other words, by what we notice in the moment.

How to truly be with my mother

The more I practice, the more I'm aware in the present moment of my coping mechanisms. For instance: For years I've projected a self that my mother wants of me as she rejects anything unfamiliar to her. But my increased awareness is making it harder to be that "pretend" me. How do I strike a balance between developing a genuine relationship and being rejected by her whenever I show other aspects of my self ?

We learn to get the balance right through trial and error. Growing up in relation to one's parents can be challenging, for we find ourselves in 'two' relationships at the same time. We relate as a child to a parent and also as an adult to an adult, which, as you have found out, can bring about a sense of conflict.

You may not be able to change your mother's feelings or meet her expectations of how you should be, but you can change and do what you know is necessary for your individual development and accept that you can only meet mother's needs up to a point.

We can be grateful to our mother for the care she gave us whilst we were growing up, and at the same time we can be sensitive to her struggle to come to terms with us being an adult in our own right. But we do not want to be imprisoned by another person's expectations, even if it does happen to be our mother's.

Finding the right balance between the two will depend very much on the specifics of the situation, but in general terms a combination of sensitivity to your mothers needs, avoidance of aversion and frustration and a willingness to be kind and supportive, but without compromising what you know to be important for you and your path of development, is the way to go.

If you are true to what is right for you, even if it should disappoint your mother, it is what you need to do. Whilst you follow your path you can reassure her that you care for her, that you are well and will be well. You can encourage her to understand and respect your needs and to support you on 'your' journey of life. Not being angry with her will help her come to terms with the fact that she does not own you or need to stop you from developing.

