

Infinity, Eternity, Love

Do you think we set our sights too high, if we wish to directly experience and tangibly touch infinity, eternity and love—all within the next few minutes?

No, not at all. Because infinity, eternity and love are all that we experience, all the time.

It's only our skeptical and judgmental thoughts that tell us otherwise. And it's believing those thoughts that creates the fear that's the basis of all our stress and suffering.

Let's now let go of those thoughts.

I—Breath by Breath

Infinity, eternity and love are ordinary, everyday things.

They are as plain as day, as obvious as sunshine, as bountiful as air.

Only our thoughts say otherwise. When we notice how our thoughts warn us against trying to experience infinity, eternity and love—such as by labelling them as high-flown abstractions, mere philosophy, castles in the air—we see how important it is to disenthral ourselves from our thoughts.

Because we want and need to live in reality. We do that by learning how to live through our true nature as awareness, instead of through our thoughts.

Infinity, eternity and love aren't abstractions. They are reality; our thoughts about them are abstractions.

What's abstract and impermanent are our bodies, our emotions, our thoughts, and the world. Hopefully this is what we've experienced at least in glimpses over the past six weeks. Hopefully this is what we have learned or have at least caught the taste of.

Hopefully we've seen why we suffer so much, by grasping to these fickle and impermanent things—the mind, the body and the world. Because in doing so we grasp to what's merely symbolic and impermanent. In grasping to what's unreal and impermanent—illusory—we of course feel only the pain of continuous and unrelieved grasping, which we then call "I."

By contrast, look what happens when we befriend the present moment with caring interest, which is to say when we meditate, releasing our attachment to thought and staying with our actual experience.

We become patient. Breath after breath, we let go of our thoughts and patiently return to what we are really experiencing here in our bodies.

We become kind, letting go of our harsh self-judgments to instead enjoy the gentle inner enlightenment of awareness.

We become honest, fearlessly facing whatever arises with compassion and equanimity, and in this way dissolving our suffering into love, breath by breath.

What are we when we meditate? If with caring interest we ask this question and watch for the answer in experience, we discover we are only knowing. The only thing we ever experience is experience itself, as a knowing. That's all we ever discover when we look into our experience. Just that, and only that.

We don't experience a thing called breath; we experience a knowing of breathing, which thought then calls "breath." In this way, the knowing and the breath become one.

In meditation, experience and object are not really two things, but are known as one and the same—with no other. It's the same in knowing all objects through awareness: awareness and objects become one.

Don't let thought tell you this is abstract. Any time, you can just touch your thumb to your forefinger and notice the sensation that's created. What do you know about that sensation, other than your knowing of it? Nothing at all. The sensation is the knowing of it; awareness and object becomes one. That insight is always as close as finger and thumb. But it applies to knowing any of the objects of mind, body and world.

The intimacy of this—of the merging of the knowing and the known, subject and object—is the intimacy of love. It's the activity and the discovery and the experience of awareness, over and over. It's awareness constantly knowing itself.

Breath by breath, in this way, we can build confidence in knowing ourselves knowing—as the living potential to accept whatever is, to befriend whatever is, to accurately know whatever is, and to transform suffering into peace. These are the natural capacities and effortless activities of awareness itself. Just notice that.

What better word could there be for these activities of pure knowing—awareness—than love?

II—Just Knowing

Notice, being precise, that we don't really "return to the breath" as in the standard phrasing of this step in meditation. What we really return to is the knowing of the breath. So, notice this: that when you notice the breath, what you are really noticing, is noticing itself, which is noticing a series of sensations in the body.

Thought often comes along and labels these sensations "breath," but the actual experience is just the knowing of sensations. Notice this, and rest in this noticing. Notice that the label "breath" comes along later—but it doesn't have to come along at all. We get the full experience just in the pure knowing.

Another popular way to put this is that "awareness and the breath become one." Or more accurately, not separate, not two things. There is only awareness of breathing. Or of sensations, emotions, or thoughts. It's not difficult to notice this, it happens naturally if you keep coming back to awareness from your thoughts.

When you do this over and over, after a while you realize that you strongly prefer relating to your experience through awareness as opposed to your thoughts. That's only natural, because awareness is so relaxed and bright and aware, and because emotional stresses naturally dissolve in this way.

Eventually, enjoying the bright relaxation and clarity of awareness, you just naturally decide to stay there.

