

## *Bursting Bubbles*

*September 22, 2009*

One of the teachings that tends to get overlooked is the teaching on elements or properties, *dhatu*. This is a shame, because it's a very helpful teaching. There are physical elements and there are mental elements. In each case, you've got potentials that you can strengthen. On the physical side, there are the physical elements of earth, water, wind, and fire, which, as they say, can get provoked. Each of them lies there as a potential, but then you can provoke it, to get it to show itself more, to strengthen it.

These things tend to get provoked on their own anyhow, particularly in the body. Sometimes you find that the heat element is dominant, and sometimes the water element, or the wind element is dominant, when things get out of balance. You want to bring things back into balance.

You can use the power of the mind to do this, just focusing on whichever element is weakest. You can strengthen it. In other words, when the weather is feeling hot outside, you can focus on the water in the body, and it cools you down. There are cool sensations someplace in the body, and you focus on those. You're trying to make them more prominent. Simply by paying attention to them, keeping them in mind, you can make them stronger. When you're feeling lightheaded and dizzy, you can think about the earth element. That helps to ground you. When you're feeling sluggish, you can think of the wind element. That makes the body feel lighter. You make these things more prominent and bring the body into balance.

The same principle applies in the mind. There's a potential for sensual desire, there's a potential for ill will, there's a potential for each of these hindrances, and there are the opposite potentials as well. The problem is that we don't give appropriate attention to the potentials that can get rid of the hindrances, so the hindrances just take over because we tend to forget when a particular hindrance is there squatting in the mind—it's moved in, it's claiming rights of ownership—that we have just as much a right to be there. It's as if we're stuck in a hut with a squatter who's claimed ownership of the hut. We move into that particular thought world, and it seems like everywhere we look is colored by that perspective. It's like being in a red bubble or green bubble: You look through the bubble, and everything outside is red, everything is green. You don't realize that there are good potentials you can focus on, potentials for getting you out of the bubble. These potentials are here in the mind.

For example, with restlessness: We talked about this a little bit today. When the mind seems overcome by restlessness, you've got to remember that there's a part of the mind, there are these potentials in the mind that you can be bringing to the fore. One of the potentials is that even though the thoughts may be there in the mind, you've still got the breath, and the breath doesn't have to be a restless breath. You can try to calm it down.

Or the thought of your death: That's just as real as any of the things you're worried about. Death could come at any time, and when it comes, there's nothing you can do to stop it. It swoops down and takes you. And the question is always: Are you ready to go? The Buddha uses this as a contemplation to help pull you out of whatever unskillful mind state you find yourself surrounded by. Death could come at any time. You have to ask yourself, "Are there any unskillful mind states still in my mind that I haven't let go of? Are there any skillful states I need to develop more?" And if the answer in either case is Yes, you've got work to do.

The Buddha also says to act as if your head is on fire. You've got to do it right now. Because you never know when that earthquake is going to come, or the guest house is going to collapse on you. As they say in the texts, "Many are the possible ways of my death." You can be out in the grove, and all of a sudden, a rattlesnake comes up. But that's not a good example. It's total fantasy. Rattlesnakes tend to run away from you; they don't run toward you. But there's always the possibility that this could be your last day, and of course, it's not what you planned.

The purpose of this thinking is not to get you morbid, but simply to put things into perspective, so that you can look at your thoughts and say, "My gosh, what a piddling little thing. I'd be embarrassed to die in the middle of this thought or this concern or this worry, whatever." It helps you step outside.

Then you can develop the alternative potentials. You can breathe in a soothing way. You can remind yourself of topics that calm you down. And those potentials are always there. That's what you've got to remember. We tend to forget that. You get sucked into these thought worlds, like those bubbles, and everything looks like a cause for restlessness. Everything looks like a cause for anxiety, because you're looking at it through these colored bubbles that you're inhabiting. You've got to step outside the bubbles and realize, okay, there is that green bubble in the mind, there is that red bubble in the mind, but it doesn't have to take over. And it doesn't have to color everything you see.

So it's good to think about these potentials that are there in the mind. Because willy-nilly, we do step out of our thoughts. I don't know of anyone who's stayed restless about a particular thing 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and throughout a year. And if they did that, of course, they'd go crazy. But usually what happens is

that something else comes up, grabs your attention, and the bubble bursts. Then you find yourself in another bubble. It's only because nothing else compelling comes up that we stay in these bubbles, allowing ourselves to be totally taken over by them.

So you want to strengthen the observer in your mind that notices, "Oh, I got caught up in this bubble," and strengthen the mindfulness part that remembers that there are these other potentials, too.

This is why simply doing a meditation technique is not enough. You've got to reflect on things, reflect on what's important in your life, reflect on the actual position you have here. You're a human being at the moment, and human concerns tend to pull you in line with your family, in line with your job, in line with your other activities. But they, too, burst at the moment of death. This is why death is such a good contemplation, a great solvent.

So recollection of death is good, as is recollection of the suffering that surrounds you at all sides. Again, this is not to get morbid or depressed, it's just to remind you that there's work to be done. It's also to put your ordinary everyday concerns into perspective.

Years back, I went to a medical museum in Bangkok where they had corpses on display along with different parts the body. For example, they had taken one person's nervous system, and had removed everything else from the body and just left the nerves. You got to see all the different parts the body laid out. You realized what a great leveler death was. Those bodies that were floating in those formaldehyde vats: They had had their hopes, they had had their dreams, they had had their worries. But now those were all past. I came out of the museum with a huge sense of relief, the ability to step back from my own hopes and worries and dreams. I began to see how a lot of them were very small and minor. They weren't worth all the agitation that usually accompanied them.

So this ability to develop samvega is an important part of the practice, seeing that your ordinary everyday concerns really are petty and minor, and you've got much more important things to deal with. No matter how big they are in terms of your life, your life is going to end at some point, and then they're not going to matter at all. What really matters is the quality of your mind.

This is where you pair your samvega with pasada: There is a way to develop the quality of your mind. You've got these potentials. You've got the potentials for unskillful qualities, but you've also got the potential for skillful ones. And you can emphasize the skillful ones. They are there. So no matter how all-encompassing your worries and irritations are, remember they're not totally all around you.

Think of them as being like a holograph. There's always one spot in the holograph that's empty, open. Try to find that. What would be the conditions under which a particular world would not matter at all? That's the opening in the holograph, so that you can step out. Or that's the spot that you can burst the bubble.

Now, as soon as one bubble is burst, it may come back again. It gets blown again, and you get into it again. But the more you remember that there are these spots where you can step outside—there are these other potentials, these other properties, that you can emphasize, that you can bring to the fore—then the less you're imprisoned by your thoughts, imprisoned by your worries. There is a way out.

And you've got this range of skills for doing it. On the one hand, you've got the breath. No matter how bad things get, you can always stop and say, "At least I can breathe in a way that's not agitating, in a way that's not restless." Then when the thoughts come back and say, "Hey, wait a minute, you've got to worry about this, you've got to get worked up about that," that's when you use the contemplation of death or whatever else you can use to develop a sense of samvega that "This stuff really is unimportant. There's no reason for me to allow it to encompass my mind, to overwhelm my mind. I've got other things that are more important."

So always remember that you've got the possibility to step outside and look at the thought from the outside, to see it simply as an event, as a state of becoming that's moved into the mind, but you don't have to move in with it. You do have that choice. So you want to make the most of it.