

Safe Haven

August 7, 2009

That chant just now, “May I be happy, may all living beings be happy”: It’s good to think about that every time you meditate. It states why we’re here: We want true happiness. We want a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody—doesn’t harm ourselves, doesn’t harm anybody else in the world. That thought helps create the right mood for the meditation, the right context. Some people have trouble wishing goodwill for themselves. Others have trouble wishing goodwill for others. So you have to unlearn old habits of ill will, or at least embarrassment about goodwill.

The Buddha’s whole life was about goodwill: goodwill for himself, goodwill for everybody else. It’s an example of the benefits that come when you consciously try to develop that attitude, so that you don’t feel embarrassed about feeling goodwill for yourself. You see that everything we do in one way or another is for happiness, so we might as well learn how to do it skillfully, in a way that really does lead to happiness for ourselves, and doesn’t interfere with anyone else’s happiness.

So try those attitudes on for size and remind yourself that it’s perfectly reasonable, perfectly honorable to wish goodwill in this way. We have the example of all the noble disciples, and they *are* that: noble. People from whatever their background, whatever their original problems, were able to train their minds in this direction. They’re people we bow down to. So you should learn how to bow down to your own wish for true happiness, something you should really respect.

As we’re meditating here, it’s one way of showing goodwill for ourselves, realizing that we have to train the mind if we’re going to find happiness. It needs some good basic qualities like mindfulness and alertness, and it needs a good safe place to do its work. It needs time out to do its work because it’s very delicate work. Many of the issues in the mind are very delicate, very complicated. We have a lot of tender spots inside that need care and attention. And although it may sound brave and courageous to say we’re going to do this work in the midst of our everyday lives, it’s awfully hard. Even warriors know when they have to retreat, when they have to recover from their wounds—not because they’re cowards but because they’re intelligent, they’re wise. They know when they’re strong enough to fight and when they have to retreat.

Ajaan Lee talks about this, of why he goes into the forest. He says it’s because he has to learn from the forest animals how to avoid danger. He tells a story about baby birds one time. The monks were walking through the forest on their alms

round, and they came across a mother bird with lots of little baby chicks. As soon as the mother bird saw the monks coming, she called to the chicks, and they all went running into a pile of leaves and then just lay there, very still. Ajaan Lee had one of the novices take a stick and stir the pile of leaves to see if he could get the baby birds to come out, but they wouldn't move. He said he learned a good lesson from the baby chicks that day. There are times when you really do have to be very, very still to protect yourself, regardless what other people may say.

So we come here to find a safe place, not only in the physical surroundings, but also inside. This is why we try to bring the mind to concentration. That's our safe place inside. That's our safe haven. You can focus on the breath, you can focus on the word *buddho*, whatever you find calming and easeful and pleasant. The breath is good because it helps work with the whatever sense of dis-ease you might have in the body. Ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel good right now and allow the body to breathe that way. If you're thinking about other things, you tend to squeeze the breath or limit the breath in the body, so you don't get as much good out of the breathing as you normally could. Thinking and planning or whatever take up so much energy, so much space in your body.

So for the time being, you give the body entirely over to the breath. The whole body can breathe in; the whole body can breathe out. Think in that way. You try to hold that idea in your mind so that each time you breathe in, everything is allowed to breathe. And allow the body to find whatever rhythm feels good. You might nudge it in this direction or that direction—in other words, try longer breathing for a while, or shorter breathing for a while. It's good to start with a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths, to clear things up, to ventilate the body. If that feels good, keep it up, until it doesn't feel good anymore. Then you can change. Just pose that thought in the mind: What kind of breathing would feel good now? And give everything over to the breath.

If you need a meditation word to help you stay with the breath, you can use the word *buddho*, which means awake. Think *bud-* with the in-breath, and *dho* with the out-, to help block out any other vagrant thoughts that may be coming in. After all, there will be these other thoughts. You're working on new habit here, a habit of being here for yourself.

