

Principles for Living Together

April 29, 2015

Close your eyes and notice where you're feeling the breath. When the breath comes in, watch the breath come in. When it goes out, watch the breath go out. Try to breathe in a way that feels comfortable: refreshing to the body, soothing to the mind.

We meditate to put the mind in a position where it can watch itself clearly right here in the present moment, because this is where it shapes its experience. So you want to shape it well. You don't want greed, aversion, and delusion to come in and take over. So you have to be vigilant; you have to be watchful. But to stay watchful for a long period of time requires that you feel at ease here, too.

Remind yourself the breath is your home. This is where you come back to all the time when you're here in the present moment. This sense of the breath coming in, going out: You know you've got a body because you can breathe. If you couldn't breathe, you wouldn't know you had a body. So settle the mind down in the present moment, because when you're here you can look at yourself carefully. You not only can look at the present but you can also look back at the past and look ahead to the future, learning lessons from the past and then applying them to your plans for the future. You can gain lessons in living with one another, so we have to learn.

The Buddha points out four good lessons that you've probably noticed in the past but it's useful that he points these things out, because sometimes it's so easy to forget. If we want to live together well with other people, either in a family or a group, it's important to have four qualities.

The first one is generosity: that you give of your time, give of your energy. You're not always thinking about what you can get out of things, get out of the group, get out of the relationship. You're also thinking about what you can put into it. This is an opportunity to be generous. This means not only giving material things but also giving your time, giving your forgiveness, giving your knowledge, giving fairness. It takes energy to do these things, which is one of the reasons why it's good to have meditation as a good background. Without generosity, you begin to wonder why there'd be a relationship to begin with. It's all about giving; it's all about sharing. That's the first principle.

The second principle is to speak kind words. This doesn't mean you go around just saying empty platitudes all the time. It means that you go out of your way to be kind and respectful to the other person as you speak to them. Especially when

you have something critical to say: You want to say it in a way that shows that you still respect the person. This means finding the right time, the right place, where there aren't a lot of other people around, when you have time to talk about things. That way, even though the words are critical, the other person senses that you have respect. And it's the respect that keeps the relationship going.

They've done videos of couples discussing minor irritants and then they slow them down so that they can see the micro-expressions that flit across the faces of the couples during the discussions. They've found that they can actually predict whether a couple is going to stay together longer by identifying the micro-expressions: things that are in broad daylight but we often miss. The micro-expression that kills a relationship more than anything else is contempt, looking down on the other person. So make sure that never comes out in your words or your expressions, that even when you're critical, you do it with kindness.

The third principle is genuine help. When you're going to help somebody, it's not for show or to make points. It's because you see that person really needs this help and would really benefit from it, and you're in a position to give it. That way, the other person really feels that you have his or her best interests at heart.

Then finally the fourth principle is consistency, which means two things. On the one hand, maintain the goodness that you start out with in the relationship. Try to be consistent with that goodness over the long haul. On the other hand, consistency means that the way you behave and speak to the person to his or her face is the same way you behave behind his or her back. When the word comes back that behind his back you said this nice thing, or behind her back you said this nice thing: That keeps the relationship going.

So make sure that any relationship you're dealing with that you want to last has these four qualities: generosity, kind words, genuine help, and consistency. This is what makes the relationship last because it makes it a good relationship to have: one that both sides feel they benefit from.