

Making a Difference

March 2003

Every night, we start the meditation with that chant on thoughts of goodwill. And you notice it begins with goodwill for yourself. Some people feel embarrassed about this, but it's based on an important principle. You can't feel goodwill for other people if you can't feel goodwill for yourself. This is where it has to start.

Once you remind yourself of your desire for happiness—and that desire underlies all your actions—that puts the meditation in perspective. Because the question is asked, "What kind of happiness? Where are you going to find it? What kind of happiness is going to satisfy you? What kind of happiness qualifies as true happiness?"

These are the questions that the meditation is going to address.

It aims at a happiness that's totally reliable and totally harmless, one that's not subject to change. It's going to found within. And how are you going to find it? Through your actions, your karma.

A lot of people have problems with the teachings on karma, but essentially this is what underlies the whole project we're undertaking here. What we do is going to make a difference. We can't be sure about the extent that what we do will make a difference in the world outside, but in the world of our experience, what we do shapes everything. And if we can train our minds, it will make a big difference in our lives.

After all, when you're asked to believe in the principle of karma, what are you being asked to believe in? One, you're responsible for your actions. There's no outside force like a god or the influence of the stars acting through you. You make your choices; you're responsible for them. Two, the quality of your choice comes from the quality of the intention underlying it. Three, the results of the action will depend on the quality of that intention. In other words, the practice is based on a principle that's under your control, a principle that you can learn to master.

There's really nothing difficult to believe in these principles. In fact, they're principles you *want* to believe. Otherwise, your happiness is totally outside of your control, dependent on other factors. Or else that there's no pattern at all to cause and effect—all of which would make life pretty hopeless. But if you're convinced that what you do makes a difference, and you can figure out how to make a good difference, then it makes a lot of sense to sit down here and meditate.

So you focus on your breath. When the breath comes in, know it's coming in;

when it goes out, know it's going out. As you do that, you have to bring some mental factors to the breath.

The first is mindfulness, just keeping the breath in mind. Remind yourself: This is where you want to stay. And make this your frame of reference. You can forget about the world outside for the time being. Focus on this world here, the world of your breathing, the world of your immediate experience in the body. Make that your frame of reference.

Thoughts that deal with other things: Put them aside for the time being. It's not that you're being irresponsible here, it's simply that the mind needs some time for itself, some time when it can put down all the cares and responsibilities of the outside world so that it can get itself into shape.

So, mindfulness here means remembering to stay with the breath in and of itself, right here.

The next quality is alertness: You actually know what you're doing right now. You know when the breath is coming in; you know when the breath is going out. You know when it's comfortable or not. This is important. If the breath isn't comfortable, it's going to be hard to stay with it. A lot of the meditation revolves around this one issue right here: learning how to be comfortable with the breath.

You can focus on the sensation of breathing at any spot in the body where it's easy to know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Choose a spot where it feels comfortable to be centered. It can be the tip of the nose, the middle of the head, the base of the throat, the chest, the abdomen.

When you find a spot that you like, then allow the breath at that spot to feel comfortable: comfortable coming in, comfortable going out, with no tension building up with the in-breath and no holding on to tension or pushing out with the out-breath. Just allow the breath to come in, go out, in a way that feels really good.

A third quality you bring is ardency: You're really focused on this. You pay attention. When you're with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. The more sensitive you are to detect the slightest little bit of tension or tightness and work through it, then the more comfortable the breath becomes, the more absorbing it becomes. It feels really good just sitting here breathing.

You can start exploring this aspect of what it means to have a body and what it means to sense a body from the inside. You can play with the way you breathe—in terms of its rhythm, in terms of its texture, whether it's deep or shallow, fast or slow, heavy or light. There's lots of room for experimentation.

When you get really sensitive to the breath, you begin to realize that it's a

whole-body process. Your whole nervous system is involved in each in-breath and each out-breath. Think of the breath coming in and out through the whole body, down through the nerves, out to every pore.