This safe haven is not only safe from other people. You want to make it safe from other voices in your own mind, other opinions, other identities that you take on as well. As the Buddha pointed out, we create identities out of our cravings, and our cravings can be all over the place. Each different craving focuses on a different point, and our sense of who we are then develops around the craving. So there's not just one self in here. There are many selves that you've

made. Some of them are skillful; some of them are not. Right now you want to develop a really solid sense of self that's just aware of the breath. As for any narratives that come up about people in your life or things you've done in the past or things you're planning in the future, change the narratives. Say, "Whoever that person was who did those things in the past is now meditating. And however this person is going to be doing those things in the future, it's going to be better off if it has been meditating now, has this extra range of skills." Add this new identity to your repertoire.

Ultimately, you will have to deal with your stuff, but you need a good safe place to do it. This is what breath meditation provides, a place for your awareness to pull out of your old conversations and discussions, your old controversies, and just step outside of them. As you're staying here, there is a certain amount of conversation going on to keep you with the breath, but otherwise you're mainly with the physical sensation of the body. This can get you out of the back and forth. You're aware of your hands, you're aware of your feet, you're aware of relaxing your hands, relaxing your feet, your arms, your legs. Start with whatever parts of the body are easy to relax, and then allow that relaxation to spread from there into other areas that you tend to hold more tightly.

And be patient. This work takes time. One of our worst problems is not only that we have issues in the mind, but also that we want to get rid of them fast. That just piles more issues on.

As you develop a sense of ease sitting right here, wherever you may feel it, be confident that this is going to become your safe place. It may not be very large right now. To use another image, it's like starting a fire on a windy day. As soon as you light the kindling, you've got to protect it. Once the fire starts going, if you try to put too much fuel on it all at once, it may actually put it out. So you've got to be very careful to protect it. In Thai there's a word, *prakhawng*, which is the word you use when, say, you've got a child who's learning to walk, and you're walking behind it. You hold your hands out to either side. You allow the child the freedom to walk, but you're there, close enough so that if the child is about to stumble, you're ready to catch it. You're protective but you don't clamp down on it. The child needs its freedom. It needs to learn how to walk and gain some confidence.

In the same way, you have to find just the right amount of attentiveness to protect your concentration, and this takes time. Everything in meditation is trial and error. If you're afraid of making mistakes, you never get anywhere. You want to learn the ability, say, when you see you're about to fall down, you can catch yourself in time. Even if you do fall down before you can catch yourself, you pick

yourself back up and start over again. And then start over again. Start over again. Don't get discouraged. Many people in the past have had a difficult time getting started. It doesn't mean that they're not going to do well. If we do only the things we're already good at, we don't get much done. We don't expand our range of abilities.

So as you stay with the breath, try to protect this space you have, where the awareness meets the sensation of the breath. See what you can do to get them on good terms with each other. This is a very direct way of showing goodwill for yourself, a very immediate way of giving rise to a sense of physical ease, gratification. The breath feels really good coming in, going out. Try to see which areas of the body are really hungry for breathing and allow them to have their share.

Once you learn how to show genuine goodwill for yourself, it's a lot easier to feel goodwill for others, because here you are, with much greater sense of well-being, a much greater sense of ease. You don't feel so put upon by the rest of the world. It's easier to look at other people and see them as being like you. They struggle. They have their sufferings, too. When you're suffering, sometimes you say, "I don't care about other people's suffering." But as you're able to give rise to greater sense of well-being inside, it's a lot easy to sympathize with other people.

So it's important to have that sense of safe haven, a place where you can get away from other people, away from your other selves, and learn these very basic skills for how to be good with yourself, sensitive to what the body needs in the present moment, sensitive to what the mind needs in the present moment. You show goodwill to yourself by learning to breathe in a way that feels good. You show compassion for yourself by trying to figure out, when the breath is not feeling good, what you can do to make it feel better. When it is going well, you maintain it. That's empathetic joy. As for the parts the body you can't get to go the way you like yet, okay, develop equanimity. As you develop these attitudes around your own breath, you gain practice. Then you can develop them in other areas of life as well.

So as we meditate, we're not simply running away from the world. We're taking some time out to develop the skills we need to use to deal with both problems that come from outside and the problems that come from within. After all, wherever you go, you've got the breath. As long and as you've got the breath as your friend, that means that wherever you go, you've got a friend with you.

So take this time to develop this friendship inside, this sense of a safe friendship, a safe haven, because it provides the space, provides the environment, where you really can work on those problems with a greater sense of competence,

a greater sense of patience, and a greater sense of fairness that allows you to learn to develop your relationship to yourself and to other people with a lot more skill.