

To Begin the Day

November 22, 2022

It's good to begin your morning meditation with thoughts of goodwill. Just tell yourself, "May I be happy. May I understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them." That sets your intention for the day. Then spread goodwill to everybody. Think of all the beings to the east: May they all be happy. May the beings to the west be happy. North, south, south-east, north-west, north-east, south-west, below, and above—all beings of all kinds: May they all be happy. May they all understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them.

You're not saying, "May you be happy just as you are, doing whatever you're doing." If people are doing unskillful things, you hope that for their own sake they'll stop doing those unskillful things. If people are already doing skillful things, you're happy for them.

By doing this, you're creating a state of becoming, your sense of yourself here in the world, and it's a healthy becoming based on goodwill.

You're here in the center: This emphasizes the fact that what you do in the course of the day is the central thing you should pay attention to. Other people will be doing other things, sometimes skillful, sometimes not. You hope that they'll act in a skillful way, again for their sake as well as for yours. But you realize that your primary responsibility is your actions, so you have to protect your goodwill.

There's an image in the Canon of a mother protecting her child. Sometimes it's misinterpreted as saying you should protect all beings in the same way that a mother would protect her only child. But the image is actually saying something else: that you should protect your *goodwill* no matter what, in the same way that a mother would protect her child, because that's what you're responsible for.

Even if bandits were to pin you down, the Buddha said, and start sawing you up into little pieces, and there's nothing you could do to get away, he said you should spread goodwill to them, too. After all, if you were to die in that circumstance, you wouldn't want to die with ill will. You want to maintain your goodwill to your last breath—and beyond. It's that important.

Then you remind yourself that this is why we're meditating, so that we can strengthen the mind, center the mind, give the mind good nourishment inside so that it's less likely to do

things based on ill will, less likely to do unskillful things. Usually it's out of fear or hunger that we do unskillful things. So remind yourself that your main treasure is your mind. As long as that's strong, you're safe. The things you could lose in the world are not nearly as important as the things you could lose inside. As the Buddha said, your right views and your virtue are your most important possessions. For those to be maintained, the mind needs a good solid state of concentration. That's what we're working on here.

So, now that you've established yourself here in the center, look into the center. What have you got here in this body that's right next to the mind? You've got the body sitting here breathing. There may be pains here and there; you might feel a little cold in the morning, but that doesn't matter. What matters is the breath coming in and going out. Focus your attention there, because that's the force of life. It's one of the ways in which you shape your experience of the present moment. So try to shape it well.

Start with some good long, deep, in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the breathing in the body. When the Buddha talks about breath, he's talking about a quality of the body in and of itself. It's a property, not so much the air coming in and out that you can touch at the nose or on the lips. It's one of the elements or properties that make up your internal sense of the body sitting right here, right now—and it's the primary one.

All too often we have the sense that the solidity of the body is primary, and then we have to pump the breath into a solid. But it's better to think the whole body as already being a field of energy. When you breathe in, good energy is circulating through the body; you breathe out, good energy is circulating through the body, energy mingling with energy. Breathe in a way that feels good, because after all, this is the force of life, so it should feel good.

If it feels tight or constricted, think of things opening up. Think of the breath coming in from all directions. Think of yourself being bathed by the breath on all sides. If the mind wanders away, just drop whatever thoughts set you out wandering, and come right back. You're trying to establish yourself here in the present moment at the beginning of the day, to make sure you have your priorities straight. Your priority is the state of your mind because the state of your mind, of course, will determine your actions. So you want the mind to be really solid, well-supported.

As for any of the thoughts of the day, thoughts of yesterday, thoughts of tomorrow, whatever, put them aside for the time being. There's a tendency sometimes to think that there's going to be an issue coming up today that you've got to think about, and here's an empty space

of time, but the mind needs some time for itself.

After all, you use the mind to deal with issues, and so you should take care of the mind. It's like having a tool. You take good care of your tool. You don't use the tool all the time. Otherwise, it wears out. If it's a knife, it gets dull, and then you can't use it to cut anything properly anymore. So even though it may cut into the time that you can work, you have to take time out to sharpen the tool. The same way with the mind: You have to give the mind a place to settle in, so that it has a sense of solid support inside.

If there are any pains in the body, don't pay them any attention right now. Give attention to the parts of the body that can be made comfortable by the way you breathe. Then, as the breath gets comfortable, the next step is to be aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. That's one way of avoiding a tendency we may have when the breath gets comfortable: to go for the comfort and to forget about the breath. It's like standing on a tall building and seeing a nice, soft-looking cloud float by below you, and then saying to yourself, "That cloud looks comfortable," and you jump right in. Well, you jump right through it. There's nothing there to support you.

