

Limitless Thoughts

December 20, 2003

Every evening before the meditation, we have that chant of goodwill: goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for the people around us. But it's not just a chant. We're trying to develop the attitude that goes along with the chant, really wishing for your own true happiness, wishing for the true happiness of the people around us. Because this is one of those thoughts that doesn't need to have a limit. However much true happiness you gain, you're not taking anything else away from anyone else. However much they gain, they're not taking anything away from you. It's good to be able to put the mind in an unlimited state by thinking of unlimited things like that.

The Buddha talks about greed, anger, and delusion as things that make a limit. *Pamana-karana* is the Pali term. As long as we allow greed, anger, and delusion to hold sway over our minds, we're limiting ourselves. Then there's a whole question of self identification: That too is a limit. The Buddha says that whatever you identify as your self, that's a limit on you. If you identify with your body, you're suddenly limited to your body. If you identify with your feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, you're limited by those things as well.

So as we're meditating, we're trying to strip away the limitations we place on ourselves, for those limitations are much more confining than the ones that other people place on us. We counteract these limits with limitless thoughts, starting with thoughts of good will or any of what they call the sublime abidings or limitless attainments. In other words, while your mind is dwelling on the idea of goodwill for yourself, goodwill for other people, you're not creating any opening for the limitations of greed or anger to come in to the mind. That way you help to open things up, open up the windows in your head, let the air come in.

That puts you in the right frame of mind for meditation, focusing on the breath. After all, why are you here just watching your breath coming in and going out, when you could be doing so many other things? It's because you want true happiness. You've seen the happiness of other things that the world has to offer, and it's not much. It comes and goes. Ajaan Suwat often liked to ask: The sensual pleasures you had last year, where are they now? They're gone. And what have they left behind? They've left behind a few memories. Sometimes they haven't left even that much behind. There's so much you forget. And of the things you do remember, what kind of memories are they? Either you miss those things and wish they could come back again, or you think of what you had to do in order to get those things, and sometimes there's regret involved in thinking of those things as well. A bad aftertaste. So you as you reflect on this, you realize that that's not the direction you want to go if you want true happiness.

Psychologists talk about how human beings really tend to forget around the issue of happiness. They've looked someplace for happiness, they didn't find it, but then they go back there and look again, they go back and look again, as if somehow it'll spring up. It's like the story about the man who was eating a whole

bushel of peppers and crying. People asked, "Why you are crying?" "Because they're so hot." "Then why are you eating the peppers if they are hot?" "I'm looking for sweet one." That's the way sensual pleasures are in life. You keep hoping that a sweet one will come along, one that will last, looking in the same places where you've found nothing but fleeting pleasures before. You forget that what determines the pain and pleasure in the mind, the stress and ease in the mind, the sorrow and happiness in the mind, comes from our actions. It doesn't come from things.

So as we're meditating, we're learning how to focus on our actions to see what we're doing, to see where there are slips in our awareness, lapses in our mindfulness that allow us to do things that are not in our best interest. This is why meditation focuses so much on developing continual mindfulness and alertness. These are the two most helpful qualities in the mind. And they're very basic: Mindfulness simply means keeping something in mind. That's a basic, basic skill. Alertness means noticing what you're going, and what's happening around you. We already have these qualities to a certain extent, but we've never fully developed them to see how far they can take us.

So as we're meditating, that's what we're doing: developing these two most helpful qualities in our mind. Keep the breath in mind and watch the breath, be sensitive to the breath. The more sensitive you are, the more you'll see, not only in terms of the breath, but also in terms of the mind. Because alert sensitivity requires being fully present, and also being very open to noticing what's coming in through your nerve endings. Think of all the nerves in your body opening up. Keep that picture in mind for a little while. Throughout the brain and all the way down to the feet, down the shoulders and arms, out to the hands: Think of your whole nervous system opening up. Then notice what you sense in terms of the breath, how the process of breathing feels.

