



Smiling Mind Meditation | Intro. Continue

The Cavern

Imagine living our entire lives deep inside a mountain. There are a seemingly endless chambers and large caverns connected through intricate arrays of tunnels. There are beautiful rock formations and deep pools, and many people living in the mountain; it's pleasant. Sometimes it feels a little confining in a vague way. But since we know nothing outside the caverns, the feeling passes.

We have a friend who is nice, though a little odd. In quiet moments he mentions something called "trees." He says they're green, like some of the rock pigments. Yet the green is deep and soft and delicate. Inside the green are brown pillars, like stalagmites. These "trees" are both strong and soft. He says that if we travel through a certain set of caverns and tunnels, we can actually see them.

We're intrigued. So one day we try to follow his directions. We get lost but find our way back home. We try again. Eventually we come around a turn and see an impossibly bright light. It's beautiful; it's delightful to look at. We sit and gaze. After our eyes adjust to the light, we see deep greens and browns within the light. And the greens sway a little.

Excited, we go back and tell our friend. He listens carefully and says, "Yes, those are trees. You were looking outside the mountain through what's called a 'cave exit.' Rather than just look at it, why don't you try to walk toward it and see what happens?"

This hadn't occurred to us, but it's intriguing. So the next time we find this light, we walk out the cave exit.

Now we see more trees. They are so much taller than we'd imagined: they rise up and up. It's dizzying. And above them there's no rock ceiling—just a tiny patch of...well...nothing. The nothing is a soft light blue. We can't quite focus on it—but it is beautiful. How can nothing be beautiful and have qualities?

We go back and tell our friend, who again listens carefully.

"Yes," he says, "the trees are very tall. And that blue nothing is called 'sky.' It's lovely to look at. But rather than stop there, why don't you walk outside the cave exit to the right. You'll come to some water. Unlike the water in the cavern, this water moves. It's called 'river.'"

Walking outside we come to a wall of trees. The wall isn't rock solid. We can walk through it—slipping between the brown pillars.

Eventually we find the river. It's not what we'd imagined. Not only does it move, it lifts up and down and swirls. It's large and powerful. And the blue nothing above is even broader and lovelier.

We go back and describe all this to our friend. He listens carefully and says, "Yes, that was river and sky. Now you're beginning to see the whole forest. You have gone far—and you can go farther. As you're comfortable, follow the river in the direction from which it flows. You'll come to what's called 'lake.' It's huge and still, and the sky above it is even larger.

Our friend guides us farther and farther. But he can't actually travel with us—we have to do that on our own.

What we find along the way is never quite what we imagined from his descriptions. But when we try describing it ourselves, we can't find better words. It's just something one has to experience to know.

Before we ventured outside the cavern, we could have read about trees, rivers, lakes, and sky. We might have trusted that they existed. We might have believed in them—had faith they were real.

But after experiencing them, we no longer believe in them. We know them. We've seen them directly. This makes belief and faith seem pale and irrelevant by comparison.

The path described by the Buddha unfolds in just this way. It begins with experiences we can have from within our caverns. But rather than sit and gaze at how marvelous they are, this path uses them as guides to show us where to go next. If we tried to go from our mountain chambers directly to the lake, traveling would be as difficult as walking through rock. By our going to the cave exit, finding the river, then heading upstream, the journey becomes manageable. From the lake, we get a mountain glimpse that is inconceivable from deep inside the cave.

In a similar way, the Buddha offered instructions on how to travel up to peaks that previously were unimaginable.

The Buddha's instructions came in the form of meditation practices. One of the practices he talked about most has two aspects: loving kindness (metta) and insight (vipassana). They aren't separate or even sequential practices. Rather, both are

done at the same time and are intended to be integrated together.

From inside the cave, we might understand how the river, forest, and mountain interact together. Seeing them from the mountain slope however is no longer an intellectual understanding. It's direct knowing.

It is specific insight—direct knowing of how things are—that awakens us.

The Buddha described this path in stages (or jhanas). Each leads to insights and states of consciousness that makes the next jhana more accessible. It's a "bootstrapping"—using the power of each jhana to help propel us to the next. If we become fascinated with a particular stage and just stay there, progress stops. If we try to move too far ahead of ourselves, progress is very difficult. But if we follow the path, it moves along more quickly than we may have imagined possible.

The discovery of this route is part of what made the Buddha such a master guide.

Insights

Insights that reveal themselves along the way. Some of these, like the view of the sky, are discernable near the beginning. As we travel further, the insights become more nuanced.

The insights support our progress along the path. And our progress along the path supports the insights. The deeper our practice, the more we'll see. The more we see, the farther we travel.

Meditation practice gives an experiential basis from which we might better understand the insights. And later, the insights will help us better understand the stages of practice.

Meditation Practice

Let's shift from this metaphorical overview to tangible practice.

Sit upright if possible. Lounging invites the body and mind to go to sleep rather than wake up. But the posture should be comfortable. Cushions or chairs are both fine. Sitting cross-legged isn't required. A posture that is familiar to your body will be less distracting and more helpful than one that is uncomfortable.

Begin meditation by feeling the sensations of the body resting, sitting and breathing. Feel the body supported by the chair or cushion. Feel the in breath and the out breath.

Now recall what the bodily sensation of what happiness feels like...recall a time when you felt content. Perhaps you remember a soft happiness of holding a small animal that cuddled into you. Perhaps it was the selfless joy of watching a child play. Perhaps it was the serenity of watching the ocean waves roll in and out.

