

Less is More

July 2, 2009

We spread thoughts of goodwill for all the world, that we don't wish anyone any harm. We wish that all beings could find happiness. So why are we sitting here with our eyes closed? Why aren't we going out there, making people happy?

Because happiness is something that has to come from within. It's based on being skillful in the way you act, which includes not only your physical actions, but also your speech and the actions of your mind—and in particular, the act of intention. This is because it's through our intentions that we shape the world we experience, along with the amount of pleasure or pain we take out of that experience. To formulate intentions that really do lead to happiness is a skill. And because it's a skill, nobody else can master the skill for you; you can't master the skill for anyone else. You can give other people advice, you can show them to some extent how to do things, but for them to find happiness requires that they take the issue of happiness seriously, that they learn how to be skillful in their approach to happiness. If you're going to give them reliable advice or set a reliable example, you yourself need to learn how to be skillful, too.

So, both for the sake of our own true happiness and for the true happiness of others, this is why we're sitting here meditating. We're training the mind to be very attentive, continually attentive to what it's doing, so that it can learn how to do it skillfully. This means that even though there is the quest for peace, the quest for stillness in the mind, it's not just peace and stillness for its own sake. It's for the sake of understanding what we're doing to cause suffering, and what we can do to stop it. That's the purpose of our understanding.

Last week I was teaching up in Canada, and the question came up: Isn't the purpose of all this practice to find the ultimate truth about things? And the answer is No. We're trying to find a particular truth that's useful for a higher purpose, the purpose of true happiness. It's truth with a purpose. After all, there are many truths of the world. We can talk about how lasting things are, and in some ways it's true. We can talk about how ephemeral they are, and in some ways that's true as well. We can talk about the happiness in relationships, and there really is happiness in relationships. But we can also talk about the suffering in relationships, and there's a lot of that, too. The question is, what use comes from focusing on which truths? Where do they lead you?

Once, when I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang, there was another young monk who had ordained at his fiancée's request. She wanted to make sure her husband had had some training as a monk before they got married. So he spent two weeks out there at the monastery and found that he liked the life of a monk a lot more than he had expected. When the night came for his parents and fiancée to pick him up and take him back to disrobe in Bangkok, Ajaan Fuang could sense that he was getting a little reluctant to go. So that night he gave a talk on how we're not born alone. We're born from our parents. We owe a debt to our parents, and we need to repay that debt.

A few days later, I was beginning to get concerned about my own debt to my father, and Ajaan Fuang said, "When we come to this world, we come alone. Nobody comes with us. Nobody hired us to come."

Two different truths: both true, and the question is learning how to use those truths properly in the right context.

Which means that the *uses* of these truths are what's important. The ultimate use is finding out how we create a lot of unnecessary stress and suffering for ourselves in spite of ourselves, and how we can put an end to it. That's why we train the mind.

To see this clearly, we have to get the mind still. Get the mind with one object, so it can settle down and have a good solid foundation that doesn't shift around all the time. The more you shift around, the less you see. You

might think that the more territory you cover, the more sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations you'll see. But you don't see them clearly. And the memory of what you do see is very impermanent.

When you try to gather up that kind of wealth—the wealth of memories and experiences—you find that it doesn't stay with you. It's like buying a huge shipload of lettuce, thinking it'll supply you with all the lettuce you'll need for the rest of your life. And, of course, the lettuce begins to rot pretty fast and after a while you can't use it. You then have the burden of trying to throw it away.

So you need to get a different kind of knowledge, the kind of knowledge that doesn't change. You find that it doesn't require you to know a lot of things outside, but it does require you to know your mind very thoroughly. How does your mind process things? That's where the stress and suffering come from.

The Buddha explains the causes of stress and suffering in a very elaborate sequence. It starts with ignorance and goes through many different factors. But one obvious point to notice is that many of the factors come prior to your sensory experience. In other words, the issue is all about what you *bring* to the experience. That's what makes all the difference. This is why we train the mind: so that it can bring the right qualities, the right intentions, the right *attention*—paying attention to where there's stress, and what can you do to put an end to it, by focusing on what you did to cause it. That kind of knowledge is useful in all circumstances, for it enables you to bring the right attitudes, the right qualities to bear, no matter what the situation.

So we start out here with our eyes closed, sitting still, to get the mind to settle down so that we can see it, so that we can develop some of these skills. But these skills are not just to be used when sitting here with our eyes closed. They're for us to bring to any situation no matter what, no matter how complex, no matter how large and complicated. If we can bring the right attitudes to those situations, we don't have to suffer. We don't have to cause suffering for other people. They may not like what we say or do, because we can't have any control over people's likes and dislikes, which are pretty unreliable. But we can be firm in our intent not to cause anyone any harm.

This is the kind of knowledge and these are the kind of truths we're looking for: the truth of what you're doing right now. What is your intention right now? Is it a skillful intention? And *skillful* doesn't mean just good, because you can have good intentions for others, but you can also have a lot of delusion at the same time, in which case your intention is not really skillful. When you're looking for skillful intentions, you're looking for intentions that aren't founded on greed, aren't founded on aversion, and aren't founded on delusion. That's what you're working for.