You know you'll miss nothing in your life by doing so because, it goes without saying, everything that happens in your life happens in your awareness, in your consciousness, and nowhere else. Even as you don't lose anything, you realize that you've gained a lot, because you've discovered how to relate to everything in life through this naturally relaxed, clear, interested and contented way of knowing. This is abiding as awareness.

When we relate to life only through our thoughts, all we see of life are labels, because that's all that thoughts are—labels, symbols, words and images. But when we relate to life as awareness, we suddenly open the aperture of our attention to let in the full reality that thought only manages in a very meager way to label and to name. We open to the fullness of actual experience and moreover to the wisdom and the love of knowing.

This is the purpose of meditation, to know ourselves as pure knowing.

We learn meditation as a way to know ourselves not as bodies, but as the knowing of our bodies. Not as emotions, but as the knowing of our emotions. Not as perceptions or thoughts, but as the knowing of our perceptions and thoughts.

We feel safe, protected, happy and healthy as this knowing because knowing, awareness itself, is what is directly experienced as permanent, while all of the objects of this knowing (the mind, body and world) are constantly coming and going, flickering like fireflies, impermanent. Clinging to those only brings pain.

Our own impermanent body is known within this knowing, as just another object arising and disappearing. And it's perfectly okay, because when we take our stand as the permanency of awareness itself, we know we are safe. Moreover we are invulnerable, because nothing can harm as empty a thing as pure knowing.

Whatever happens, pleasant or unpleasant, it's simply known. And then at some point we realize that this knowing is love and compassion itself because anything that is known, dissolves. Especially suffering.

III—Hypnotist's Disk

Our problem isn't that we don't experience the sublime states, the beautiful visions and the profound insights. It's that we experience them all the time, and yet just don't notice them; and that when we do notice them, fleetingly, we don't credit them. We don't give them the value they deserve. We don't put them at the center of our lives the way we know we should. We don't have the moxie, the confidence, the courage to do that.

We know what's right, what's valuable and what's good. We just don't value and express what we know is right in our thoughts, speech and actions most of the time. Then our guilt feeds back and we interpret our guilt not in a healthy way, namely, as reality's calling out to us to get the backbone to carry ourselves aligned with our highest inner knowledge. Instead, we take our guilt to be just more evidence of our irreversibly fallen nature.

We keep sliding back to the idea that selfishness is the way. We keep reserving the right to be selfish. We complain that there's so much suffering in the world. We say "what can a small and impotent person like me do about it?" But that line of thinking is actually selfishness in dharma terms, because these are thoughts that keep creating the small, impotent and suffering "I." It's just a strategy to keep our suffering going.

We love to look at the wheel of suffering, we're mesmerized by it. It spins like a hypnotist's disk, drawing us into itself over and over. It's a wheel of thoughts that creates contractions and suffering in the body, which create more thoughts of anger and resistance to that suffering, which in turn creates more painful contractions, and on it goes.

This cunning survival strategy keeps the organism of suffering alive.

IV—The Parasite

Suffering is an ingenious parasite in the human system.

It's a miraculous creature, made of pure suffering, which has devised an ingenious method to survive. It camouflages as the "I" itself and by so doing, implants in the mind of its host that it can't be killed, because to do so would be to kill the host. That's why we endlessly put off the work of compassion. Because we know it will end our suffering and we're afraid of that, because we think that the end of suffering will be the end of "me."

This is why thought works hard all the time, to make sure we don't notice our actual experience. And then it works extra hard, when we do accidentally notice our actual experience of innate peace and wisdom—our essence as infinity, eternity and love—to discredit and discard those experiences as soon as possible.

We have passing moments of inexplicable peace, maybe while taking a walk in nature, or while looking up at clouds, or laughing with a baby. We're happy to experience these moments but we don't take the time, with caring interest, to look into their nature and discover right there the portal into the infinity, the eternity and the love of that moment, which is our own true essence. Instead a minute or two later, the usual aches and pains and challenges of life come back. Our habitual grasping to this suffering as "me" comes back, and just like that we've missed the wide open door to our eternal happiness that remains always open right this moment.

We need to take the time, not only to transform our suffering into love, but also to deeply notice, and in this way deeply internalize, the truth of reality being spoken in these moments of transcendent happiness.

