

## *Gratitude, Goodwill & Generosity*

*March 27, 2004*

When I went back to Thailand and ordained to stay with Ajaan Fuang, during my first month back at Wat Dhammasathit on the hillside there, it seemed as if all the snakes in the hillside came out to check out this Western monk.

I'd be doing walking meditation and suddenly realize that there was a cobra lying next to my path. When I was going down to the bathroom, a snake would slip between my feet as I was stepping.

It was happening every day, several times a day. And it was beginning to freak me out. I'd never had many experiences with snakes before, and these were cobras.

When I first mentioned it to Ajaan Fuang, he didn't seem concerned. But when he realized how often it was happening, he taught me to memorize the chant we chanted just now, spreading goodwill to snakes.

And I must admit I'd never thought about the idea of goodwill to snakes and what their feelings might be. I had always been concerned about my own feelings when I saw them.

But it was good to think about theirs. As Ajaan Fuang said, they're operating with a disadvantage: no feet like everyone else. They have to slide on their bellies. Once you learn how to feel goodwill even for snakes, it gets a lot easier to deal with them. You begin to understand them, and the more empathy you have for them, the easier it is to live with them.

I mention this because we often think of meditation as a process of just stilling our thought-processes and getting down to a state of concentration, trying not to think at all. And yet an important part of getting the mind to concentration is learning how to think skillfully first before you can stop thinking. Because some thoughts are very sticky: They actually prevent you from settling down, they keep coming up with all sorts of issues as to why you shouldn't be meditating. So you have to learn to think in ways that counter them. Then it's easy for the mind to settle down without a lot of struggle.

So before we empty our minds of thoughts, we have to fill them up with good thoughts. The Buddha once said that, for him, the beginning of getting on the right path was learning how to divide his thoughts into skillful and unskillful, and then to encourage the skillful thoughts so that they could crowd out the unskillful ones or undercut them. And then it was easy for the mind to settle down.

So if you find yourself having trouble sticking with the breath, look back and think, "What issues are preventing you from settling down?" There are skillful ways of learning how to counteract those thoughts.

We often read the texts that right view consists of seeing things in terms of the four noble truths, but there's a more preliminary form of right view that reminds you of the power of your actions. In particular, it focuses first on the power of your good actions; that

there is a special value to generosity. There's a special gratitude you owe to your parents.

Gratitude is considered the beginning of all skillful qualities.

Generosity is considered the basis for all the practice.

These qualities get you started with right attitude. So when you find your mind feeling ungenerous or ungrateful, remind yourself you really do owe a debt of gratitude to your parents and other people who've been helping you.

As the Buddha once said, it's hard to find two things: One, people who will go out of their way to help you of their own initiative; and then, two, people who recognize help and feel gratitude towards it.

So if you find people like that in the world, those are relationships you want to cultivate. Those are attitudes you want to cultivate within yourself as well.

And both of these encourage an attitude of goodwill, which is another good way of filling up your mind: thoughts of wishing for happiness for others, realizing you don't really benefit from anybody's suffering, so why wish suffering on other people?

If you reflect on it for a minute, you realize that if everyone in the world could find true happiness within, we wouldn't have all these problems. All the stupid things people do are because they don't know happiness within. All the harmful and cruel things they do is because they don't know happiness within. If there were some way that they could find that inner happiness, a lot of the problems in the world would disappear.

So wishing for the true happiness of all beings is beneficial for everybody. Believing in the power of your actions is beneficial for you.

Someone this morning expressed the idea, "Well, it's all going to come out okay in the end." And the Buddha questions that: "Will there be an end where it all sort of settles in?" We like to think that the world or the universe has some sort of plan behind it. It's like a nice novel, all the loose ends get tied up in the end. But when you look at people's lives: How many people's lives have their loose ends tied up? How many people's lives end with a nice, satisfactory, esthetically pleasing closure?

That's not the way of the world at all. It's all unfinished business. People stop their work because they get too old, too weak to do it, or they die before it's done. It's not that the work ever really gets finished – it's just that people have to drop it.

Relationships tend to have lots and lots of loose ends that never really get resolved.

And so the idea, "Well, it doesn't really matter because it's all going to come out in the end": That's one of the most destructive attitudes you can have because it makes you lazy. You don't pay careful attention to what you're doing, thinking, "Well, it doesn't matter, the sun's going to go nova some day." But what the sun's going to do then doesn't really matter in terms of your life right now. What *you're* doing right now really shapes your life, and it's good to have that attitude firmly established in your mind. Your actions make a difference.

