

Comfortable with Yourself

March 20, 2005

We just had a chant on *metta*: goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people around you. And it was expressed as a wish. Now we actually put that wish into practice.

Concentration is a practice of being comfortable with yourself. If there's no sense of comfort in the present moment, you can't really settle down.

So you can use the breath as a way of anchoring the mind in the present. Then you look at the breath. Observe it. See how it feels as it comes in, how it feels as it goes out. You're perfectly free to change it if it's not comfortable. If it is comfortable, maintain it. Learn to explore all the ins and outs of the breath: all the different ways in which it might be more comfortable than it is right now. You could make it a little longer: See how that feels. A little shorter: See how that feels. Faster, slower; deeper, more shallow; heavier, lighter: See what really feels good for the body right now—and feels really good for the mind as well.

Some types of breathing maybe relaxing for the body but just they're a little bit too slow and blurred for the mind to focus on. So, make adjustments for that, too.

This is a very immediate way of showing goodwill for yourself. There's a potential for comfort in the body that we often overlook. We're too busy concerning ourselves with other things—people outside, issues outside—and not really taking care of the inside.

So here's a way of taking care of the inside. It doesn't take anything away from anyone else. You're using resources you already have. It's simple a matter of learning how to be more familiar with them so that you can get the most out of them.

When you have this good relation going on inside with the breath, you find that it extends out to other people as well. You're coming from a place of solidity, a place of well-being, a place of strength. And it's only natural when you're coming from a place like this that your actions, your attitudes towards other people, are going to express more goodwill, too. If there's a lot of turmoil inside, the turmoil tends to spread outside.

So here you're making a pact inside that you're going to be on good terms. As with developing any kind of friendship, it takes time to get to know the person: their strengths and weaknesses, where you can trust the person and where you can't.

And it's the same with the breath. It's going to take a little while to get

acquainted with the breath, but it's a friendship worth pursuing, worth developing. Because even when things go well outside, if there's a sense of turmoil in here, it prevents the happiness from outside really penetrating inside.

But when things are going well inside, it really doesn't matter so much what's going on outside. All too often the good actions we do in the course of the day depend on our feeling that we've been treated well by people outside. That's because we have a lack of this inner sense of well-being. But when you develop this inner sense, then your external goodness doesn't have to depend on other people's external goodness. You've got the resources, you've got the strength you need right here.

So take this time to develop this friendship inside. And whatever skills you learn in the course of becoming friends with the breath, you can take those with you. After all, what do you have here? The mind and the breath. No matter where you are, you still have the mind and the breath. The problem is that you let other things interfere.

That's the part of the practice that takes place off the cushion. But it's an important part, a necessary part, because otherwise the practice lacks continuity. It's like a friendship where people break up and come back together again and break up and come back together again. The depth and the familiarity that could develop just don't have a chance, because when you get back together again, there's always a sense of mistrust in having to start all over again from scratch—which prevents any kind of momentum, any kind of continuity.

So learn to be on good terms with your breath while you're sitting here. Then, when you get up from here, try to maintain that same relationship as you go through the day, and you'll find that it develops

That way, this wish for goodwill, this wish for happiness, is not just an idle wish. It's something you actually put into practice. The Buddha said that when the mind is rightly concentrated, that forms the heart of the path. All the other elements of the noble eightfold path are ancillary, because the path depends on this sense of well-being, of getting along inside. If the different things that come together to create the present moment, that compose the present moment, are on bad terms with one another, it's hard to work together on any kind of path, much less the noble eightfold path.

So you want to develop this sense of harmony inside. The more sensitive you are to the breath, the more it'll start showing you its potentials. And the more the happiness you wish for—both for yourself and for the people around you—will become a reality.