

Goodwill for the Breath

October 30, 2003

We start each meditation session with chants on goodwill, *metta*, to remind ourselves of why we're here. It's because we wish for true happiness. As the Buddha once said, wisdom and discernment begin with that question: What can we do that will lead to our long-term welfare and happiness? The whole teaching comes out of that question. We practice generosity, we practice virtue, as means for long-term happiness. We come to meditate, and it's for the same purpose.

So you want to do the meditation with an attitude of goodwill: goodwill for the people around you, goodwill for yourself, and goodwill for your breath. That's the object of meditation you're going to be working with. If you start out with an adversarial relationship to the breath, it doesn't go very far. The breath won't open up. If you push it around too much, you never really get to know it. If you don't do anything to it at all, just try to watch it without really getting to know it, all of your subconscious ways of dealing with the breath can go underground. They stay subconscious. You don't see them. It's by adjusting the breath, getting sensitive to how your mind interacts with the breath, and then learning to do it in a more and more friendly way, more sensitive way, so the mind and the breath get along together: That's how you come to know both the breath and the mind.

So, notice how the breathing feels as it comes in; notice how it feels as it goes out. Put aside your preconceived notions of where the breath comes in and where it goes out. Just notice: What does it feel like to breathe? Imagine yourself coming out of some other plane of existence and suddenly finding yourself in this body. What would the experience be like to someone with fresh eyes?

Then notice where the breathing feels good. Which part of the in-breath may feel like it's a little bit too long? Where do you begin to notice that it's too long or too short? How do you notice these things? The best way to learn is to experiment.

The same with the depth of the breathing, whether it's deep or shallow. Experiment to see what feels good just now. There may be times when you push things a bit too much, in which case you should back off a bit. Or sometimes if you're not experimenting enough, that can lead to problems as well. You don't learn as much as you could if the breath doesn't get as satisfying as it can. All of this is something you have to learn through trial and error.

The important thing is that you maintain that attitude of goodwill all the way through. You're not struggling with the breath, you're not trying to push it or

squeeze it into some sort of shape so that you can step on it and climb up to nibbana right away. It doesn't work that way. You have to go there together.

So you treat the breath with respect. You treat it with goodwill. You listen carefully; you watch carefully. As the Buddha said, to get to know anybody, one, it takes time, and two, you have to be observant. You get to know someone's virtue by living with them for a long time. You get to know their honesty by dealing with them over a long period of time. You get to know their resilience by watching how they reacted to misfortune or any undesirable situation. You get to know their discernment by how they approach questions.

In each case, the Buddha said that you not only have to notice these things, but you also have to be very sensitive, very observant, and watch for long periods of time. In the same way, we meditate for hours and hours and hours to get to know the breath. It's not the case that you breathe in once, breathe out once, and you know the breath. You have to stay with it over and over again. Feel your way. Notice the results.

This way, as you get on better and better terms with the breath, the breath begins to open up. Then you begin to see how the whole flow of energy in your body is very directly related to the mind. In fact, once you get sensitive to the breath, you often begin to notice things happening in the breath before you realize they're actually happening in the mind. The breath is simply reflecting them back to you. This is why the Buddha used the breath as his main meditation object and taught it in more detail than any other method. Once you give the breath some space to do its thing and you get to know it better and better, get more sensitive to it, it starts showing you many things about the mind that you didn't know before. That's because the energy flow in the body is very directly related to the mind.

If we tend to be in our heads an awful lot, we find that from the neck on down, things are kind of blocked out. Well, focusing on the breath is a way of opening up that block. As we do, we begin to realize that there are other areas of awareness that tended to get blocked off as well. As we're more open to them, we begin to see them more clearly. They're less subconscious. They're more brought into the light of day. Subtle little decisions, just a decision to focus on this or focus on that, close off this, close off that, ignore this, deny that: We begin to see them more clearly.

If you're honest with yourself, you can learn a lot here. You begin to see what you're doing to create unnecessary suffering for yourself. Why did you have to close off those areas of awareness? Because they were painful. Yet when we're working with the breath, and the breath feels stable, solid, soothing, where it's a really friendly place to be, you're in a position where you can explore those painful areas and not be threatened by them, not be overcome by the pain. There's less

denial; there's more openness. This way, that attitude of goodwill spreads throughout the meditation, leading up to discernment.

After all, if the Buddha didn't base his teachings on goodwill, on the desire for true happiness, why would he focus on suffering as his main issue? It's because he wanted to free himself and free us from suffering: That's why he focused there, so he wouldn't have to keep putting up with false happiness all the time. The problem with false happiness is that it turns so quickly into suffering and stress. It betrays us.

So we're taking our desire for true happiness seriously. We don't want a happiness that turns into something else. That's why you focus on the issues of suffering and stress. Even as you get into concentration, after a while you begin to see that there are subtle areas of stress in the concentration. Well, that's where you can begin to do your discernment work, figuring out exactly what it is that causes that suffering and stress. At that point, it's often so subtle that the word *suffering* doesn't seem to apply. It's just where you can detect inconstancy in the state of stable concentration and well-being that you've begun to depend on. You begin to see that even here there's a little bit of stress and disturbance. Well, what are you doing to cause it? What's going on at the same time? Look for that.

This is how concentration work goes together with insight work. Or how tranquility and insight work together to develop concentration and deepen it, at the same time bringing more insight about. So the two qualities go together, insight and tranquility. The concentration deepens them and is deepened by them.

Many of the forest ajaans make the point that when the path comes together in the mind, it's not the case that you can clearly divide concentration, tranquility, and insight apart from one another. They all come together. It's a stillness that allows you to see, and it's the clear seeing of even subtle stress that allows the mind to be more and more still.

So in this way you and your breath become friends working together. The breath becomes more comfortable, the body gets healthier, the nerves get soothed, the mind has a good soothing place to stay, a restful place to stay. The breath and the body have somebody looking after them.

You walk the path together with a sense of goodwill. Be friends with the breath. You're going to be living with it for a long time. The more you take a friendly interest in the breath, the more it's going to have to offer to you, the more it'll show to you, the more you can learn from it. But as with any friendship, it takes a certain amount of exploration. The breath is going to try you, test you as a friend. You have to be willing to be tested, to sit through some uncomfortable

periods so that you can get to know exactly what works and what doesn't work in the relationship. But if the friendship gets over those difficult periods, it'll become more solid—as long as the goodwill is still there.