

What You Can't Change, What You Can

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We've gotten this far in life. We've probably noticed that there are some things we can change and some things we can't.

It's something so obvious and yet something we tend to overlook. We keep pushing, pushing, pushing against things that can't be changed, and we neglect the things that we can change, where we can make a difference.

This is why the Buddha taught the brahmaviharas or the sublime attitudes as a set—qualities of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—with the realization that some of them will be appropriate at some times and others appropriate at others. There's no one attitude you take all the way all the time. Wisdom comes in knowing which attitude to apply in any given situation.

You start out with goodwill. That's your basic default mode: a wish for happiness, a wish for true happiness—your true happiness, the true happiness of those around you. You try to maintain that attitude.

There's an image in the Canon of a mother looking after her child. It's not the case that you're going to love all the world the same way she would love her child. That's impossible. But you try to look after your attitude of goodwill the same way she would look after her child. If anything threatens to weaken it, you want to be right there.

Because if you lose your goodwill, you lose. You start acting in ways that are harmful to yourself, harmful to other people. And that doesn't help anything at all.

If you see people who are suffering or people who are doing things that are going to lead to suffering and you want it to change, that's compassion. You see yourself doing stupid things that lead to suffering, you want that to change, too: That's compassion for yourself.

Empathetic joy is when you see people who are happy or who are doing the things that lead to happiness—and that includes yourself. You don't resent other people's happiness. You don't resent the good they've done. You don't feel that you're in competition with them. When you do something skillful, you can enjoy it.

The Buddha says that that's an important part of the practice. Sometimes we feel embarrassed about looking at our own goodness. But if you're embarrassed about your goodness, you're not likely to do any. We're not doing it to gloat or to compare ourselves with other people. We simply want to see ourselves progressing

and to take joy in the fact that we're progressing.

These are all the attitudes we can have toward things that can change. There are things that, for the time being, look like they can't change, but we have these attitudes toward them. Those are underlying attitudes we should try to develop for all beings. Now, you may think of some people who you don't easily feel goodwill for, but again, if there's a gap in your goodwill, then there's a gap in your skillfulness—a gap in the extent to which you can trust yourself.

So when you extend goodwill to others, it's not because other people are innately good or because other people deserve goodwill. *You* need the goodwill to be able to trust yourself.

The problem, of course, is that there are times when things can't change. You see someone who's suffering or who's doing things that lead to suffering, and you can't help them for one reason or another. It's either your karma or their karma. That's when you have to develop equanimity, with the realization there are some things in the world that are not going to change. There's going to be aging, illness, and death. As soon as there's birth, then aging, illness, and death have to come. If you get worked up over things you can't change, you waste energy that could be devoted to things that can change.

So equanimity means learning acceptance—but not for everything. It means acceptance of things that you've tried to change and you realized they won't change. So you pull back and ask yourself, "Where *can* I be of help? What changes can I make?" And you try to focus there.

The wisdom lies in seeing where you draw the line. At what point do you have to say, "Okay, on this issue, I've got to be equanimous. Things are not going to change—at least they're not going to change right now. I have to put them aside for the time being." That kind of insight comes with experience. There's no quick rule of thumb aside from the fact that if you find yourself up against aging, illness, and death, you're up against a big enemy, things that are not going to easily change. But you realize that in your own case, you can do something about whether you're going to suffer over those things or not.

The Buddha talks about two kinds of stress or suffering. There's the stress or suffering that comes simply from the fact that things are changing. They depend on causes, they depend on conditions, and causes and conditions are always changing. If you try to place your happiness on those things, it's going to get tipped over. That's one kind of suffering, one kind of stress.

But then there's the stress that comes from our own craving, our own ignorance. We shape our experience in ways that are really not all that skillful. We're not paying very careful attention to how we shape our experience. We crave

for things to be a way that they can't be. Or even when we crave for things to be a way they *can* be, those things are going to change on us, and that ultimately leads to disappointment. That disappointment is what you've got to look into because that's something you can change.

So as you're focusing on the breath, try to see what lessons you can learn about change and not-change; the stress you can't do anything about and stress you can do something about. When you're sitting here breathing, how much awareness do you actually bring to the breathing process? Is it clear? And when you breathe in and breathe out, what notions do you have in your mind, what pictures do you have in your mind, about how the breath is moving in the body or how it *can* move in the body? Some of those pictures you picked up from your own experience, some from textbooks. But are they the best pictures to carry in mind right now? Can you change the picture? What happens when you do?

When you think about breath, what kinds of sensations are you thinking about? Can you expand that range a bit? Because not all breath sensations move. Some of them are still.

Ajaan Lee talks about three levels of breath. There's the basic in-and-out breath. Then there's the subtler breath that flows through the bloodstream, flows through your nerves. And then there's a still breath that you can notice at certain spots in the body. These levels are like different frequencies of breath energy, in the same way that there are different frequencies of radio waves going through the air right now. When you hold that picture in mind, can you sense these various energies? Can you tune in to them?

There are a lot of things that are there in the body right now, a lot of signals being sent that we're missing simply because we're not prepared to believe that they can be there.

It's like that story they tell about the ozone hole. Satellites were picking up data about the ozone hole over Antarctica for years and years. But the computer software analyzing the data wasn't programmed to believe that such a thing could happen. That wasn't a possibility that the number crunchers had thought of. So the software rejected the data. It wasn't until the data were overwhelming that they began to realize, okay, there was a problem with the software.

Our awareness of our body and our awareness of our mind are often like that. Things are going on, but our sense of the possibilities of what can go on can be very limited.

So try to open the mind, ventilate the mind a little bit to get an idea of what can be done, what can be changed. That way, you'll be able to sit here with the breath. If the breath is going well, you keep it going well: That's your empathetic

joy. If it's not going well, you can change it: That's your compassion. It's all motivated by basic goodwill: You want to be able to develop a sense of happiness that doesn't have to depend on outside conditions.

You start with the breath and then move into the body. From there, you move into the mind, into the sense of awareness right here. You want to develop this as much as possible. You want to develop your sensitivity of the present moment as much as possible so that you can see subtle movements of the mind. Those are the things that are causing that unnecessary stress and those are the things that can be changed.

We take our greed, aversion, and delusion for granted. We take our normal everyday state of mind for granted, thinking that that's the way things are. And yet that's something that can be changed.

So we have to stop and take stock: What are the things we can change, what are the things we can't? The fact that things are inconstant, stressful, not-self: That's not going to change. But you can push against that a bit. You can create this state of mind that's more constant, that has a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, and that is to some extent under your control.

Then you use that to look deeper into the mind, to see: Where are these subtle movements? Where's the movement of craving? Where's the movement of ignorance? Can you detect when the level of stress in the mind is going up, when it goes down?

The greater the sense of ease you can develop with the meditation, the more sensitive you become to these things. When the level of stress goes up in the mind, what did you just do? You have to look at this again and again and again to be on top of things. But it is possible to see that there are these movements of the mind. The perceptions and labels you put on things, the thoughts you put together: These are the big culprits, so these are the things you want to watch out for.

You begin to realize that even though there are a lot of things in the world you would like to change and you discover that they can't be changed, there are other things that you thought would never change but they can. One of the reasons we're meditating is to learn these lessons and take advantage of the things that we can change—and stop beating our heads against the things that can't. Because the area where we can make a difference turns out to be *the* most important part.