

Metta Meditation

September 2, 2005

“May I be happy. May all living beings be happy.” We chant that every night before we meditate. We’re advised to think thoughts of goodwill like that at the end of the meditation, too. We chant them beforehand for two reasons. One is to remind ourselves of why we’re meditating. The chant on happiness is accompanied by the chant on equanimity: All living beings are the owners of their actions. That’s to remind us that happiness is not simply a matter of an affirmation, it’s something you actually have to do. It requires causes, actions that you have to do. And where do the actions come from? They come from the mind, from your intentions. So you have to train your intentions if you want to make sure that the results that are going to come out are the ones you want. Otherwise, the intentions of the mind pull you in all directions unless you train them to pull in one direction, which is the direction of true happiness. So that’s why we meditate: to train our intentions.

The second reason why we chant the chant on goodwill before meditating is to put the mind in a good mood. Thinking thoughts of goodwill feels good. Goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for other people, no animosity for anybody: It feels good to have those attitudes in mind. Sometimes when we’re in the wrong mood, it’s good to remind ourselves that the best happiness is the one that doesn’t take anything away from anybody else—a happiness that doesn’t impede the happiness of other people—and to remind ourselves that there is such a thing: the happiness that comes from within.

If, in the course of the day, you find yourself enmeshed in all kinds of struggles with other people, where your happiness seems to run at cross purposes with theirs, it puts you in a foul mood. You start looking at the human race as a whole, and it’s nothing but struggle and conflict, where people are constantly taking advantage of one another. For what purpose? They keep doing it until they run out of steam and then they fall dead. And then they’re replaced by other people. And they themselves, after they die, come back and start to struggle all over again. It all seems pointless. If that were all there were to the human race, it’d be a pretty miserable situation.

But, as of the Buddha pointed out, that’s not everything. There is a happiness that comes from training the mind—a happiness that comes from doing good things, developing things like integrity, generosity, virtue, concentration, discernment. These are all good things to work on. The causes are good; the results

are good. If you look at the human enterprise from this perspective, it takes on a whole new cast. And particularly if you look at *your* human enterprise, your life, what you're going to do with it: It feels a lot better if you can make up your mind that, yes, what you want is true happiness, harmless happiness, reminding yourself that there is a path to follow in that direction. It's this one we're following right here as we sit and meditate.

So these are good thoughts to think, to help you get in the right mood to meditate, because an important element in the meditation is to come with a good mood to the breath. If you come with a sense of frustration, exasperation, it's going to be reflected in the breath, and then the mind is going to reflect that back at the breath, and then it's like falling into a house of mirrors with a little monster between the mirrors. The monster just multiplies and gets magnified. But if you come to the breath with the right attitude, it's a different kind of house of mirrors. Different things get reflected and magnified, good things. The breath feels good, the mind feels good, and that gives you a basis for settling down, being on good terms with the breath, showing some goodwill for the breath. And even though we can't say the breath will show goodwill back to you, at least it'll show some pleasant feelings that you can settle down in. Try to be sensitive to those.

All too often, we sit here and we look at the body, the first things that pull our attention are the pains. It hurts here, it's tight there, it's tense here, and if you focus on those areas, they become the little monster in the hall of mirrors. Try to find the spaces between the pains and the parts of the body that feel okay. They don't have to be great. They just have to be relatively pleasant. Focus on them and allow them to continue to be relatively pleasant.

One of the things that you have to watch out for is the mind's tendency to tense up the spot where it's focused. So find a spot that feels good and think about keeping it relaxed, keeping it relaxed, keeping it relaxed as you keep tabs on it. If you slip off, be good-natured about coming back. As with any skill, the people who can laugh at their mistakes and then come back and try to fix them: Those are the ones who will do well. That's the right attitude to have. If you get frustrated and start beating yourself up, that's the face that's going to fall back into the hall of mirrors, either the beater or the beaten, neither of which is something you want to see repeated infinitely.

So when you come back to the breath, come back to the parts that feel good, learning how to be in a good mood and yet diligent at the same time. Persistent at the same time. Precise at the same time. This takes some practice but, after all, you find that this is the attitude that's going to get you into comfortable concentration. And one of the purposes of concentration is to be at ease, to have a

sense of comfort, a sense of pleasure, because the inside work we're going to be doing—and it will be work—requires that you stay in the present moment for long periods of time so that you can watch what's happening. You can follow that trajectory of the cause leading to its result. To do that, your gaze has to be steady, your foundation has to be strong, and any foundation that's based on a sense of frustration and strained effort is not going to last. If it's based on the sense of ease and a sense of belonging here in the present moment, then it's going to be solid. Very few things will be able to knock it over.

So keep bringing that attitude to the breath. Every time you slip off, come back and remind yourself: "May I be happy. May all living beings be happy." And in that way, you'll find it easier to keep coming back, which is what the concentration is all about.

Concentration isn't something that's built up from nothing. We all have certain powers of concentration already. If we didn't, we wouldn't be human beings, or we wouldn't be sane human beings. So in the beginning you'll start out with momentary concentration. It's going to last for a while and then it's going to stop, and then you have to start it up again. Take that as a given. And when you learn how to stay in the spots that feel comfortable and keep them relaxed as you're focused on them, that's what's going to allow the moments to connect. The concentration will last longer and longer—until you catch yourself at the point where the normal lifespan of your focus is about ready to give out, and yet you realize you have a second wind and you can keep going, keep going, keep going, because you've got your source of strength, your source of comfort.

That's what the work in concentration is about. You're working at a sense of ease, and that's different than straining or pushing or tightening things up in order to get them done. The work is in the persistence, persistence in allowing a relaxed spot in the body to stay relaxed as you watch it.

It's in this way that when you come out of concentration, you'll feel goodwill as well. And this time, when you spread thoughts of goodwill to other beings, it'll have a different quality. It really will be a gift to them because it's coming from a sense of goodwill that's already there. Rather than a reminder to yourself, it's more a natural outcome of the concentration you've been doing. You allow the goodness in your mind, which already feels radiant, to radiate to others outside.