

Maintaining Goodwill

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Start out with thoughts of goodwill. Tell yourself: “May I be happy. May my happiness be true.” Those two words have to go together: “true” and “happiness.” True happiness is the whole purpose of why we’re meditating. We realize there’s a lot of suffering in life, and a lot of that suffering comes from our own minds. And yet we don’t want it. We should respect our desire for happiness—in particular, our desire for true happiness, not just any old happiness. True happiness. That kind of happiness has to come from within.

Our desire for true happiness is the basis not only for our looking after ourselves, but for looking after other people as well, wishing for their happiness, too. Because after all, everybody else wishes for happiness, and if our happiness is going to depend on their suffering, then it’s not going to last. They’re going to do what they can to overturn it. So the extent to which your happiness depends on thoughts and words and deeds that deal with things outside, it has to take into consideration the happiness of other people. But true happiness has to come from within. It has to be based on something that doesn’t change, and the only place you can find that is in the mind.

For most of us, that’s just an idea. It’s not definitely true yet, but it makes sense. You see things outside changing, so how are you going to depend on people who die, age, grow ill, people who are going to leave you? Or people who you will have to leave? Things that you’ll have to leave? The one thing left is looking inside. Now, looking inside is discouraging at first because your mind seems to be a bigger mess than the things outside. But it can be sorted out: That’s the lesson of the Buddha’s life. The basic message of his quest is that your desire for true happiness is something that should be taken seriously, because it’s something that can be fulfilled. It’s what makes life meaningful—and it is possible. That’s the message of his awakening.

This is why we start with thoughts of goodwill for ourselves, and then we spread those thoughts of goodwill out to other people: family, very close friends, and then even wider, to people you like, to people you’re neutral about, even to people you don’t like. If everybody could find true happiness within, then this world would be a much better place. Spread thoughts of goodwill to people you don’t even know—and not just people, living beings of all kinds. May all beings find true happiness.

And with those thoughts you clear the ground for the meditation, not only reminding yourself of the motivation for why you’re meditating, but also clearing away a lot of the resentments you may be carrying around. It happens all too often that when the mind begins to settle down, difficult things start coming up. What someone said the

other day, what you did the other day or the other week, sometimes years past: These things come up. So this is to prepare yourself. As soon as any of this stuff comes up, you can remind yourself: “Hey, I’m here for goodwill. I’ve already wished happiness for that person, wished happiness for myself, so why should I browbeat myself or stir myself up with issues that serve only to heat up the mind and make it uncomfortable?”

We’ve got important work to do here: working on the mind’s habits that create suffering for itself and for other beings. The first step in this job is to learn how to make the mind quiet, so if there are any other disturbances, you just push them aside. Focus on the breath, because that’s one thing you know is always going to be in the present moment. If you’re watching your breath, you know you can’t be watching a past breath or a future breath. Watching the breath right now, the mind will tend to hover around the present moment. It may not be precisely on top of nothing but the present moment, but it’s close enough to the present moment that that’s what counts right now.

And you don’t have to talk too much about the breath to yourself, just enough to remind yourself to stay with the breath. When it comes in, know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know it’s going out, and work with it a little bit to make it comfortable. Allow it to be comfortable. You don’t have to force it in, force it out. Choose any one spot where it’s easy to follow the breath—the tip of the nose, the lungs, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, any place where it’s easy to keep track of “now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out,” and it feels comfortable to be centered there. Then relax around that center. All too often, when we try to focus on one part of the body, we tense up around it. Try to maintain your focus even as you relax around that spot. And try to maintain both that spot and the sense of relaxation around it.

That’s all you have to do. It’s not much, it’s simply that the mind is not simple. It’s got other issues, other agendas that keep popping in, and you have to be adept at fending them off. It’s like that old story of the sword master. A student came and said he wanted to learn how to be a sword master, too. So the sword master said, “Okay, go out and chop some wood, and fix some food, and do this, do that,” and had him do chores all around the monastery. But no mention of learning how to use a sword. The student was wondering, “When am I going to work with the sword?” The master said, “Don’t worry. We’ll get to it.” And then every now and then the sword master would attack the student with the stick while the student was doing his chores. So the student got very wary and very alert, until one day the sword master came up to hit him, and the student was ready for him, fended him off, and the sword master said, “Okay, now you’ve learned to be a sword master.”

You’ve got to anticipate the fact that other things are going to come up unannounced at unexpected times, so armor yourself with the right attitude: that this little place of stillness here is really important and has to be protected. You’re not going to trade it for

anything else. Sometimes thoughts will come in and say, “Hey, you have to plan for tomorrow, this is a great time to plan for tomorrow, all this time, nothing else you’ve got to do right now. Or you can go and rehash a relationship with this person or that person”—all kinds of things you could be doing with the hour. You’ve got to remind yourself: That’s a waste of the hour. The most important thing is to learn how to develop the skills you need in order to keep the mind still right here: mindfulness and alertness. Learn how to be very skeptical of the mind’s claims when it says that this or that thought about the past or the future is really important, you’ve really got to think about it. You’ve got to learn how to see through those claims.

One of the reasons that we’re so susceptible to advertising outside is that the mind uses all sorts of advertising tricks on itself, worming its way in and saying, “Oh, you really have to think about this, you know. This is really important.” Or: “This is a really attractive.” Or: “You’re really going to enjoy this thought.” Don’t believe those claims.

