Start with Goodwill

August 23, 2025

We have that chant on the Brahmaviharas every night to remind ourselves of why we’re here. We want to find a genuine happiness. Happiness that will last. Which means it has to be a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. Because if our happiness harms them, they’re going to try to destroy it. We also have to remind ourselves that thoughts of goodwill are things we have to develop. The Buddha calls them a form of mindfulness, that you have to be determined on. Determination means that you have an overriding desire to stick with something. And if the thoughts of goodwill were universal and natural to us, we wouldn’t have to keep it in mind. We wouldn’t have to be determined on it. We just do it. But the fact is that we are human beings. We don’t live in a Brahmavihara. We live in a Manusavihara. A human dwelling. And in our human dwelling, our human state of mind, our goodwill tends to be partial. We have goodwill for people who have been good to us, or people we love. Ill will for people who have been bad to us, or to people we love. We have to learn how to rise out of that partiality. Because after all, we’re the owners of our karma. That’s another one of the reflections we have. And our karma comes from our intentions. And if our intentions are fired by ill will, they’re going to be bad. And then we’re going to reap the rewards of bad karma. So to be safe, we have to have goodwill all around. Then we develop the other Brahmaviharas as well. There’s compassion. May all beings be free from suffering. That’s basically what goodwill feels when it sees people suffering. You want them to get out of that suffering. Then there’s empathetic joy, which is what goodwill feels when it sees those who are happy. May they continue being happy. May they continue being skillful, or they have had a lapse. In other words, they’re experiencing the happiness that comes from their past actions, but their present actions are not all that skillful. Empathetic joy means may they resume becoming skillful again. They’ve been skillful in the past, but as we all know, some people get the rewards of their goodness, and they turn bad. It’s like milk that goes sour. They gain power, and they start abusing it. They discover they can get away with things. They try to push the limits to see how far they can get away. So they stop creating the causes for happiness, even though there’s still some leftover results from past skillful actions. Well, they must have been skillful at some place in the past. They hope that they revive those habits. And finally, there’s equanimity, which is not indifference, but simply the realization that you can’t have everybody be happy or skillful as you would like them to be. And if you try to push and push and push in that direction, it’s a waste of time. So you try to develop an attitude of possibility, not getting upset, just being very matter-of-fact about what you can’t change, so you can devote your energies to what you can change. Whereas the primary area where you can change things is in your own mind. So the Brahma-biharas start with the wish, “May I be happy,” and then they focus us back to what we’ve got to do to train our own minds. So here we are. You’ve got your awareness in the breath, and you want to keep them together. It’s going to require that you focus very carefully on the breath. Where do you feel the breathing in the body right now? You may have some preconceived notions about where the breath comes in, where the breath goes out, but where’s the actual feeling? And what is that actual feeling? It’s a feeling of movement or energy in the body. And it doesn’t have any clear boundaries. Because it’s not just the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the energy that allows the muscles to move, allows the nerves to send messages, allows the blood to flow through the blood vessels. There are many layers. Where do you feel the energies that are related to the in-and-out breath right now? Focus your attention there. Try to get that comfortable. And then notice how it relates to the energies you feel elsewhere in the body. If you can connect them all, so much the better. Because you’re aiming at a stable, focused awareness in the present moment that fills the whole body. It requires that you direct your thoughts to the breath. You’re focusing them here to prevent your thoughts from wandering off someplace else. And then you evaluate what you’ve got right here so you can get an interest in it. If the breath is not interesting, you’re not going to stay with it. The mind needs something to catch its interest. So think about how the breath is the force of life. And if the force of life is not flowing very well through your body right now, it’s a bad sign. But you can do something about it. Of all the elements in the body or elements of the way you sense your body, it’s the most responsive to the mind. You can change your perception. And that changes the way you think the breath flows, where it flows, what direction it flows. Can you think of all the breath energies in the body flowing in together, flowing out together, all in harmony? And realizing that if this is going to be good for your body, it’s like a medicine that you put on a wound. You don’t put it on and wipe it off. You put it on and you let it stay there. So once the breath energies are flowing well, try to maintain that as long as you can. And you learn a lot about your mind in the meantime, because there’ll be parts of the mind that want to wander off. They’re used to allowing the breath to go on automatic pilot. But if you let the breath go back on to automatic pilot, it goes back to its old ways. So maintain alertness, maintain your ardency, maintain your mindfulness right here. Direct your thoughts right here and evaluate what you’ve got. And