

Surrendering into the Expanse

Before meditating each day, I recite an affirmation that reminds me of the spiritual path. This is my current version:

*Knowing that one day this body will cease:
I seek simplicity, clarity, and acceptance,
observe the mind-heart without preference,
and surrender into the expanse.
When sending and receiving kindness
feel the same,
self dissolves in contentment,
yearning fades into timeless presence,
and eternity merges with this moment
right now.*

This morning I'd like to talk about a spiritual path and practice as I understand them. Unfortunately, unpacking the entire affirmation might take a few hours. So let's focus on the four-word phrase that appears in the middle. We also used this phrase in the earlier meditation.

Lets start by reflecting on the phrase itself: "*surrendering into the expanse.*"

Surrender

"Surrender" in this context doesn't mean defeated, beaten down, or captured by the enemy. Rather it means softening, relaxing, welcoming, taking things to heart, and letting go into life just the way it is.

One of my first glimpses of this notion arose half a lifetime ago. Let me give you a little background.

For my first thirty years I lived in a chronic, low-grade depression. I was so used to it that I didn't even recognize I was depressed.

However, when I looked at my childhood photographs, they broke my

heart. In my baby pictures my eyes were forlorn. In the childhood photos I looked lost. In adolescence my eyes were stiff and confused.

When I moved away from home in my early 20s, I began to recognize the dysthymia — the clinical name for chronic, low-level depression. I began to seek out psychotherapy. After ten years of therapy, counseling, personal growth workshops, retreats, serotonin uptake inhibitors, and more, the depression lightened up a little but still hung around.

I began to get annoyed at walking through sludge. Finally I imagined looking the depression in the eyes and saying, "I'm sick and tired of you. I surrender. I'm not fighting you any longer. If you want to do me in, go ahead and do your damndest. I'm not going to resist. I've had it."

Apparently, resistance to depression fueled my dark mood. I instinctively reversed directions. I turned around completely. When bad feelings came up, rather than pushing them down I simply leapt into them and followed the energy.

I began to think like a kamikaze — if something hurt, rather than run away, I leapt into it. I went into anything that hurt without resisting it. Without fighting it, it ceased to feel relevant and gradually disappeared.

Expanse

It was an ornery surrender to be sure. But it was an expansive one in that I was willing to open up to whatever was going on deep inside. The most loving thing I could do was to let go of the urge to fix me.

When I hurt, rather than run from it, I dove in head first and relaxed until the mood started to lighten.

If this sounds a little crazy to you, it sounded that way to me to. But the effect was freeing.

The 20th century German philosopher Martin Heidegger took this a little further. He wrote: "Imagine an awareness that sees to the heart of suffering with no urge to fix anything. Imagine this awareness is the opposite of indifference."

The opposite of indifference is love.

Heidegger suggests that love can run so deep that it cares for things just as they are. It doesn't need to correct, repair, or fix anything in order to open our hearts.

And it does imply that when we hurt, shrinking away may not be wisest. Sometimes it helps to flow out into everything rather than try to run away.

This kind of surrender is expansive. It's the opposite of shrinking, repairing, or fixing. The deepest happiness and wellbeing, come from expanded awareness.

The Buddha tells a story about this. In the "Loṇaphala Sutta" (*Anguttara Nikaya* 3.99) the Buddha points to salt as a metaphor for suffering. If we put a lump of salt into a bowl of water, it can taste undrinkable. If we put the same lump into the Ganges River, we don't even notice.

(I know, the Ganges is a sewer in many places today. But this was long ago when it was still pristine.)

Life has its crystals of salt or lumps of discomfort. They can't be avoided. But if we make our container bigger, we hardly notice. As we expand, the tiny bit of salt doesn't seem so relevant. Rather than shrink down in an attempt to get rid of

the pain, we expand until the pinch of salt feels unimportant.

So let's look at surrendering into the expanse more carefully. It can reveal a lot.

Buddha

Eventually I came upon the Buddha's first teaching, that suffering is part of this world.

As you may know, the Buddha never said life *is* suffering. He said it *has* suffering. If we look deeply and clearly and heartfully enough, we see suffering is an inevitable part of life. It's part of the mix. It's part of how we are wired. We aren't to blame.

Anyone here never suffered? ...

That makes the Buddha's case.

His full instructions were the "suffering is to be understood."

Many people have the impulse to run from suffering. This is understandable, but often not wise. Turning toward it, we may discover something liberating.

When we look deeply beneath our hurt or discouragement, we'll find tenderness. Without tenderness, we wouldn't hurt. So it will be there.

If we look deeply into tenderness, we'll see openness and receptivity below the ache. Without openness we would not feel the tenderness.

If we settle into the openness, we find the path to awakening our higher instincts. We move toward freedom and wellbeing.

Many people would like to go from suffering to freedom and wellbeing and by-pass the tenderness and opening up. This is understandable. But when you see it doesn't work, please take this as wisdom:

The way out is through.

I wish there were bypasses. But there isn't. Nevertheless, there is always a path out the other side if we go deeply enough.

As we surrender into something and emerge with new found clarity, we feel more joyful and expansive. Without the expanse, we can get caught up and dragged down.

If we are dedicated to seeing clearly and heartfully how the mind-heart works rather than avoiding suffering, it potentially takes us much further.

To repeat, rather than shriveling up, freedom, happiness, wellbeing, tranquility all are accompanied by becoming bigger.

Indra's Net

So let's look more carefully at what the phrase "the expanse" might refer to. It is a synonym for the interdependent web of life where everything is directly or indirectly connected to everything else.

In ancient India it used to be described metaphorically as Indra's net. The net was like a gigantic spiderweb. Everywhere that one strand touched another, there hung a jewel representing an individual. Each being was symbolized by such a jewel.

