

Goodwill for All Beings

May 26, 2005

They say that after his awakening, when the Buddha surveyed the world with the eye of a Buddha, he saw all the beings on fire—as we chanted last night—“on fire with passion, aversion, delusion, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress and despair.”

He, however, was no longer on fire. So he spent forty-five years teaching other people, other beings, how to put out their fires.

It's a sign of his great compassion. We tend to forget that: that the whole underlying motive for his teaching was goodwill for all beings, seeing that we all want happiness. In fact, almost everything we do, whether we articulate it or not, is for happiness, for pleasure, ease. Yet in spite of that, we end up creating a lot of suffering for ourselves and the people around us. The Buddha himself, before his awakening, saw that he was creating unnecessary suffering for himself. He wanted to find a way out. And not just for himself: for anyone who was willing to listen.

So the underlying motive for even undertaking the path to become a Buddha was goodwill. Once he'd become the Buddha, he was able to act on that motive in a total way, having found a path for totally freeing the mind from suffering. That's what he went out to teach.

So it's ironic when you think of all the people who've accused Buddhism of being pessimistic or Theravada of being selfish. Neither accusation is true. The Buddha taught that there is a total release from suffering. That's the opposite of pessimism.

And he taught everybody who was willing to listen, was willing to put the teachings into practice. That's the opposite of being selfish. As he saw, having overcome the problem of suffering in his own heart, he couldn't just wave a magic wand and have everybody else stop suffering. Suffering is something that each of us creates for him- or herself. Our own lack of skill is what makes us suffer. And because no one can master a skill for anyone else, this is a path that each of us has to practice for him- or herself alone.

But the results aren't felt only by you or only by the person who practices. They spread around.

They say that Ajaan Mun would practice spreading thoughts of goodwill three times every day. As soon as he woke up in the morning: goodwill for all beings. When he woke up from his midday nap: goodwill for all beings. And before he went to bed at night: goodwill for all beings. It established the context for the

practice. And kept his mind on the path.

Even as you're falling asleep, you can think goodwill for all beings. You don't want let your mind wander off into areas where it shouldn't go.

Of course if this wish, goodwill for all beings, just stops there at the wish, it becomes an empty thought. It begins to dry out. You have to find ways of implementing it, watering it. And you start at home.

One of the reasons we work with the breath to make the breath comfortable is to give the mind a good place to stay. When you have a sense of ease in the body, you're much less likely to want to go out and cause harm to other beings. And you become more sensitive to how you cause harm for yourself.

When you get very sensitive to the impact of thoughts on the breath and the body, then when an unskillful thought comes up, you notice it: "Okay, this really hurts." Just thinking it, hurts. You look at the content of the thought, and there's really nothing worth following through there: It just creates more suffering, more trouble.

So when you're coming from a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, a sense of strength because you're not constantly inflicting yourself with suffering, you become more reliable. When you come from this position of ease and strength, you're much less likely to act on any thoughts that are harmful.

This means that creating this inner sense of ease is a gift not only to yourself but also to all of the people around you. It's a very visceral way of implementing thoughts of goodwill. You sense it immediately.

Now, it has to come with practice. Often we're used to breathing in unskillful ways, just as we're used to thinking in unskillful ways. So when we're told to adjust the breath, we adjust the breath in unskillful ways. But if you're observant, you can get more and more skillful at adjusting it.

This is the whole reason why one of the central concepts the Buddha teaches is *kusala* or skillfulness. It opens the way to get out of our old habits. A skill is something a human being can develop. There are gradations of skillfulness. And you move from lack of skill to greater and greater skill by being observant.

This requires patience. It requires sensitivity—and it also develops sensitivity. Once you become more and more sensitive to the breath, you become more sensitive to the mind. You become more sensitive to the things you say, the ways you think. You begin to see more clearly where you're causing suffering, where you're causing stress, because you have a sense of ease against which to measure it.

So this technique of learning how to relax the body, learning how to relax the breath so that it flows smoothly through the body, is crucial. The nature of the mind is that it's always looking for happiness, it's always looking for ease, and if it

can't find any inside, it's going to go wandering out hunting for food outside.

Sometimes it goes out and noses around in piles of garbage, looking for something to eat out there. And for the most part, it finds disappointment. Of course, there is some satisfaction out there. If there weren't any satisfaction at all, nobody would go out there. But it's a pretty miserable position to be in when your happiness depends on a food that you can't rely on.

This evening I was reading a review of a book on children living under the Germans during World War II. One of the themes of the book was how hunger is not only physically limiting but also morally limiting as well. When the Polish children or the Jewish children living under the Germans were really, really starving, the things they would do just to get something to put into their mouths were pretty appalling.

It's because we're driven. We've got this body that needs to eat. And if it doesn't get enough, the mind changes as well. It can start thinking of doing things that it ordinarily wouldn't think of doing at all.

So you owe it to yourself and to the people around you to find a source of happiness for the mind that, to begin with, doesn't have to feed outside. Ultimately, you want to get to the point where you don't have to feed at all, where the mind is strong enough that it doesn't have to impose on anything. It doesn't have to rely on anything for its happiness. It's totally complete, in and of itself.

The first step in that direction is learning how to produce your own sense of ease from within so that you're less likely to go out nosing around for food in places where the food is bad for you or where you have to fight off other people nosing around in the same garbage pile.

As long as you've got something good to feed on inside, you're much less likely to get involved in conflict outside—or to impose or create burdens for people outside. That's because you're not feeding on them. You're not fighting them for food.

So, you need this ability to create a sense of ease simply by the way you breathe — and the breath is free. It's one of the few things they haven't privatized yet. It's always there, coming in, going out. And you have the choice of how you want to breathe.

If you can maximize this potential here, you've really got yourself in a good position. You create a sense of ease for yourself and you're less burdensome to the people around you. You become more reliable. You can rely on yourself, and the people around you can depend on you too.

So, working with the breath, getting skillful, getting observant about what works and what doesn't work, and allowing the breath to flow freely through the

body: It's a visceral, very immediate and very lasting way of showing goodwill both for yourself and for all beings.