Most of the thoughts that are going to come into the mind are old thoughts anyhow. They’re old movies. You’ve seen them who knows how many times? Do you really need to see Humphrey Bogart say “Play that again,” or whatever he said? Do you really need to see what happens at the end of this Hitchcock movie? You’ve seen them many times before. And truth be told, the thoughts in your mind are not nearly as interesting as a Hitchcock movie or *Casablanca*. If they were projected on the screen and you had to go into the theater and pay for them, you wouldn’t go. You wouldn’t pay for them. And yet it’s so easy to drop the breath and go after these thoughts while we’re sitting here meditating.

So remind yourself: You’re not here for that. You’ve seen these movies before and they’re lousy movies. Why bother with them again? As for plans for the future, you can save those for the end of the meditation, after the mind is clear and calm. If you really do need to think about something, okay, *then* you can think about it. But in the meantime, get your mind calmed down, get it clear, just stay right here with the breath, allow the breath to be comfortable, allow your focus around your breath to be comfortable. And then just maintain that. It’s a healing awareness, like a topical cream, so the longer you can keep at it, the more it’s going to heal the mind.

So the trick in the meditation is, one, learning how to focus the mind and the breath in a way that feels comfortable, and then two, learning how to maintain focus.

And finally, three, there’s learning how to use it. In other words, when you finally get settled here, you can start using this state of mind to open things up inside, to see all the tricks the mind plays on itself—and specifically the tricks it plays on itself when it’s going to cause itself suffering. You’d think that the mind would to be honest and sincere with itself, but it’s not. It’s worse than the Chicago City Council. It uses all kinds of tricks, all kinds of political maneuvers. This desire comes in, and it’s almost as if it has a mind of its

own. What actually happens is that you begin to identify with these things without really thinking about “Whose voice is this? What kind of voice is this? Where is it going to take me? Do I really want to go there?” To see where these thoughts are going, you have to be able to step back. Which is precisely what the breath meditation is for. It gives you a firm place to take a stance and watch what’s coming in and out of the mind, so that you can understand why it is that the mind creates suffering for itself. It doesn’t make any sense at all. And yet it keeps on doing this.

That’s the best use for this concentration, because when you stop creating suffering for yourself, you don’t feel inclined to create suffering for anybody else. The reason we make life miserable for other people is because we feel threatened, along with this attitude: “As long as I’m suffering, let everybody else suffer too.” Or: “If I’m suffering, I don’t have the strength to do the right thing to help other people, it’s just beyond me.” It’s because you’re burdening yourself down with tons of bricks. How can you lift up a brick for someone else? If you can learn to put down your burden, then it’s no problem lifting up a whole load of bricks for other people.

This is the elegance of the Buddha’s teachings: You focus on this one problem—the suffering you create for yourself—and you find that all other problems in your life get solved. Either you realize that they’re not genuine problems anyhow, or else you see that they were caused by the fact that you weren’t mindful, weren’t alert. You were too busy creating suffering for yourself to really do the right thing. Once that old habit is gone, though, then you find it a lot easier to deal with whatever comes up. And there are no problems in the mind. The problems in the world stay in the world. You help where you can and you realize where you have to let go, but the world doesn’t make inroads on the mind.

That’s what we use the meditation for. And as for the other issues that might sound more attractive or more compelling—Is the world one? Do we have one in mind? Are we all oneness together?—even if you tried to answer those question, you wouldn’t get anywhere. There are so many issues like that out there. “What is my true self? Do I exist? Is the world eternal? Is it not eternal?” With all these issues, the Buddha said, “Don’t go there.” He wasn’t forbidding you to go there, he was just recommending that if you’re really concerned about solving the problems in your life, don’t bother with these issues because they’re false issues. The real issues are: Why is the mind creating suffering for itself? How can it stop? Once these issues are taken care of, everything is taken care of. That’s what you use the meditation for.

But to get the best use out of the meditation, you have to be good at focusing the mind, and then maintaining that concentration. Because in the maintaining comes the steadiness that you’re going to need in order to see things. When something moves in the mind, you don’t have to move along with it. When you can learn that skill, you’ve

learned a very important one. All too often, something moves in the mind and we jump right in, as when a car goes riding past and we get intrigued: “Where is this car going? Well, let’s go. Jump in it and go.” And the driver usually ends up dumping us off someplace and we have to come back. Here comes another car, “Let’s jump into this one.” Every little movement of the mind, you move into it, move along with it. It’s as if the mind is singing and you sing along with it. But when you learn the skill to stay still in the midst of the movements of the mind and the body, that’s when you’ve learned something very, very important.

So that’s why you have to maintain your focus. If you stay with the breath for a little while and then move on to whatever comes up, that’s your ordinary state of mind. It doesn’t really change anything. It doesn’t open your eyes. But if you take your stance in a comfortable way—a way that you can maintain because you’ve relaxed around it, and it doesn’t rely on tensing anything up—then you watch as things come into your range of awareness, and you see how they come, you see how they go, you see what interactions there are that cause suffering, and you can learn how to stop them. Just drop them.

So the important work lies in the maintaining, because it’s the force of the maintaining that shows you new things in the mind that you didn’t see before. It allows you to withstand old habits, to replace them with the new ones, and to get to the point where the mind no longer can play tricks on itself, because you’re there watching all the time. It has to behave itself. It stops creating suffering, and that’s the end of the problem.