

## *Limitations*

*October 21, 2009*

The chants we had just now on developing an attitude of unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity: Those are among the few ways the mind really can be without limit. When you realize that your true happiness doesn't have to depend on causing anybody any suffering, then it is possible to have unlimited goodwill, wishing all beings happiness. If you see anyone who's suffering, you wish them to be free from suffering. If you see people already happy, you wish that they can continue being happy, which of course means wishing that people would learn the causes for happiness and act on them. It's not as if we're going around with the magic wand and touching people on the head, saying, "May you be happy regardless." A lot of people out there are doing all kinds of things that are not leading to happiness, so your wish is: May they learn how to understand what true happiness is, how it can be found, and actually act on that knowledge.

Also, when we observe the precepts, we're offering unlimited safety. You make up your mind you're not going to kill, steal, have illicit sex, tell lies, or take intoxicants under any conditions. In that way, as the Buddha said, you're offering unlimited safety to all beings, and you have a share of that safety in that as well.

It's good to develop these unlimited attitudes and practices. They give us a sense of spaciousness the mind, because there are many areas in life where we have to face up to the fact we have limitations, in terms of our time, energy, our wealth. We have only so much. And yet there's so much that could be done.

This is where equanimity comes in. You focus on the areas that really are important in life and you have to develop equanimity for everything else, so that you don't get distracted from the important things by things that are pressing or urgent, or things that are in your face, demanding your attention all the time. Just because something is urgent and pressing doesn't mean it's important. You have to ask yourself what really is important in your life and invest your time and energy there.

Primarily, the important issue is the condition of your mind. That's what's really important. When your mind is in good shape, then the rest of the world can be in miserable condition but you don't have to suffer from it, and you have the strength to do what's needed, given the imperfect condition of the world.

This is why we meditate. We're investing our time in the mind, focusing on qualities which, in the very beginning, may not seem much. Mindfulness and

alertness: very ordinary everyday qualities. Mindfulness simply means keeping something in mind, as when we're focusing on the breath right now. We keep in mind of the fact we want to stay with the breath regardless of whatever else comes up in the mind. Alertness means keeping watch on what's actually happening with the breath, what's happening in the mind.

Then you build on these two qualities with the quality of ardency. In other words, you try to do them skillfully. Once you've made up your mind to stay with the breath, you try to keep it there and use whatever techniques, whatever strategies you can think to keep the mind with the breath. This can include experimenting with the breath, thinking of the breath energy circulating throughout the body, exploring areas in the body that are tense or tight, and using the breath to loosen them up. Or if there are any parts of the breath cycle where you tend to squeeze things in the body—say, in your neck or in your chest or in your head—then very consciously hold back from squeezing those things. In other words, make the breath interesting, and it becomes a lot easier to stay here.

You may wonder: Why are we working with the breath when we really aim at training the mind? Well, it's in working with the breath that you develop those qualities of mind. Mindfulness, as it gets more and more continuous, allows you to see things you would have missed otherwise, because it allows your alertness to be more continuous as well. You begin to see what the mind is doing that's causing unnecessary suffering, unnecessary stress. After all, the stress that really weighs on the mind is self-inflicted. In other words, events outside may not be to our liking, but we don't have to suffer because of those things. We suffer because we place our hopes on things outside, invest our time and energy in people or situations outside. It's as if we build a bridge so that outside events can come in and invade the mind, invade our heart.

The nature the world is that whatever arises passes away. Things that are brought together by natural conditions will have to end through natural conditions.

So even though the happiness we hope for would be lasting, we're trying to build our happiness on a foundation that doesn't last. It's like building a house. It may be in a nice solid house, but if its foundation is a house of cards, it's going to come crashing down. So you want to be able to see how it is that the mind opens itself up to these things, and how it can find happiness without having to open itself up. You have to see how it can find the inner strength it needs to deal with aging, illness, death, and separation as they come, so that it can maintain its goodness, it can maintain its inner sense of well-being, not only for your own sake,

but also for the sake of others. After all, if you have that inner sense of well-being, you're much more likely to be able to do the skillful thing in any situation.

So the wisest investment—given the fact we have limited time and energy—is in developing good qualities of the mind. They start with mindfulness and alertness, because you can't see what's going on in the mind unless your alertness is continuous.

Normally, our understanding of our own mind is like connect-the-dots. We notice a little thing here, a little thing over there, scattered points of insight, but we don't see how they all connect. So we tend to make up lines to connect things together. But who knows if the lines have anything to do with what's actually there? If you want to see what's really going on in the mind, your awareness has to be as continuous as possible. This requires that your mindfulness be strong, your alertness be quick, and that you really are ardent in developing these qualities so that they put you in a position where you can learn how to see what the skillful thing is to do or say or think, and actually bring yourself to be able to do it. When you notice you're acting in an unskillful way, you can learn to stop.

One of the great ironies of life is that we all want happiness, yet we keep doing things that cause ourselves suffering. When it's pointed out to us, many times we say, "Well, that's the only way it can be done. I've got to do it that way. That's my way." Or: "I've done it that way so long I can't think of changing."

This is stupid.

This is why the meditation asks us to step outside of ourselves for a while, to look at our lives like an anthropologist from Mars, so that we can see that certain habits that we're most attached to are actually causing us the most pain. And if we can learn to see that we don't have to follow those habits, that there are alternatives that don't cause suffering, we're much more likely let them go.

So even though mindfulness and alertness sound like very ordinary things, still, when you make them continuous, they have a very revelatory effect on your understanding of the mind, on your understanding of the heart, on your understanding of why you feel stress, why you feel suffering.

The good news here is that it's your own habits that are causing the suffering, which means you can change. If your suffering were something necessarily imposed on you by outside conditions, there'd be no escape. But as the Buddha pointed out, true suffering comes from the fact that we're the slaves to craving. Not only do we crave the things we like, but we like the act of craving itself. So we have to look at that because that's why we suffer.

So even though there may be a lot of work here, and it may require a lot of digging around in the mind, it is good news. There is a problem, but something can be done about it. Here's the solution.

When the Buddha talks about stress and suffering, it's not because he's pessimistic. He's just being a good doctor. You go to a doctor, and the doctor asks you, "Where does it hurt?" you don't accuse the doctor of being pessimistic. You don't ask him, "Why do you think everybody walking into your office has pain?" That's a doctor's job. That's why we all go to the doctor: for him to take care of our illnesses and pains.

It's the same with the Buddha. He's offering a way to put an end to suffering, so he's assuming that anyone who wants to come and listen to him has some suffering in life that they'd like to get rid of. He talks so much about suffering not because he is pessimistic, but because he's very optimistic. He knows the way out. And it starts with these simple practices: learning to observe the precepts in all circumstances, learning to have goodwill for all beings—the unlimited sides of the practice. That gives a sense of space to the mind, and also energy, so you don't get tied down with the realization that we have only a limited amount of time, a limited amount of energy, to really focus on what's important.

But the even better news is that if you learn how to focus your time and energy on what's really important, you finally reach something deep down inside the mind that's even more unlimited than goodwill and more unlimited than the precepts. It's a dimension that's totally unlimited by any of our concepts of who we are, what life is about.

So even though all the talk is about stress, suffering, and craving, the message is about unlimited freedom. Try keep that perspective in mind.