In order to do that, you have to be fully present. In being fully present, you bring all of the mind along with you. When you're not really paying that much attention to the present moment, there are lots of little hidden corners where other things are going on, and they fragment your attention. But the more fully you can immerse yourself in the present moment, the less room there is for those hidden corners. This is why being fully sensitive to the breath also allows you to be more and more sensitive to the mind. The mind becomes more fully here so that you can observe it, so that you begin to watch it in action.

The Buddha's approach to dealing with the problems in the mind is not so much tracing things back to what you did as a child, as they do in psychotherapy. He has you focus more on looking at your habits right now, as they keep coming back again and again and again. You don't have to ask, "What happened when I was a child, why did this happen?" You just have to look at what you're doing, to see the unnecessary suffering you're causing yourself. Or you can keep an eye out for any lack of openness and honesty in the mind: What's that doing to the mind? Do you want to do that? Do you continue wanting to do that as you see the stress that it's causing?

Sometimes this may seem threatening, opening up these hidden boxes, but as you're dealing with the breath, working with the breath, making it comfortable, you're also developing an attitude of gentleness, being gentle with the breath, not forcing it too much, just allowing it to feel really good. And that gentleness,

as Ajaan Suwat used to say, is a paradoxical gentleness. The gentler you are with the breath, the more solid the mind gets. The more solid the mind is, the more you can really look into what's going on, with a gentleness that doesn't scare these things away, and a solidity that doesn't get swayed by them. That way you don't have to be afraid of the things that get dug up. You don't have to deal in denial. You can acknowledge, yes, there is that the mind. If it's something you can deal with right now, you do it. If you realize you're not up for that yet, well at least you know it's there. You can be confident that as you develop the meditation, you'll eventually develop the skills to deal with whatever comes up.

So watching the breath is a simple exercise, but it does a lot of good things for the mind. It puts the mind in a really good place, so that we can see what you're doing. We get into the present moment not because the present moment is a wonderful moment; after all, a lot of things that happen in the present are not wonderful at all. But the present moment is an important moment, because it's where we're making decisions that shape our life. Decisions that were made in the past are things you can't change anymore. They are done. Decisions that you're going to make in the future will depend a lot on what you're doing right now. So this is the most important place to be.

The world tells us that things other people are doing on the other side of the world are the most important thing going on. But you don't have to believe that, because your world is being shaped by your actions right now. You want to understand this process of acting. What does it mean for the mind to act? What's the difference between a simple event in the mind, the appearance of a feeling, and an action, the intention? How are intentions formed? What goes into that process? What kind of perceptions, what kind of questions do you ask yourself? What kind of contact in the mind and the body forces your decisions?

Often you'll catch yourself doing something, and you'll say, "Wait a minute, what did that come from?" The decision seemed to be made by itself, and little tiny things triggered it. That's what you've got to look into, so that you can be more sensitive and actually see the trigger. Often the trigger, on closer inspection, won't seem worth it. Why on earth did that trigger spark that intention, spark that action? This is probably one of the scariest things about our own minds: Our minds are shaping our lives, and yet we don't know how and why they're doing it.

As meditators, we're putting ourselves in a better position to see the how and to see the why, and get more control over what those actions are. But before you can see the movements of the mind, you have to be very still. This is how we get the mind into that stillness: focusing on the breath, being mindful of the breath, being alert to the breath. Try to immerse yourself in the breath as much as you can in the present moment. The more immersed you are, the more difficult it is to pull away and start wondering about someplace else. So allow yourself to be immersed totally in the body right here right now: breath coming in, breath going out, whole body breathing in, whole body breathing out. Aware of the whole body, the whole nervous system opening up, all your blood vessels, all the little tiny, tiny muscles in your blood vessels: allowed them relax so that the breath energy has a free rein to flow anywhere in the body at all.

This is a very immediate way of showing goodwill to yourself, because it's both a good place to stay and it's a process of developing the mindfulness and alertness you're going to need to learn even more as the meditation progresses.