All of us have felt happy at times—probably many times—in our lives. The feeling may vary depending on temperament, history, conditioning, and circumstance. Our flavor of happiness may be unique to each of us but that is not important.

This feeling of happiness we have established is the cave exit. This is where this meditation practice begins—not with the memory of the situation but with the feeling itself. It's like a glowing feeling radiating from you.

At the beginning of your meditation, put yourself in your own heart. It's not important that you visualize this clearly. Keep it light and relaxed.

Next send yourself a wish for happiness or well-being. "May I be happy." "May I be peaceful." "May I feel safe and secure." "May I feel ease throughout my day." Any uplifted state is fine. The phrases are a way of priming the pump—they evoke the feeling. As it arises, shift your attention to the feeling itself. Let this feeling grow and expand. Allow it to radiate from you. This is your Home Base.

Sooner or later the feeling will fade. When it does, refresh your feeling of happiness...perhaps by repeat the wishes for happiness. It's not helpful to repeat rapidly. This makes the wishes feel mechanical. Rather, say the phrases sincerely, and rest for a few moments with the feeling it evokes. Then repeat it again.

As we do this, three things arise in the mind-heart: the person to whom you are wishing happiness (yourself), the mental phrase, and the feeling. About 70 percent of your attention should be on the feeling, 20 to 25 percent on the person (yourself), and just a little on the phrase used to evoke the feeling.

Spiritual Friend

After about ten minutes, switch the person to whom you are sending kind wishes. Rather than sending loving kindness to yourself, send it to a "spiritual friend."

A spiritual friend is a living person whom you find very easy to wish the best. It might be a favorite teacher who always has your highest interests at heart. It might be an aunt or uncle who always looks out for you. It might be a small child who opens your heart.

A partner is not a good choice for a spiritual friend.

You may have a lot of love for him or her. But primary relationships are usually complex. For the purpose of this meditation, simple is better. For the same reason, a teenage son or daughter is probably not a good choice—those relationships have too many textures. A person you find physically attractive is not a good choice either. Physical attraction can become thick, complicated, and distracting. You want the meditation to be light, easy, and uncomplicated.

Once you have settled on a good spiritual friend, stick with that person. If you switch from one person to another, the practice won't be able to ripen or deepen. And if you stay with one person in meditation, the other people around you will benefit even without being the explicit focus of your sitting practice.

So each time you sit down to practice, send well wishes to yourself for ten minutes. Then switch to your same chosen spiritual friend.

The Smiling Mind Practice

Part 1

Wholesome Uplifted State

This practice of sending loving kindness or well-being is the first part. This wholesome feeling occupies and uplifts the mind-heart.

Part 2

Applying the Six Rs

As you send well-wishing to yourself or your spiritual friend, other things will occur uninvited. The mind has a mind of its own. As long as you're still with the well-wishing for your spiritual friend, keep going with that. Flickers of your attention to your object of meditation (radiating loving kindness) may come and go. Let that happen without attending to them.

But sooner or later, a distraction highjacks your attention completely. You won't see this happening. One moment you'll be sending loving kindness. The next thing you know, you're rehearsing a conversation, planning your day, reminiscing about yesterday or attending to things other than the object of your meditation. Now you get to use the second meditation practice. This is a powerful practice that can only be used when the mind wanders. So, now's your chance!

The drifting mind is a symptom of tension disturbing your underlying peace. This side of enlightenment, we all have many tensions. So the distraction points one out—it shows exactly where it is so that you can release it skillfully. This is good news.

The only trick is to do it wisely. An unwise way is to condemn yourself, "Oh, I can't do this!" That criticism creates more tension and destabilizes the mind further. Another unwise strategy is to buckle down and try harder. This too creates more tension and restlessness. The Smiling Mind practice offers a wise, powerful and effective approach—using the Six Rs.

Recognize where your attention has gone. In time it will be clear that there is some wisdom in why your attention moved to that particular place. It may not be the least bit clear right now what that wisdom is. That's fine. All you need to do is recognize where your attention went.

Release your grip on the distraction. Let it be. Don't push it away. Just release the hold it has on your attention.

Relax. Let go of any tension in your mind or body. You don't have to search for tension like an enthusiastic detective. Just relax. That's enough.

Re-Smile or smile again. Allow a higher state—any uplifted state—to come into the mind-heart. Having a good sense of humor about how the mind drifts is helpful.

Return. Now take the relaxed mind-heart and this brighter/lighter state back to your object of meditation.

Repeat. The repetition will happen automatically if you continue meditating—that is to say, the mind will wander again and again. If you haven't released all the tension from a particular distraction, that's fine. It will simply come up again until you have. You can relax in confidence that the mind-heart will let you know if there's more to relax.

This Six-R process contains the practical essence of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path. So we'll return to it many times in the context of insights as well as of the practice itself.

If you already have another kind of meditation practice, I encourage you to give this approach a try. Or at the very least, insert a "relax" step into how you deal with distraction: when your mind wanders, rather than pulling your attention immediately back to your object of meditation, relax first. The Buddha saw that craving or tightness is the root of all suffering. It also gives rise to distractions. So relaxing the tightness goes to the core of his teaching and practice. This simple step can make a huge difference. We are actually purifying our unwholesome habit patterns by releasing the tension they have created and returning to our wholesome object of meditation. This wholesome relaxed calm state we are cultivating in this meditation process allows for a basis for observing the mind. Observing the the causes of dukha (anxiety, dissatisfaction, unease, suffering).
