

A Load of Straw

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The mind has a habit of loading itself down with all sorts of unnecessary garbage. It's like a phrase they have in Thai, "the old woman loading herself down with straw." The story goes that she thought that someday she might find herself in need of some straw, so everywhere she went she carried a huge load of straw on her back. Of course she was always bent over and at the same time could never pick up anything that was any better. When she got home that's all she had: this big load of straw. She had been all over the place, carrying her big load of straw, and yet had nothing to show for it.

It's like a person on a camping trip who tries to prepare for all the possible contingencies and as a result loads his pack so heavily that he can hardly walk. He won't get very far. If he wants to get anywhere, he's got to learn how to minimize his load. In the same way, we have to learn how to get rid of all the unnecessary things we carry around. Even though we're out here in an extremely peaceful place, we keep finding things to weigh the mind down.

So it's important to have techniques for letting go, for putting down those burdens. The four sublime attitudes that we chant every night are good tools for putting down your load. Start out with thoughts of goodwill: "May I be happy, may all living beings be happy." Think about it for a while: Why would you want anyone to suffer? Do you want anyone to suffer? Look down, be very honest with yourself, because with all the conflicts in life, you may have a residual grudge against some people. You'd really like to see them get theirs. And yet who's being weighed down by that desire? You are, all for no purpose. You don't have to make sure that just punishments are meted out. The law of karma is going to take care of everything, sooner or later. Of course, often we'd like to see it sooner, but the desire for "sooner" is right there an unnecessary load on the mind.

So think about goodwill for a while until you can really see why you'd genuinely want to see everybody happy. After all, if everybody had true happiness welling up from within, nobody would harm anyone else, no one would cheat anyone else, no one would take advantage of anyone else. If everybody had true happiness, there would be no reason for all the wars and cruelties in the world. The possibility for peace and wellbeing in the world has to come from everyone's being happy from within. So you wish that happiness for everyone, whether they're people you like or people you don't like. Don't make your likes and dislikes a big issue. Dig into each person a little deeper than that, to see the part where you can sympathize with his or her desire for happiness.

The next two sublime attitudes follow immediately on goodwill. If you see people who are suffering, you feel compassion for them, you'd like to see them gain release from that suffering. As for those who are already happy, you wish them to continue in that happiness. It's funny that this last attitude, appreciation or sympathetic joy, is the harder of the two. Sometimes compassion is easy because we can view ourselves in a position of being over somebody, looking down on that poor suffering person, whereas with sympathetic joy, sometimes the people who are happier than we are, are in a higher position than we are. They have a happiness we don't yet have. In situations like this, thoughts of envy or resentment can easily come up, so if they do, look at them. Do you really want to think those thoughts? Do you really want to identify with those thoughts?

These sublime attitudes are measuring sticks against which you can measure what's actually going on in your mind. In other words, you're not just smothering all the unskillful thoughts in your mind with these nice warm fuzzy clouds of goodwill. You're using these skillful thoughts as measuring sticks. These are the attitudes that put people into jhana. These are the attitudes that brahmas, who live in jhana, actually dwell in. This is why they're able to stay in jhana. So how do your attitudes measure up against theirs? If you find that your attitudes don't measure up, try to reason with yourself until they do. You can't force yourself without reasoning.

The same with compassion: Can you feel compassion for someone without a sense of your superiority getting involved? Just simply seeing someone suffer hurts your heart. Don't make an issue of whether you like that person or not. If someone is happy, again it doesn't matter whether you like or don't like that person. Try to make your heart as fair as possible with regard to all beings. Once you've developed these attitudes, then when thoughts that go against these principles come into the mind, you'll catch them more quickly, see them more easily, and in this way these attitudes become a basis for good concentration, a basis for developing stillness within the mind.

Of course there are cases where people are suffering and you can't do anything to put an end to their suffering, or when happy people are going to have to lose their happiness. This applies to you as well as to other people. This is why equanimity has to be the safety net for all these sublime attitudes. Realizing that there are some cases you just can't help, you have to reflect on the principle of karma. This again is a very useful principle for preparing yourself to meditate. Realize that you don't have to straighten out the world before you're going to be able to gain Awakening or before you're going to be able to sit down and meditate. The principle of karma is at work here. Often, when people have made up their minds to straighten out the world, the things they do to straighten out the world tend to get very unskillful and they end up making things worse. They don't like other people's greed, anger, and delusion, yet in the course of trying to straighten them out, they inflict them with their own greed, anger, and delusion. They simply compound the problem.

So your only responsibility to the world is to focus on doing what's skillful. That's all you have to take care of. As for the working out of everybody else's karma, that will work out on its own without your having to get involved. Just make sure that your own present karma is skillful.

One thing you can do that's skillful right now is to allow the mind to settle down with the breath. There's no unfinished business with other people that you've got to take care of right now. Your unfinished business is to see how skillful you can be in the way you direct your mind, for if you want true happiness this is what you've got to do. You're not going to find true happiness by straightening out the world, but you *can* find true happiness by straightening out the mind. Doing skillful things, saying skillful things, thinking skillful things: This is how your world is going to become a better world.

And this is not a small or narrow minded idea. You may have read that these poor Hinayanists, all they can think about is their own individual liberation, while other Buddhists have nobler, broader aspirations: They want to save all sentient beings from suffering. Now if suffering were a thing — like a house — that you could clean up, then it would be possible to go around cleaning up other people's houses for them. But it's not a thing. It's a pattern of unskillful behavior. Each person is suffering because of his or her own lack of skill. So each person has to clean up his or her own act. You can't make other people more skillful. You can't force them to choose to be more skillful. You can't clean up their act for them. You *can* show them by example, by cleaning up your own act. You can recommend that they clean up theirs, but your recommendations carry weight only if you can speak from experience in how you cleaned up your act, and you can show the actual example of your own behavior. But the actual cleaning is something that each person has to do for him or herself. Nobody can save anyone else. There's no other way that the world will get clean.

And regardless of whether the world will actually ever get clean — which is pretty open to doubt — there's no doubt that you've got issues coming up in your mind right now. Those are the ones you have to deal with; that's your field for skillful work right now. When you have this perspective, it helps you focus on your meditation and do the work that has to be done. There's a passage in the Anguttara describing two kinds of fools in the world: those who take on work that's not their own work and those who neglect the work that *is* their own. So look at the work your mind has to do. It's right here in front of you in terms of your thoughts, your words, your deeds. When you focus on this, you're doing what has to be done, what should be done, the best thing you can do. So these four Sublime Attitudes are not there just to give a warm, fuzzy feeling to the mind. They help you gain perspective on what you're doing. When you have the right perspective, it's a lot easier to keep focused on the path.