That means you have to start with something immediately present and really obvious—like the breath. Just be with the breath as it comes in; be with the breath as it goes out. Part of the mind will complain that there's not much happening, but the more space you give to the breath, the more you see what's there. In other words, you don't want to clutter up your mind with other thoughts. You have to realize in this case that less is more. The fewer things you're thinking about, the more you'll see right here, right now.

So whatever other concerns you may have about your situation at home, at work, or the world outside, put those concerns aside for the time being. Be as fully aware of the body, as fully aware of the breath as you can right now. Think of the breath as a whole-body process. It's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the flow of energy throughout the body, part of which is related to the flow of the blood and to the sense of aliveness in your nerves. Try to be sensitive to the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. Notice if there's any tension or tightness in any part of the body. Allow it to relax. If there's a sense of nourishment and refreshment, allow that to expand. Ask yourself: What would be the most refreshing way to breathe right now? See how the body responds. And stick with it, trying to stay on top of the body's breath-needs and providing whatever you sense it needs with each and every breath.

Because it's in sticking with the breath that the mind develops some steadiness. Once your gaze is steady, it can begin to see other movements in the mind as they happen. But for the time being, you don't want to pay them any attention. You want to pay attention more to the movements of the breath. If there are any thoughts coming up, you can just let them go, let them go, let them go. Again, less is more. The fewer the thoughts

cluttering up your awareness, the more you'll sense how the breath can fill the range of your awareness. The more sensitive you are, the more likely the mind is to settle down, to have a sense of ease and wellbeing right here, right now. Comb through any tangles of tension in the body, any knots of blockage in the breath. The more demanding you are in not allowing the tension to stay, the more subtleties you'll see. It's like being the princess who couldn't even have a pea under many mattresses—the difference here being that if you sense any little peas under the mattress, you take them out.

That's the work at the beginning of the meditation: ironing things out, smoothing things out, asking questions about the breath. What kind of breathing would feel good now? And what would feel good *now*? Because sometimes you can breathe in a way that stays steadily the same for long periods of time, and the body feels fine. At other times, one type of breathing might feel good for a couple breaths and then not so good with the next breath, so you've got to change. The important thing is that you stay with the breath as your main topic, to develop what is called singleness of preoccupation, which means both that you hold to one preoccupation, the breath, and you make it single in the sense that it's the one thing that fills the whole range of your awareness, with breath energy flowing through the body, even around the body. Think of it as a cocoon around the body, protecting you from outside energies. See how long you can maintain that perception.

It's an act of balancing. If you've ever noticed people walking across a tightrope, you notice that they don't stay perfectly balanced all the time. They shift a little bit to the right, a little bit to the left, and then they correct, like those old-fashioned scales that swing back and forth before finally coming into balance. If something tips it in one direction, the scale corrects itself, swinging back and forth until it's in balance again. The ability to regain your balance is what's going to keep you here.

Our mind is often like the mind of an addict, the sort of person who says, "I've been smoking pot for the last five years but now I'm totally clean, totally beyond that. I'll never be tempted to smoke again." That kind of attitude is going to get him back into smoking pot pretty soon. The way to stay away from your addiction is to realize that there are certain things that attract you, so you have to be on your guard, armed with antidotes for every temptation. You need to have antidotes to bring yourself back into balance. So realize that there's always a possibility of falling out of balance, but you can master the skills that can get you back in.

That's what the directed thought and evaluation at the beginning of right concentration are all about. If you find the mind slipping off the breath, you can get it back right away. If it slips off in another direction, you get it back right away. You keep regaining your balance no matter how much it wobbles. After a while, things finally settle down. You get more and more absorbed in the breath. There's a greater sense of oneness. A greater sense of concentration, composure, assurance that this is where you really want to be, and it's all right where it is right now. At that point, you don't have to adjust or analyze the breath any more. Just stay with "full body breath, whole body breath, aware, aware." It's as if the awareness and the body and the breath penetrate one another. There's a strong sense of oneness. It's from this oneness that we can begin to see things clearly.

The important thing right now is just to make sure that your foundation is strong, and that you do whatever is needed to maintain and regain that sense of balance. You may find the mind going into its old habits of trying to gather up this, gather up that, so remember: Less is more. Just the breath. Just the breath. You don't need anything else. If you give a lot of attention to the breath, you begin to see its potentials and can take advantage of them. You find that a sense of ease and wellbeing with the breath can do a lot more for you than any amount of status, material gain, praise, outside pleasures—any of the ways of the world. A sense of ease and wellbeing that come from within: This is really all you need because it fully nourishes the mind right now.

A well-nourished mind gives rise to more mindfulness and ultimately to the knowledge that can put an end to defilement—which is an even greater example of the case that less is more. The fewer your defilements, the more freedom you have. As the Buddha said, when he gained awakening, he dwelled with an unrestricted awareness, free from any attachments, free from any constriction. It's the greatest wealth there is.