Kindfulness

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As you train the mind, focusing on the breath, allowing the breath to be comfortable, trying to become friends with the breath, it's a very direct way of showing goodwill to yourself and to the people around you. Goodwill for yourself in the sense that you learn how to develop a source of happiness that comes from within. Your happiness is less dependent on outside conditions. And this is why it's an act of goodwill for others, in that this happiness doesn't have to take anything away from anyone else.

Now in the beginning, as you're learning the ropes, it's very helpful to have conducive outside conditions. As with any skill, you want to learn the basics with as few distractions as possible, along with a supportive environment, and helpful people to inspire you, to encourage you, to give you advice. So in the beginning, this happiness is very much dependent on conditions.

But as you get more and more skilled, you find that you can carry the sense of being well-centered—having an awareness that fills the body, that feels at ease with the body, feels at ease with the breath—into all kinds of situations. Where in the past you felt threatened, nervous, or ill at ease, now you have a solid center. You're grounded and you're taking care of the mind's need to feed.

It's something we don't often think about but it's an important question to ask yourself: Where is your mind feeding? What kinds of things is it looking for to give itself strength, to give itself pleasure, to give itself nourishment? All too often, you find you're feeding on the words and actions of other people, things around you. Inside, you find yourself feeding on greed, feeding on anger, feeding on delusion. None of these things are good, healthy food.

But as you feed on the comfortable breath, it's not just the breath you're feeding on. You're also feeding on the good qualities you're developing in the mind as you stick with the breath: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment, goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. These are all good qualities to develop. As for the word *qualities* here, it's best to think of them as habits you develop in the mind. That's because it's more useful to think of the mind in terms of what it's *doing* than in terms of what it *is*. In other words, if you think of your mind as a thing with particular characteristics—a narrow mind, a broad mind, a good mind, a bad mind—you find yourself stuck inside that particular characterization and it's hard to get out. But if you see it simply as a bundle of different activities, then an activity is something you can change. Just because you did something yesterday doesn't mean you have to do it again today. As you give the mind a better and better place to stay, a better place on which to base its activities—more solid, more reliable, more pleasurable—it's more likely to do the skillful thing because it's not so tempted to go out and get a quick fix, a quick bite to eat. That way you can trust your mind more and more.

This is probably the scariest thing in life: when you come across different situations where you sense that you can't trust yourself to do the skillful thing, where you're tempted to do something that's either harmful to yourself or harmful to others. But that's the way the mind is if it's dependent on conditions being a certain way. It behaves itself when things go well but not when they don't.

The Buddha once said he didn't trust the monks who behaved well only when there was good food, good clothing, good shelter, and good medicine available. As he said, he couldn't trust that they were really there for the practice. What would they do when the food wasn't so good or if there was a lack in the clothing, shelter, or medicine?

This is one of the ways in which the meditation is a gift to yourself: You learn that you can trust yourself more because you're more nourished and at ease in the present moment. You're more at ease with a greater

sense of confidence, stability, and strength. And this is a wellbeing that has no drawbacks. Especially as you develop the mind further and further, you ultimately run across something that's not conditioned at all, not even by inside conditions. That's what the practice is aimed at: a dimension totally free from suffering, totally free from conditions, pure, unadulterated, trustworthy happiness. That's quite a gift.

On top of that, you're not the only one who benefits. That's the other side of the practice: You're showing goodwill for others. All aspects of the practice share in this quality of being good for both sides. You start with generosity, which obviously benefits other people, but you benefit as well. The mind grows larger, more expansive, more able to include other people in your consideration.

The same with the precepts: You refrain from harming other people. That means you have less remorse to deal with inside. If you're going around intentionally hurting this or that person, and then you sit down and try to make the mind quiet, these things just pop up in your awareness. When they pop up, you can do one of two things. On the one hand, you can deny that they happened or that they were wrong or that that person was worth anything, all of which makes your mind more and more narrow and rigid. Or, on the other hand, you can just sit there overcome with remorse, which is like sticking a knife in an open wound.

But if you make a practice of going through the day resolving not to harm other people regardless, then when you feel tempted to say something that's hurtful or untrue, you just hold your tongue. That, of all the precepts—the one against lying—is probably the most important and the most relevant all the time. There are not that many situations when we're tempted to kill or steal. Illicit sex, maybe; alcohol and drugs, maybe. But controlling your mouth: That's 24/7, except when you're asleep.

As you exercise more restraint over your mouth, you're showing more respect for yourself. As Ajaan Lee once said, you should bow down to your mouth every day. You went to all the trouble of developing the perfections that allow you to be born as a human being. You have a human mouth. It's not like the mouths of animals, which can say only a few things. You can say all kinds of things, so you want to use that mouth well. Think of all the effort that went into gaining it.

So when you've been observing the precepts, sticking with them as a promise you make to yourself, then as you sit down and meditate, there's less remorse. Instead, you have a sense that you're living in the world in a harmless way, with a light footprint, and you find it easier to live with yourself. In this way, other people benefit, and you benefit as well.

Even more with the meditation: We're working to overcome greed, anger, and delusion in the mind. We're learning to make ourselves more self-reliant—which means that other people will be less subject to our greed, anger, and delusion, and we'll have to lean on them less. As we develop mindfulness, concentration, discernment, compassion, these things can't help but spill over into the way we deal with other people.