If you find yourself slipping away from the breath, then ardency means coming right back as soon as you notice that you've slipped away. And try not to get discouraged. It's common in the meditation that you suddenly find yourself someplace else, thinking about things in the past, things in the future. Don't worry about how you got there. Just drop it and come back to the breath.

No matter how fascinating or how important that other thought may seem to be right now, you can think about it later. Right now is time to get in touch with your breathing. You'll find that with practice you catch yourself more and more quickly, until you get to the point where you can actually sense the mind getting ready to leave the breath before it goes. Then just breathe in good and deep in a way that feels really gratifying to the body, and that will re-establish your mindfulness.

So these are the qualities you bring to the breath: mindfulness, keeping the breath in mind; alertness, being alert and sensitive to the breathing; and ardency, trying to make that sensitivity even more refined, more continuous.

So, as we focus on the breath, it's not that we're just getting the breath. We're also developing good qualities in the mind. These are qualities we need in all our activities: the ability to be mindful, to be alert, and to really be ardent about what we're doing.

These qualities allow us to be more and more sensitive to how the principle of action operates in the mind, not only in what we do and say but also in what we think. You get more sensitive to your intentions; you become more sensitive to your actions and their results. This allows you to get more and more skillful in how you negotiate life.

You can compare the meditation to physical exercise. You don't wait until your mindfulness is really strong before you meditate. You take what you've got and you work with it. The same way with your body: You don't wait until your body's strong before you start exercising. If you've got a weak body, you exercise your weak body and it gets stronger through the exercise. And when you've exercised it, it doesn't mean that you're strong only in a gym or healthy only in a gym. You take that healthy body out and you can do all kinds of work that you couldn't do before because you're stronger, healthier.

The same with developing qualities of the mind: As you work with them as you're staying with the breath, then when you negotiate other issues in life you find that you've got a stronger mind. More resilient. Clearer.

You've also developed the skill of learning when and when not to think. For most of us, our minds are constantly thinking, like a TV set left on all day long, sometimes all night long as well. No wonder we know no peace.

Or you can compare it to a knife that you use to cut things all day long without ever sharpening it, without ever looking after it. The knife is going to get dull.

But if you know how to give the mind a space to be quiet and think about just one thing, the breath, that allows it to rest, to get its bearings. Then, when the time comes to think, it's like a knife that's been sharpened. You see an issue that has to be thought about and—chop!—you cut right through it—because the knife is sharp, and the person using the knife is strong.

So these are important skills: developing your mindfulness and alertness; developing your ardency; learning to gain some control over your mind's thinking processes so that it thinks when you want it to think and it stops and is quiet when you don't need it to think. Give it a chance to rest.

Once the mind is more under your control, then the whole issue of the happiness that you're looking for in life becomes more manageable, because the major factor that's going to shape that happiness is the mind. When it's in better shape, more under your control, then it's not a traitor to your happiness.

All too often the mind seems to undermine whatever potential we have for happiness because it goes off thinking about things that are detrimental, and you can't seem to keep it under control. But if you develop these qualities of mindfulness and alertness and ardency, the mind is more under your control. It gets more skillful in how it manages the issues of life.

In this way, our desire for a happiness that's really true and reliable becomes more and more realistic, because we have the tools, we have the skills that are needed.

After all, it depends on us. We can't wait for the stars to deliver us happiness. We can't wait for some outside spirit to deliver us happiness. We discover it's something that we can work toward through our own efforts, through the skills that we develop: being generous, being virtuous, meditating. These are the skills that bring some rhyme and reason to our lives, and allow us to take seriously that desire we all have deep down inside that we want to be truly happy.

The mind wants peace, the mind wants security. These are things that it can work toward, things that it can bring about if it develops these skills.

So give yourself to the meditation. We've got an hour that we're sitting here. It's rare that you have a whole hour just to sit and watch your breathing. Allow the mind to have this sense of settling into the present moment, feeling at home

with the present moment, not being a constant stranger to the present moment. Use the breath not only to allow the body to feel good in the present but also to develop some good mental habits whose rewards will carry you beyond the present moment toward the happiness you want.