In practice terms, this means watching for these moments when they happen in our lives, and making the effort to explore their nature, to live in them and to dwell in them. Many of us had many of these moments when we were children. We can go back to these moments in our memory and still touch their powerful innocent essence, the way that as young children we were utterly present to what is, in calm delight and joy.

On the night that he was enlightened, the Buddha opened the way to his own liberation by recalling such a moment when he was a young boy. He was watching farmer plow the earth and his mind became silent, still and peaceful. "What if I maintained just this same mind of contentment as I sit here now in meditation?" the Buddha asked. He did just that and soon accomplished complete awareness and freedom from thought.

In moments of transcendent happiness we know that everything is okay, whether difficult or easy, painful or pleasant. All is workable and manageable, and we look upon whatever needs to be done, with a certain courageous joy. We need to pay attention to transcendent happiness like this when it happens, so that it gets deeply into our minds and bodies and in that way becomes an integral part of us. Otherwise, we'll all too easily let these glimpses of eternity get swamped and forgotten by our habitual unskillful thoughts.

Our innate goodness often manifests as a first impulse which is later checked by thoughts that present themselves as practical, "realistic" and wise. And these "second thoughts" may, up to a point, actually bring those qualities to a situation requiring cool, clear thinking and analysis. But all too often our initial impulse of pure and radiant generosity, patience or kindness is completely stifled by our "practical thinking." We feel that not a bit of our goodness was shared with the world and instead feel paralyzed, conflicted, despairing.

On top of all that, as a cherry on the ingenious cake of self-centered suffering, we then harshly judge ourselves for feeling depressed and defeated. We even judge ourselves for judging ourselves. Right here you can see how the vicious recursive loop of suffering works.

V—Infinity & Eternity

Infinity and eternity are common, ordinary, everyday things.

They are so ordinary that they are not even what we experience, they are literally what we are.

If we don't notice infinity and eternity, it's in the same way that an eye can't see itself, that a knife can't cut itself, or that a tongue can't taste itself.

"What you are looking for is what is looking," as St. Francis says. It's a knack to notice this.

But we can definitely learn how to do it.

For example, we experience eternity all the time. To verify that in your experience, just notice where and how the so-called "past" happens: as thoughts called "memories" in the present moment. Now notice where and how the so-called future happens: as thoughts experienced in the present moment. Also ask yourself, have you ever, for even one moment, directly experienced the past or the future? No, you've only experienced the past and the future as thoughts—impermanent and repetitive thoughts—in the present moment.

In other words, the past and the future are just concepts, and all that we ever actually experience is the present moment. This is the direct experience of eternity. It's not endless time, it's the complete absence of time, and it's all that we ever actually experience. Only our thoughts tell us otherwise, and that's because thoughts, being impermanent, can only describe eternity in its own limited terms. "Time" is thus thought's name for eternity.

Likewise, we experience infinity all the time. To verify this in your experience, notice some sounds in your experience; then notice some body sensations; then some textures, sights, tastes or smells; and then some thoughts. Notice the impermanence of all of these.

Now ask yourself, where are all of these impermanent phenomena happening? And notice, they are all happening within awareness.

Continuing to investigate with caring interest, see if you can notice in your experience any boundaries or limits, within the space of your awareness, that mark off your sensations, thoughts and perceptions from each other. Or are all of these appearances of the mind, body and world actually happening all in the one space-like awareness? You will find they are all happening within the one space-like awareness, and that no boundary can be found between these experiences, nor between them and the awareness that knows them. This boundaryless-ness is infinity.

This is our actual experience all the time—infinity. It's not endless space, it's the complete absence of space and instead the actual experience of everything

happening right now (the experience of eternity), and right here (the experience of infinity). Only our thoughts tell us otherwise because thoughts, being finite, can only describe infinity in its own limited terms. "Space" is thus thought's name for infinity.

Very directly knowing ourselves now as infinity and eternity, we notice that all of the objects of the mind, the body and the world are all arising and passing away at the same time (now), in the same place (here). They are all blossoming eternally out of the same centerless center of the flower of experience.

Noticing this, we don't "feel a connection to" everything that's known in awareness, but rather we directly know a non-separateness, an intimacy with everything as being one with us, in our identity as awareness.

This intimacy is itself a new "I" that includes everything that arises within it: the mind, the body and the world.

This intimacy is simply noticed, in a completely ordinary way, in just one moment of knowing awareness.

We could call this intimacy, love.

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