

## *Peace of Mind*

*February 22, 2005*

We all want peace in our lives, but we keep running into obstacles. Some of the obstacles come from outside: things that people do or events that happen that shatter our peace of mind. Then there are obstacles that come from inside.: usually worry one kind or another. We're worried about ourselves or about people we care about. And the concern is: Have we done enough to prevent bad things from happening to ourselves? Have we done enough to prevent bad things from happening to the people we love?

This kind of worry can eat away at us. After all, just look at human life: All kinds of things can happen, many of them things we have no ability to prevent at all. As in the chant just now: We're all subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. These things will happen to everybody. There's a certain extent to which you can fend them off for a while, but eventually they're bound to come crashing into your life.

The trick is finding exactly how much you really can do as a human being, both to protect yourself and to protect the people you love, to honor the memory of the people you love when they've passed. Then learn the wisdom to realize that there's a certain point where worrying becomes counterproductive. After all, the best thing you can do to help other people is to have your mind in good shape, because when bad things do come, as they inevitably will, you'll be in good shape and a good position to be of help. If you wear yourself out worrying, then when the time comes when you need the powers of the mind, they won't be there. You've frittered them away.

This is why meditation is such an important principle in finding peace. To begin with, it helps develop all kinds of useful qualities of mind, like mindfulness and alertness. You stick with the breath: That requires mindfulness. You watch the breath, you're sensitive to the breath: That requires alertness. These are the two qualities you really need for any endeavor.

In this way, meditation is like exercising your mind in the same way you exercise your body to make it strong. You use the qualities that you need and you find that, with use, they get stronger. Concentration develops; discernment develops. All these things get stronger with use. And even though it may seem like a simple thing, being focused on the breath, still the qualities you develop around it are important. Just like going down to the gym: They ask you to lift some weights. What does it accomplish, lifting weights? It doesn't generate electricity.

It doesn't do anything. It just goes up and down, but strength of the body gets improved. Then you can take that strength and use it for something that really *is* useful.

That's one way in which meditation is helpful. The other way is that it gives you a place to be at peace when the breath feels comfortable coming in, feels comfortable going out. When you're meditating, you really want to focus on this issue: What kind of breathing feels good, what kind of breathing is soothing to a tired mind, a tired body, what kind of breathing is energizing when you need energy, what kind of breathing is healing when the mind and the body need to be healed? The breath energy has lots of facets, lots of different ways it can be of help, and if you pay attention to it, you'll find which kind of breathing works best for which kind of situation. With time, you begin to shift your center of gravity. The happiness and fulfillment that you might ordinarily want to look for outside, you begin to find inside. And it's much more reliable this way.

Years back, I was visiting my father in Williamsburg. When I was a teenager, we had built a house in Charlottesville, so we decided one day: "Let's go see the house." Dad drove up, my brother went along, and we got to look at the house. We discovered that the current owners were not taking care of it at all. Parts of the eaves were rotting out, and generally the place looked pretty shabby.

On the way back to Williamsburg, Dad was quiet for quite a while, then made a comment. He said, "You know, I have nothing to show for my life." He went down the list: being a farmer in Long Island, and how many times he worked all year long to grow potatoes, and then the government would come and give him money to dump the potatoes, just to keep the price up for the market. Then he had to sell the farm and he got a job in the government. From all outside appearances, he did quite well. He ended up on the Water Resources Council. But the job of the Water Resources Council was to make proposals about where dams should be built, canals should be dug, where they would serve the most use. But of course, these things would get to Congress, and Congress would pork-barrel them beyond recognition. Very few of the proposals actually got passed. Then Reagan became president and didn't like the Water Resources Council, so he disbanded it. That was it.

So he looked back at his life as a farmer, and there was nothing to show for it. Looked at his life as a government bureaucrat, but there was nothing to show for that, either. Even the house he built, there wasn't much to show. Listening to him talk gave me a strong sense of dismay over the human condition. If you look for fulfillment outside, things outside are so dependent on factors that are beyond

your control, that if you make that the sole focus of your attention, the sole basis for your happiness, you're bound to end up in disappointment.

This is why fulfillment in life has to come from within, developing good qualities in the mind, because these things stick with you even after death. And they don't have to depend on anyone else. You know when you've improved the mind in terms of its virtue, in terms of its kindness, in terms of equanimity when equanimity is needed, discernment when that's needed, powers of endurance, patience, peace. These are things we can develop within.

And doing this is not a selfish project. We're not just sitting here gazing at our navels. When you develop good qualities in the mind, you find that you can use them when the time comes to help the people around you. You also learn to recognize how much help you can give and how much the circumstances are beyond your control, when to let go, to honor the people that you're grateful for, people who have helped you in life. And when they're gone, you can realize at what point—after honoring them—you find that the regret you feel, the grief you feel, is becoming self-indulgent.

That's a skill, seeing that point: realizing that you've done what you can, you've honored that person, but now you've got other responsibilities in life. You have to work on your own mind to fulfill those responsibilities. As for the people you love, you develop, as we chant in the evening, goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, but in every case, there's going to come a point where you've done all you can, or all that can be expected of a human being, and beyond that's up to the other person's karma. That's when equanimity is called for.

As for the different points where one quality is called for as opposed to another one, it's a lot easier to see those points when the mind has developed a lot of strength inside, when it's developed its own inner stillness. If we go looking for peace outside, you look at the world: It's not offering anybody much peace at all. Peace is something that has to be found within.

In the same way, we can't wait around for other people to be good to us before we're good in our actions. The goodness has to start with us. The peace has to start with us. Fortunately, there are skills for developing it. We're not left adrift. Learning to find this center within: That's an important skill right there. It provides us a sense of stability, strength, resilience inside.

You focus on the breath, and the breath is always there. Learn to have a good relationship with the breath, and you've got a good relationship to the center. One, you can tap into it anytime you need it. Two, it provides the strength to deal with whatever situation you can change, where you can make a difference, and also to learn how to accept the situations where you can't. And it puts you in a

position where you have the wisdom to tell which is which. You don't have to wait for someone else to grant you that wisdom. You can develop that on your own. These are the skills. This is how they're mastered: by developing this inner center, learning how to stay in touch it as much as you can throughout the day, recharging it day after day after day, making time in your life for the quality of your mind.

As I said this morning, you brush teeth every day, so it makes sense that you focus on the quality of your mind every day as well. That's a gift not only to yourself, but also to the people around you. When you have this inner peace, the people around you will pick up on some of that peace as well.

So don't feel that this as a selfish project or that you're abandoning other people. You need this inner strength to fulfill your responsibilities both to yourself and the people outside. Life makes lots of demands. It requires a lot of effort to keep going as a human being. So it's important that we learn how to draw on this inner strength, to develop a habit there when you need it, so that our efforts in life are good efforts: things we can look back on and be proud of, because they come out of the sense of peace that you work on inside. Thoughts, words, and deeds that come from this peaceful center are bound to be a good force in life.

So when you're looking for what makes life worthwhile, what makes life a good life, you have to look within. And you need skills. It's not that you're simply looking haphazardly. There are skills for relating inside, skills for developing qualities of mind that are good, noble qualities of mind.

This is what gives dignity to human life. This is what brings goodness to human life. The purpose of the meditation is to tap into those qualities and bring them to fulfillment. When they reach fulfillment, that's when there's true peace. The mind becomes totally independent, released from all the bondage of the limitations that living in space and time place on us. There is aspect of the mind that transcends space and time, and the meditation is here to find that.

That's when true peace totally pervades your life.