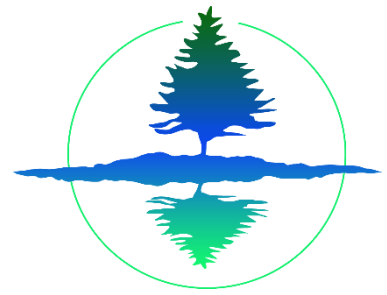


Meditating on Vulnerability

By Dhiraka



The most pervasive feelings I have at the moment are, without a doubt, feelings of vulnerability. Judging from conversations I've had I think this is pretty common. And when I go for walks in my local park it is obviously very present in people's lives. There is a softness to people that isn't usually quite so obvious. People are more reflective looking. Even the pace at which people are walking seems to have slowed. There isn't that usual sense of naïve over confidence. This virus seems to have humbled us. It is interesting to know that humble (and humility) share the same root as humus. Humility brings us down to the nourishing earth.

It is feelings of vulnerability that bring about this humbling. In Buddhism there is the traditional list of old age, sickness and death. It was his vulnerability to these experiences that inspired Prince Siddhartha to go forth (in the humble rags of a wanderer) and eventually become the Buddha. Sickness and death are two that are upper most in our minds right now.

But we are vulnerable in many more ways than this. We are always vulnerable because we have needs. We need things – *and these are often beyond our control*. I think at the beginning of this crisis the panic buying was an expression of this. We need nourishment, we need loo roll! This lack of control gets easily ignored in normal times, it takes a crisis like this to really show it up. Once we are faced with this lack of control the feelings of vulnerability quickly follow.

Similarly, we need our friends and companions. We need affection and human touch. We need communication and love. The lockdown, especially if you live alone as I do, is also preventing us from meeting these needs (zoom just isn't quite the same). No doubt we have many more needs that are to some extent or other compromised by this highly unusual situation. The clarity that this brings to our status as vulnerable beings is actually a tremendous gift.

It's a gift because with this clarity we can really connect with those feelings and own them more fully (as opposed to the common response which is to disown them). Accepting that we are vulnerable is the first step to appreciation and understanding. When we explore those feelings deep in the body and in the heart we start to see that it is in fact our vulnerability that makes love, care and compassion possible. Many of humanity's greatest qualities are dependent on our vulnerability. Put another way, our vulnerability is an important condition upon which love and compassion depend.

Think of the myths about the Greek gods who are often so cruel towards mankind precisely because they do not share our particular vulnerabilities. Conversely, in the tragedies compassion arises between the human characters because of fellow feeling. We share common vulnerabilities with each other and thus can feel compassion for another's suffering.

I've been meditating on vulnerability in a structured way and I thought I would share how to do this. It is a wonderful practice that I started doing a few years ago on retreat at Dhanakosa. During this lockdown it seemed natural to return to this practice and it is proving again to be very helpful. It's hard to say exactly why it is helpful. I expect it is something to do with a deep turning about of habitual denial, aversion and shame.

It is a three-stage practice:

1. Acknowledge your vulnerability.
2. Accept your vulnerability.
3. Affirm your vulnerability.

Each stage seems to flow naturally into the next stage, indeed they probably aren't so much stages, more like phases. *Firstly*, if the feelings of vulnerability are present then just spend some time becoming more familiar with them – notice how they feel in the body, in the heart. Be curious and explore them in whatever way seems natural to you. If you aren't feeling particularly vulnerable you might start by reflecting on the many ways in which you are vulnerable (as mentioned above) and then just dwell in the heart area and see what happens. *Secondly*, take up the intention to accept that you are vulnerable. Really welcome these feelings into the heart, let them sink in, relax around

them, give them space. Perhaps there is also here some work or effort needed to resist or let go of the habitual aversion or denial that may not be very far away. *Thirdly*, we reflect (in an embodied way) that this vulnerability is a goodness – that this very vulnerability is the source of many of our greatest qualities such as love, care, cherishing and compassion. Drop in the reflection and again just sit, allowing the heart to respond in its own natural way.

I would recommend taking some time at the very start just to settle into your posture, notice where you are in the world, take in your surroundings and also how you are currently feeling. Then take as long as you like over it. If the feelings of vulnerability are too strong for you then back off and return to the body and the breath - perhaps open your eyes and let in some light. There is no requirement to see it through to the end. When you have the resources to complete the practice then that is when it will happen. I wouldn't recommend forcing it – there really is no point to that at all. In fact, forcing yourself would be contradictory to the very intention of the practice.

If we can turn around the habit of denial and of being ashamed of vulnerability, then we are simultaneously embracing life more joyfully. We are also living more fully in alignment with the way things are. All the energy that often goes into the denial, aversion and shame is released and available. Paradoxical as it may seem, by acknowledging, accepting and affirming our vulnerabilities we suffer less.