These are the preliminaries of right view. It's good to keep reminding yourself of them as you get ready to meditate because they help clear the ground. And even though this is a process of filling up your mind with thoughts, it's filling them up with useful thoughts, skillful thoughts, thoughts that lead to the conclusion, "Yes, it is good thing to meditate

because when you meditate you're developing mindfulness, you're developing alertness, and these are precisely the qualities you need in order to be more skillful in your actions." You're developing concentration, which makes it easier to see exactly what's going on around you, what's going on in your mind.

So it helps to develop the right attitude to bring to the meditation with thoughts that come to the conclusion, "It's a good thing to settle down."

That's how you fill your mind with good things to crowd out the unskillful thoughts, the thoughts that get in the way.

*Then* you can start thinking of emptying your mind. A lot of people want to go straight for the emptiness. Yet they get disoriented because deep down inside they're still carrying around a lot of unskillful assumptions. If those assumptions aren't questioned, they come up in the meditation and can skew it.

So you want to be clear about what your assumptions are. Really examine them so that you can see which ones are healthy and which ones are not.

And there are good healthy ways of thinking. You're totally free to think in healthy ways. If you're not yet convinced of all the truth of these healthy ways, well, at least give them the benefit of the doubt, take them as working assumptions and see where they lead.

This establishes the right context for the meditation, so that as the mind tries to settle down it has a good place to settle down with a sense of well-being, an inner sense of inner self esteem, a sense of inner wealth that comes from being generous, the earnestness that can come with realizing that what you're going to do is important so you want to be very clear about what you're doing.

So before you aim at the emptiness the Buddha often talks about in terms of emptying your mind of distractions, emptying it of disturbances, first fill it up with good things. Because then it's easier to take those things apart, allow those things to fall silent.

Because unskillful thoughts, before they fall silent, scream at you to go someplace else. But if you fill up your mind with good, skillful attitudes for why you do want to train your mind, why it's worth this, both for yourself and for the well-being of all the people around you, these thoughts then fall away leaving a sense of ease.

Remember you're not doing this just for yourself. It's good for the world. The more greed, anger and delusion you can uproot from your own mind, the less often people have to suffer from your greed, anger, and delusion.

This is why people support meditation monasteries like this. They see it as good for the world as a whole that people are training themselves. Here's an opportunity to do this. They benefit too.

So we're doing it both for ourselves, for the people who support us, and then everybody else all around, including the snakes, including the... everybody.

Because when our goodwill can encompass everyone, it naturally feels good to be settling down and doing this work on your mind because it's one way of directly helping yourself and everybody else as well. It's one of those areas where your benefit and the benefit of other people are not at cross-purposes. The more you benefit yourself through

the meditation the more other people benefit as well.

Ajaan Fuang used to call snakes the “big ajaans.” In fact, the forest as a whole he called “the big Ajaan,” because it comes up with all kinds of challenges that force you to be mindful, force you to be alert—and also call on your goodwill.

Barry Lopez wrote a very good book on the Arctic, *Arctic Dreams*, and in it he talks about how hunters go out into the wilderness: There’s a sense of fear they take with them because they know deep down inside they’re out there to kill. And if they kill, they know one day they’re going to get killed as well. The quality of their intention in going out there affects their relationship to everything around them.

But here our intention is total goodwill, total harmlessness. When you keep that attitude firmly in mind, you can meet up with the snakes, you can meet up with anybody out there, and there’s no gnawing angst deep down inside that your motivation is not pure. This purity of motivation is what protects you and carries you through.

Think of the forest ajaans, running into tigers in their caves. If they’d originally gone out there with the purpose of doing harm to the tiger, that little bit of self-recrimination, that little bit of self-doubt, knowing that your motivation was impure: That would really affect the relationship to the tiger, and not for the good.

But if you’re there totally for goodwill, there’s no self-doubt. You can rely on the purity of your motivation. This is why you never hear any stories of the forest ajaans or any of the forest monks being attacked by tigers.

The other chant we have that goes along with the chant on snakes is the chant for goodwill. The story goes that a monk went out in the forest and was sitting under a tree. The devas living up in the tree couldn’t live up there because this monk was down below them. And they didn’t like that. They felt threatened by him, so they were making life difficult.

So the monk went back to consult with the Buddha, because otherwise he liked that spot to meditate quite a lot, and the Buddha said, “Go back and spread goodwill to everybody.” He did, and the devas left him alone.

So it’s good to realize that the purity of your motivation can get you through a lot of difficult situations both outside and in. It gives you the confidence you need to do this practice—and to do it in any and all situations.