then keep on making improvements until it feels as good as it could possibly feel, or feels good enough. And then you maintain what you’ve got. I’ve done Fung’s images of a large water jar. You put water into the jar. There comes a point where, no matter how much more water you put into it, it’s not going to hold anymore. It’ll just spill out. That’s the point where you can stop directing your thoughts to the breath. Hopefully by that time, the sense of fullness you have in the body will be enough to keep you interested. But if the mind is still interested in thinking about other things, you’ve got to keep on reminding yourself to stay here, stay here, stay here. And continue your survey around the body. You may not have to do much adjusting of the breath, but you will have to keep an eye out on where thoughts are going to form in the range of your awareness. Because they will form, even when the mind is very still, very quiet. You’ve got thoughts coming in from your past karma that start appearing as a little knot of tension someplace in the body. And you have the choice of seeing those knots of tension simply as something physical, or as the potential for a thought. And when you see those things forming, try to zap them with your attention. Scatter them. For some people it’s like guacamole. It’s endless scattering, scattering, scattering. For other people it’s more occasional, less frequent, depending on how much your mind tends to like its own thoughts. This is our problem. Any little thought that appears in the mind, we want to peer into it. Think it’s a possible present that someone has given to us. But then you open the box, look inside, and then you fall inside. That’s the way most of us live our lives. But for now we’re trying to change the habit. A thought appears. You stay on the outside of the thought. And you look at it. Where does it come from? Where is it going? Is it worth getting involved in? For the time being, though, as you’re trying to develop your concentration, no other thoughts are worth going into, aside thoughts related to the breath. So stay right here. And do whatever you have to do to maintain your awareness right here. Because this is a skill. You want to get the mind used to being right here so that it can observe itself clearly. There will be a sense of well-being as the breath energy fills the body. And that’s going to nourish you as you stay here. Because you’re going to observe the mind the same way that a spy would observe somebody. You rent an apartment across from where they are, and you observe their comings and goings. And there may be a lot of time between their comings and goings. But if you divert your attention from where you’re supposed to watch, you might miss them. So you’ll have to learn how to be steadily here and maintain a sense of well-being. As you stay. Sometimes it’s slow. Nothing much happens. Other times, more things are happening. Or you get more sensitive to what’s going on. You begin to see little things that are happening that you didn’t notice before. They were in the background. Those are the things you want to watch out for. Because we’re here to understand why is it that the mind, even though it wants happiness, can create suffering for itself. And it’s all in the background. So try to get as sensitive as you can, first to the breath and the body. And then that will transfer over to becoming sensitive to the mind, which is a lot more delicate. So we’re here to get the mind still. But not just still. We want it to be still and observant. And that’s an important balancing act. Because we want to understand why the mind creates suffering for itself. You’ve got to watch it carefully. The Buddha says it’s because of our ignorance that we create suffering. So we have to watch this area where we tend to be ignorant. Where does the mind disturb itself? Where does the mind disturb itself? There’s ignorance right there. Look into it. Otherwise, try to maintain your stillness as much as you can. Not only when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but as you go through the day. And when you go through the day, there are other things you may have to think about. But if you really sort through your thoughts, you begin to realize that there’s a lot of thinking that goes on that’s totally useless. So it’s not impossible to observe your mind and function properly as you go through the day. Just establish a clear sense of priority. So that you really do want to understand this problem. You really do want to figure out this mind of yours. So it can stop causing trouble. When the mind stops causing trouble, for itself, then the troubles of the world don’t weigh on it at all. This is how we show goodwill for ourselves. We say, “May I be happy, may I be happy.” As Ajaan Lee would say, “We know that red ants’ nests are full of ants that can bite, but we stick our heads in them.” In other words, we know there are things that the mind does that create suffering, but we keep on doing them. Part of that is a lack of imagination. Another part is a lack of skill. So develop the skills of concentration. And the skills of observing your mind. And allow yourself to imagine that you can actually master these skills and carry them into your daily life. That increases your sense of what kind of happiness is possible. And when you get better at understanding your own lack of skill around happiness, thinking, develop more skill in its place, then you’re better positioned to set a good example for others and actually give them advice. So again, the wish for “may I be happy” has to extend to “may others be happy too.” In other words, “may I be skillful, may others be skillful as well.” And the more you understand this skill, the more you have to offer them.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2025/250823_Start_with_Goodwill.mp3>