

Goodwill First & Last

November 20, 2008

It's traditional to begin and end each session of meditation with thoughts of goodwill for all beings without exception. The purpose in each case is different. In the beginning, you start the meditation with thoughts of goodwill as a way of putting the mind in the right frame, in the right context to meditate. You want to pull yourself out of your own little personal narrative, the events of the day, and take a larger view before you settle down and look at the present moment. If you don't, it's very likely that you'll take your narrative into the present moment with you. If it's an unpleasant narrative, it makes the present moment unpleasant as well. If it's been a bad day and you sit down and try to get the mind into the present moment to stay with the breath and you find it doesn't stay with the breath: If you've been down on yourself in the course of the day, you get down on yourself even more. You're a miserable meditator. You can't do it. See? you keep wandering off the breath. More proof that you're miserable.

So a good way to break that connection is to start thinking a few thoughts of infinity, of all beings everywhere without exception. Like that character in *Through the Looking Glass* who says he likes to think of two or three impossible things every morning before breakfast: Think about infinity a couple of times a day. It changes your perspective. And you're actually following the pattern of the Buddha on the night of his awakening. The three knowledges that he gained, part of full awakening, follow this pattern as well.

The first knowledge was recollection of his past lives, all his narratives going back many eons. And notice: He didn't go from that knowledge straight to the present moment. The second knowledge had to do with all living beings. He'd seen in his first knowledge that he had gone through many lifetimes, in many different roles, many different levels of being. But that knowledge left some questions unanswered. Was he the only one who had those many levels of being? And why were there so many? Why were they so varied?

So in the second watch of the night, he inclined his mind to the knowledge of the passing away and re-arising of all beings everywhere. And he saw that everybody goes through this process of death and rebirth. Everybody changes roles, changes levels. If you look simply at the individual narrative, these changes seem to follow a very erratic course, up and down. The Buddha himself said that it was like throwing a stick up in the air: Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it lands splat in the middle. But it doesn't seem to have much rhyme or reason.

But as he saw things in the larger context, he began to see there was a pattern. People took rebirth in line with their karma, in line with their actions. And their actions were based on their views. People who had acted on wrong views, had no respect for the noble ones, tended to go to bad destinations. People who had acted on right views, who had respect for the noble ones, went to good destinations. So there was a pattern. The pattern was determined by view and intention.

And it was only after seeing the larger pattern that he was ready to focus on the present moment with in the proper terms—events in the mind viewed as causes and effects—and with the proper question: How do view and intention operate in the present moment? Is there some way that this knowledge can be used to put an end to suffering? In the third watch of the night, that's what he found. Looking at intentions as skillful and unskillful, looking at views as right and wrong, and applying those perspectives to the question of suffering, he discovered the four noble truths. He applied them, followed the tasks appropriate to them, and gained awakening.

So notice the pattern. It starts with his own narratives, moves to the larger picture, and then focuses in on the present moment. This is what we have to do as we settle down to meditate. You remind yourself that you're here for the sake of goodwill, for the sake of true happiness. And you realize you're not the only one out there who has to train his or her mind. Everybody has to train the mind. It's not an easy process for anybody. Some people may find it easier than others, but that's because they did the work in the past.

So taking this larger view reminds you of your intention for being here and it also reminds you that when things aren't going well in the meditation, you're not the only one for whom they are not going well. I've been counseling some people in a Dharma study program. And their experience with retreats up to this point had been that you go in, you don't talk to anybody, and you go home. So as you're sitting there in the retreat hall meditating, everybody else looks so calm and still, and yet you're fighting with your hindrances, with your defilements. You seem to be the only person who is suffering that way.

But when these people come on a study retreat, they get a chance to talk with one another and they discover that everybody goes through the same thing. Everybody has the same problems. And instead of being discouraging, it's actually encouraging. You realize that even though things may take a lot longer than you had hoped, the fact that they take long doesn't mean it's hopeless. It's the common pattern throughout the world. When you see the larger pattern and understand it, you're in a much better position to focus on the present moment with the right attitude, with the right sense of balance.

So spreading thoughts of unlimited goodwill help in this direction is a way of preparing you to settle down with the breath. Then actually being with the breath is a very good way of showing goodwill for yourself right now. There's enough suffering in life. You don't have to compound it by breathing in a way that's harsh, uncomfortable, or unhealthy. So you look at the breath and see how it's affecting the body in different parts: where the breath energy seems comfortable, where it seems strained, what you can do to make it comfortable throughout, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out, and all the way through all the different parts of the body. You start seeing which part of the breath cycle you push too much: Are you squeezing out breath energy too much as you breathe out? Are you making the breath too long as you breathe in? Notice how you relate to the different parts of the cycle.

Notice also how you relate to the different parts of the body as you breathe in, the different levels of breath energy in the body, because the breath enters the body at different rates. There's the breath coming in and out of the lungs, which takes a while it to fill the lungs. But there's also the energy that flows in the

nerves, which goes a lot faster. In fact, as soon as you've started to breathe in, before you even notice it, the breath has already gone through all your nerves—unless there's a blockage someplace. Some people say as they breathe in and try to get the breath to go to the different parts the body, they can't get it all the way down the body, say all the way down the legs by the time the lungs are full. That's because they're trying to force a harsh breath or a heavy breath down the legs, which is not actually good for the legs. Think of the breath in the nerves and the blood vessels as a lot subtler, a lot lighter, a lot faster. See how that works. You have to do a lot of experimenting because each of us relates to the breath in different ways, relates to the energy in the body in different ways. And so each of us has different habits we have to learn how to correct.

This is one of the reasons in the forest tradition the ajaans are sometimes seemingly so harsh with their students as the students are not observant about the little things going on in daily life. And the reason for this is that the ajaans want to make the point that you have to be very, very observant. If you can't observe the little things in daily life, you won't be able to observe the even littler things in the course of your meditation.

So that's what we're doing here in the present moment: exploring how the breath in the body feels right here in this world of the body right here, without reference to the world outside. Just this world of energy. The more you can get into it, the more you can get yourself immersed in it, the more you begin to notice the subtleties of the energy, the better. The body feels better. The mind gets more and more concentrated, feels less and less frazzled.

Which puts you in a good position at the end of the meditation to spread thoughts of goodwill again. This serves two purposes. One, it reminds you, when you leave the meditation, how you want to relate to other people. You want to relate in a way that's conducive both to your happiness and to theirs.

Two, the force of a concentrated mind can actually make that wish for goodwill more effective. I know many stories of people who've sensed when somebody's been meditating and spreading thoughts of goodwill to them specifically, and they realize it, they sense it. The power of a concentrated mind gives a lot more energy to the thoughts that you focus on as you are leaving meditation. So you want them to be thoughts of goodwill. They're good for you. They're good for the world.

So when you spread thoughts of goodwill at the beginning of the meditation, it's primarily for your own sake; when you spread them at the end of the meditation, it's primarily for the sake of others. But notice that "primarily": It's not exclusively just for you or just for them. When you show goodwill to others, you're helping yourself. And when you help yourself in the right way, you're helping others as well.

Try to make this a regular part of your meditation: at the beginning, thoughts of goodwill for everyone, everywhere; and as you leave the meditation, again, thoughts of goodwill for everyone, everywhere. This creates the right framework, the right context for the meditation. It keeps you on track. You find that good breathing helps with goodwill and goodwill helps with good breathing. This is a common pattern throughout the Buddha's teachings. It is possible to find a happiness that's good for you and good for others—the kind of happiness where everybody benefits. Internally this means both body and mind. Externally it

means both you and everybody around you. That's the kind of happiness we're working toward.