So, stay focused on the breath. Think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. You may want to build up to this section by section, and a good place to start is down around the navel. Locate that part of the body in your awareness. Watch it for a while as you breathe in and breathe out to see what kind of breathing feels good there. If you feel any tension or tightness in that part of the body, allow it to relax. Then when you've relaxed that part of the body, move up to the next spot, which would be the solar plexus.

Follow the same steps there: Locate that part of the body in your awareness, watch it for a while as you breathe in and breathe out to see what rhythm of breathing feels good there. And if there's any tension or tightness, allow it to relax so that no new tension builds up as you breathe in, and you don't hold on to any tension as you breathe out.

Then continue up the body: the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head, the back of the neck, going down the shoulders, down the arms, out to the tips of the fingers. Focused at the back of the neck, going down the spine, out both legs, down to the tips of the toes. You can survey the body like this, around and around, for as long as you like.

It's good to take a couple of passes because there can often be patterns of tension that you missed the first time around. As you clear up the grosser patterns of tension, you'll be able to detect subtler ones. Allow those to disperse as well. One thing you might try, especially when

you're working down the back and the legs, is to see if you notice that there's more tension in one side of the body than the other. If there is, focus on relaxing the side that's more tense to bring things into balance. This sense of balance will make you even more centered.

When you've surveyed the body enough, then you choose any one spot in the body that seems congenial. Allow your attention to settle there and then—from that spot—to spread out through the whole body, so that you're aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Allow the breath to find whatever rhythm feels good. At that point, your main responsibility is to maintain that sense of centered but broad awareness.

This sense of a center is really important, because it keeps reminding you that what's important in the course of a day is not what other people do, it's what *you* do. Having a sense of your awareness filling the whole body, you also establish your priorities. You're in charge of this area of your awareness, and you don't have to let anybody else invade it. What other people say and do can just go right around you. When you're not feeling invaded, it's actually not the case that they invaded you. *You* pulled these energies in from the outside, which is what you don't want to do.

When your own energy fills the body like this, and there's a sense of sufficiency—it feels enough inside—then you're not hungry for other people's praise or nice things they might do for you. When you're not hungry, you're not opening yourself up to whatever they're going to do. Because if you go around with your heart a big gaping hole, hoping that other people will fill it up, well, they'll fill it up with whatever. Then you get upset when people throw garbage in. Well, that's what they've got. And you're the one who opened the hole to begin with.

So, use the breath energy to fill up all those gaping holes, so that everything feels full inside. See if you can maintain that sense of fullness as you go through the day. Do your best to notice what may distract you from maintaining this sense of fullness: Sometimes it's things outside; sometimes it's things inside.

People sometimes ask, "How is it that when you do concentration you develop your discernment?" Well, you see the mind more clearly as you're trying to make it centered and whole like this. When you have a sense of a good place to stay inside, you'll notice more clearly when you leave that good place.

Otherwise, the mind is like a boat out in the ocean: A current comes from the west, and the boat goes east. A current comes from the east, and it goes west, but it has no clear sense of where it's going or why it's going, because it doesn't have an anchor. But when you put an

anchor down, and the anchor is solidly secured, then you'll notice any push from the east, push from the west, you know where it's coming from.

In the same way, as you try to maintain this sense of fullness as you go through the day, you'll find that you'll lose it, and you'll be in a position to notice why, what sparked that. That will give you an idea of where the mind still feels lacking, where there's something that has to be looked into.

As the Buddha said, if you want to understand the unskillful states that have control over the mind, you have to be able to see their origination—in other words, what causes them. And you can't see what causes them if you sense their presence only when they're firmly established. You have to see their very beginnings.

Putting your mind in a place like this is what allows you to see those beginnings. "What causes it? What sparks it?" And notice it go away. Then notice if you pick it up again. Well, if you pick it up again, okay, why? What was the allure? What attracted you to that thought? Or, why do you feel you need to be thinking it?

Sometimes there are a lot of thoughts we don't like, but there's part of the mind that thinks we've got to think them. But that's not always the case. When you can see why the mind feels drawn to thinking those thoughts, then you can also look at their drawbacks and ask yourself, "Is it worth it?"

If it's really unskillful, then the answer should be No. When you can see very clearly what the drawbacks are, and that they far outweigh the allure, then you can let it go. You can escape from it.

So, getting the mind firmly established like this puts you in a position where you can do that kind of analysis. If the events of the day are pushing in on you so that you don't have time to do that analysis, at the very least you can notice when something unskillful has come up and you can drop it—breathe right through it.

It'll start as a little knot of disturbance, someplace in the area where the mind and the body meet. Then, from that knot of disturbance, it'll plant a seed and turn into a thought. But if you can catch that knot of disturbance and breathe right through it, you can nip it in the bud.

This is why we have to establish our center first thing every morning. Make sure it's solid, make sure it's secure, and that your attention and your intentions are properly focused. That's the best way to begin the day.