And each jewel had an infinite number of facets. Each facet reflected another jewel. So each jewel had surfaces that reflected all the other jewels. This meant that if any jewel moved in the slightest, that motion was mirrored in all the other jewels throughout the interdependent web.

The image is a little abstract but illustrates everything reflecting everything. Nothing is completely independent.

Who Are You?

To make this more concrete, ask yourself two questions: Who am I? And where did I come from?

For example, I'm six-foot one inch tall.

Where did I get that height?

Obviously, from my parents' genes. And they got their genes from my four grandparents who genes from my eight great grandparents who came from New England, Germany, Britain, Netherlands, and who knows where else. As they and their genes evolved, they crossed each other and mixed things up Indra's net.

What else am I?

I'm a musician. My musical leanings came from genes, music lessons, growing up in Houston, Wisconsin, hippiedom, and more.

What else am I?

I love making art, meditating, hiking in the desert, ...

Do you see how this works? You trace back to where your characteristics arose. No doubt your lineage includes blood lines, childhood adventures, places where you grew up or visited, our era, ecosystems, and so on.

We may start off thinking we are a well-defined island unto ourselves. But looking deeply we see vast arrays of factors and forces that shape us. The network of life is constantly growing out of other parts of the network.

And what about our species? the planet itself? The solar system? The galaxies?

Everything arose and continues to arise from things which arose from others.

Specifically You

Here is a different way to look at all this. Mingyur Rinpoche describes his first formal meditation lesson. His father was a famous Tibetan meditation teacher so Mingyur's first formal lesson was from his dad when he was eight. He was nervous because his renowned father might ask him an obscure question he wouldn't be able to answer correctly.

His dad's first query was, "Are you Mingyur Rinpoche?"

He was so delighted he knew the answer that he said proudly, "Yes, I am Mingyur Rinpoche."

His dad followed up, "Can you show me what specifically makes you Mingyur?"

He looked down at his legs and hands and thought, "Do feet make me Mingyur? My hands? Do my robes make me specifically me? Or my thoughts? Or hobbies? But how could they?"

...

How would you answer the question, "Specifically, what makes you who you are?"

At first it seems like there is a simple answer. But there are hundreds and thousands of things that make you. None of them are specifically unique to you.

Yes, we all think of ourselves as special until we try to pin down something specific. We are all embedded in networks of properties — physical, genetic, cultural, economic, occupational, social, biological, linguistic, familial, geographic, national, behavioral, historical, religious,¹ and on and on.

There is nothing that distinguishes us

¹ Notice all the religious banners across the back of our sanctuary

absolutely from everyone or everything else. We are all embedded completely in hundreds or thousands of connections in the web of life and non-life. ...

Just let that soak in. ...

To be sure, we can still refer to ourselves informally. We could say, "I'm sitting in church" or "I'm going to the grocery store" or "I just turned 16 or 61" and we can all know what we mean.

But if we try to pin it down specifically or definitely, it doesn't work.

Swirls

The image in my mind is that we are swirls within swirls within swirls — like clouds on a weather map or sea currents flowing back and forth and up and down around each other.

Life has lots of movements and mixing and blending where things blur around one another.

In a similar way, we are all directly or indirectly part of everything else. As long as we are alive, we are changing. And even when we die, we keep shifting more slowly until we have blended back into the swirls within swirls and disappear.

Cell Phone

Here's another more down-to-earth example of our connections:

While riding down the bike trail along the American River, I passed a man looking for something around his bike. Fifteen feet further down the trail I saw a cell phone in the dirt on the other side of the path. Two women were walking toward it.

I hopped down off my bike and called

back, "Sir! Sir, did you lose a phone?"

He looked up and I pointed to the phone. Only the ground was bare. I called back, "There was a phone there a moment ago but now it's gone."

One of the women was holding the phone. She held it up so he could see it and smiled.

We all laughed. I hopped back on my bike and rode down the path. For the next half hour I felt delighted.

When we make someone happy, we feel happy. When we make someone sad, we don't feel so good. I don't know why that is true. There probably is no reason. It's just how the world is made.

We are all connected directly or indirectly.

Empty

It is even difficult to find words to talk about this specifically. Buddhism says we are all "empty." The Pāli word is "*shunyata*." It means, "Yes, we have a self but that self is empty. We have no self-essence that separates us from anything else."

If we say "the glass is empty" we don't mean it is completely empty. It may not have any water, but there is probably air or something else in the glass. So the word "empty" means the glass has an absence of water.

To say we are empty of self means we are empty of anything that makes us separate individuals.

In the spiritual journey and spiritual practice, the most important aspect is recognizing any tension in you and then relaxing right into the middle of it. We surrender into the tightness until it

disappears on its own.

Rather than disappearing into nothing, we surrender into everything. We become a swirl within swirls which expand and become part of the Expanse. We get a flavor of being anything and everything. It feels light and joyful or serene if only for a moment. But that moment is real.

Practice

Here is a final way to engage spiritual practice. There are thoughts, images, and words flowing through your mind and heart. Can you sense them flowing and swirling now? And can you sense a place of quiet or peacefulness behind them all?

Let yourself open to that simple, empty presence.

That is a taste of enlightenment or a touch of freedom. Can you feel it? Does it feel fresh and new? Or does it feel ancient as if it's always been here? Most people say it feels strangely ancient like it's been here forever.

Just know behind all the swirls is a place that is quiet, content, softly joyful, and free.

Is there a quiet place in you that is different than the quiet place in me? Or is there just one space that we all view from a different angle?

Don't try to hang onto it. That's like trying to hold the wind in your hand.

Closing

Welcome.

Let it be.

Surrender into the expanse.