

Kind & Happy

October 23, 2005

We're going to sit for an hour, so get your body into a comfortable position, your back comfortably straight. Face forward, close your eyes, put your hands in your lap.

And get your mind in a comfortable position as well. One way is to think thoughts of goodwill, as we chanted just now. Tell yourself, "May I be happy; may I find true happiness," with the emphasis on the *true*, because there are lots of other kinds of happiness out there that turn into other things. You want a happiness that stays with you, a happiness you can depend on, a happiness that stays happy.

Unfortunately, that kind of happiness can come only from within. It can't come from without. It comes from developing resources you have inside. Which means that it doesn't take anything away from anyone else. This is why everybody's true happiness is not a contradiction in terms. Nobody's true happiness takes anything away from anyone else's true happiness. That's a comfortable thought. You don't need to harm anybody, you don't need to abuse anybody else or harm their hopes for true happiness by wanting true happiness for yourself.

So you think thoughts of goodwill for other people as well, because this is something we all have in common: the desire for happiness and the ability to find happiness without having to abuse anybody else. That's a good thing to think about.

The next step is thinking about how you're going to develop these resources inside. What are these resources? You've got qualities of mind. You've got the body sitting right here. In terms of the body, you've got the breath moving in and out. So focus on the breath. How does it feel when it comes in? How does it feel when it goes out? Keep watch on the breath. And keep the breath in mind. In other words, don't forget the breath. It's so easy you focus on the breath once or twice and then go wandering off to tomorrow, wandering back into the past, picking your nose and scratching yourself—all kinds of things happen in the mind. Then you remember: "Oh, the breath!" You come back. That doesn't develop anything.

To develop qualities in the mind, you really have to stick with one thing. Start with mindfulness. Keep one thing in mind and watch it carefully. Keep the breath in mind each time it comes in. If you catch yourself wandering off, bring the mind

right back. And pay careful attention to how the breathing feels. Where in the body do you notice the sensation of breathing?

In other words, we're not just talking here about that air coming in and out of the lungs, but the feeling of the whole body breathing. There's an energy flow that goes through the body that brings the air in and then allows it to go out. Where do you feel that energy? And where does it feel good?

If the breath doesn't feel particularly good, if you can't decide what feels good, then try holding your breath for a while and then notice which parts the body feel refreshed when you finally do breathe in again. Okay, focus on those parts. And allow them to stay comfortable. In other words, breathe in deeply enough so that they feel refreshed but not so deeply that they start feeling strained.

This requires that you be very sensitive, which is related to a quality called alertness. Be really alert to what you're doing. The more alert you are, then the more you see, the more you learn—and the more comfortable the breath will get. You can begin to adjust it. As with any skill, the more you pay attention to what you're doing, then the better you do it, and the better results you get.

What you're doing here is developing a little island of well-being inside, nurturing it, nourishing it, allowing it to grow. This is one of the basic principles in the Buddha's practice. If you're going to practice his teachings, you have to start with a sense of well-being. Otherwise, it's hard to make the sacrifices that will be required.

You see this even at the simplest level, in terms of generosity. When people went to the Buddha, that was the first thing he taught: the happiness that comes from being generous. If you're feeling poor or nasty or in a foul mood, it's very hard to be generous. You don't feel you have anything to give, and even if you do, you don't want to give it to anybody else. What kind of mind state is that? A very narrow, confined, miserable mind state. But if you can reflect on the fact that whatever happiness you have is dependent on the generosity of others, and there's no reason to resent their happiness, you can begin to be generous. You've got at least some sense of well-being inside.

In fact, the cruelties of the world come from people who feel threatened, who don't have a sense of enough. This is why it's so important to develop this sense of inner well-being, a sense that in some areas, at least, you have more than enough. You can share. As the mind begins to open up, as you get more generous and broader in your generosity, the mind itself feels more spacious. It's a more comfortable mind in which to live. You're not always concerned about not having enough for tomorrow or the next day. You begin to connect to this network of generosity. You begin to realize that there's always more than enough out there

someplace. And the more open your mind is in this way, the greater sense of well-being you'll feel.

The same with virtue, another one of the basic teachings: You realize that there are certain things that, when you do them, will harm other people. When you begin to have a sense of well-being, why would you want to harm anybody else? Killing, stealing, lying, illicit sex, taking intoxicants: These actions are harmful. People engage in them usually because they have no inner sense of well-being, or what little well-being they have feels threatened. But if you can nurture your sense of well-being and realize you've got something inward here that can't be threatened from outside, then it's a lot easier to act in ways that are kind to people, in ways that don't harm anyone.

Again, there's a sense of real inner worth that comes as a result of that. You reflect on your generosity, you reflect on your virtue, and those thoughts create a sense of well-being as well. These are ways of making yourself happy in which the memory of that happiness is a happy thing.

All too often, the happiness of the world is happy only, as Ajaan Lee used to say, when it's fresh and hot, like a pancake. Pancakes taste good while they're fresh and hot. When they're cold, they're miserable. Let them go for a couple of days, and they get moldy. You can't eat them at all. It's the same with a lot of pleasures in the world. The pleasure itself doesn't last very long. And often, in order to gain that pleasure, you have to do very unskillful things, things you don't like to think about afterwards. Then that's what the main memory is: what you did, what you said.

So the memory of that kind of happiness burns. But when the memory of the happiness comes from your generosity, comes from your virtue, that's always a happy memory. It nourishes your attitude of goodwill. This is why the Buddha recommends when you meditate, if you're coming through dry periods in your meditation, reflect on these things to create an attitude of goodwill that enables you to continue your meditation, not getting discouraged, not getting frustrated, something that gives you the energy to keep going. When you've got that sense of goodwill, you can invest it in sticking with the breath, developing these qualities of mindfulness and alertness.

As the Buddha pointed out, as you apply mindfulness and alertness in a consistent way, it turns into concentration. When you're really firmly centered in an object, firmly centered in the breath, you get more and more absorbed in the breathing because it feels good. The more absorbed you get in, the better it's going to feel. People sometimes complain that the Buddha's teachings on suffering—the four noble truths, the very first teachings he presented—are pessimistic because

they focus on the issue of suffering. “Where is the happiness?” they say. Well, if you poke around in the four noble truths, you find happiness there in the fourth truth, which is the path to the end of suffering. That’s a very optimistic teaching when you think about it. There’s happiness as one of the factors of concentration, even a sense of rapture and refreshment. If allow yourself to stay continually with the breath, it starts feeling really, really good. The more centered you are, the better it gets.

This is the happiness that keeps you going on the path. As the Buddha said, concentration is like food for the path; a sense of refreshment or rapture is food for the path. It’s what keeps you going. And it’s a very immediate and visceral way of showing goodwill for yourself. Those thoughts of goodwill that we started with are nice to think, but they’re even better when you act on them. You show goodwill to yourself in this way, in a way that’s not harming anyone. And when you have the strength that comes with a sense of refreshment, that comes from fostering your inner goodwill, your own inner happiness, it’s a lot easier to show kindness to other people.

So be kind your breath. Be gentle with your breath. Get to be good friends with your breath. As you develop that quality of inner goodwill, as you learn how to relate to the breath with goodwill, it’s a lot easier to relate to other people with goodwill, too, because you’re coming from a good place.