The Buddha once told the story of two acrobats. The master acrobat got up on the end of a bamboo pole—apparently they would stick these poles up vertically. He got up on top of the pole, had his assistant get up on his shoulders, and then told her, "Now, you look out after me and I'll look out after you as we do our tricks on the bamboo pole, and that way we'll come down safely." And she said, "No, that won't work. I have to look out after myself and you look after yourself, and that way we'll help each other keep our balance on the pole." In other words, by keeping your balance you're helping other people keep their balance. And the Buddha said that in that particular case the assistant was the one who was right.

But there are other cases where, when looking out after other people, you're looking out after yourself. As you develop kindfulness—excuse me, as you develop kindness and care in how you treat other people—you're benefiting yourself. As you develop goodwill, patience, and harmlessness in the way you treat them, you're benefiting yourself. As you develop good qualities in the mind as you meditate—persistence, dedication, mindfulness—you're benefiting other people as well. So this is why this is a special practice. You're developing a happiness that spreads around.

At the same time, this sense of wellbeing in the mind is what allows you to look at your actions in all fairness and see where they're skillful and where they're not. When the mind is feeling tired and hungry and

weak, it doesn't like to look at its mistakes—and as a result it's not going to learn from them. You're not going to learn from anything you won't look at. But when you can develop this greater sense of wellbeing inside, you can reflect with more fairness and greater sensitivity on the areas where your actions either harmed yourself or harmed other people.

This simple principle of looking at things in terms of actions and results goes very deep in the practice. As I said earlier, when you think about the mind, don't think about it as a thing or entity. Think of it as just lots and lots of actions. Look at the ways you think, the ways you focus on things, the ways you understand things, the ways you interpret things, the intentions you have, the ways you pay attention to things. These are all actions that might be skillful or not. As your sensitivity develops, you begin to see more and more where you're acting in an unskillful way, thinking, interpreting, or intending in unskillful ways. Because you're now coming from this settled place, you can begin to think more and more about how you can do things more skillfully. Keep doing this, and your sense of "skillful" will grow more and more refined.

Try to develop a sense of yourself as someone who's always willing to learn, especially from your mistakes. You don't beat yourself up over your mistakes. You try not to make mistakes so that you don't have the extra burden of looking back on blameworthy mistakes—i.e., ones where you knew better but went ahead with harmful behavior anyhow. But when you do make a mistake, you say, "Okay, that was a mistake. What can I learn from it?" You realize that beating yourself up extra hard is not going to compensate for something you did—and it's certainly not going to put you in a better position to do it skillfully the next time. The more you look at the events in the mind in this way, the more you see that what you thought were things or entities or inherent natures you couldn't change are actually actions.

Even your sense of self is a type of action. You identify with ideas, you identify with the body, you identify with your possessions, your relationships, your role outside in the world, and in each case that identification is a kind of mental activity. Because it's an activity, then the question becomes not, "Which self is the true me?" The question becomes, "When is the activity of having a sense of self skillful and when is it not?" You see that among the various selves you create, the ones that are more responsible, that are more careful, more willing to learn: Those are the ones you want to nurture.

In particular, the sense of self that's confident that it can do the practice: The Buddha strongly encourages you to foster that sense of self. The sense of self that wants true happiness: He says to honor that sense of self. Don't be a traitor to it. Heedfulness, restraint: These are all activities of wise selfing. They're things you want to develop.

As for the senses of self that say, "I just want my quick fix; I want my quick bite right now," those are selves you have to look askance at. Those are the ones you don't feed.

This is where the teaching on not-self comes in. You begin to realize that just because something comes up in the mind doesn't mean you have to identify with it. After all, there's a lot of activity in the mind that comes simply from the force of past kamma, your past actions. And that's not your kamma right now. Your kamma right now is what you *do* with those things. You have the choice to go with them or not. Try to make the most of that choice, because as you exercise that freedom, you find more and more what freedom means in the mind.

This goes deep into the meditation. You have to keep this in mind all the way to the most refined levels, because when the mind gets very still, very centered, very spacious, there's a strong sense of oneness, a strong sense that you've arrived at the ground of being, an awareness that doesn't seem to be touched by anything. It's very easy to mistake that for some sort of metaphysical principle, with the sense that "this is the way things are": "Being" with a capital B. But even there, the Buddha has you recognize it as a kind of activity. It's actually a doing.

As he once said, the highest state of oneness or non-duality is a sense of the non-duality of consciousness, a sense of knowing, knowing, knowing that permeates everything. It's a skillful state but it's not what we're here for because it's not the end of suffering. You have to learn to question it in terms of activities:

What were the activities that brought you there? What did you do, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or not, that gave rise to that? What are you doing to keep it going? Even though it's subtle, there has to be an activity to keep it going. Even just the perception, the label there: That's an activity. To what extent is that activity still stressful? Can you drop whatever's causing that stress? These are the questions the Buddha has you ask, looking at everything as actions, actions you want to do skillfully, actions you want to do or stop doing for the sake of putting an end to suffering.

In other words, this line of questioning is motivated by goodwill, motivated by compassion for yourself and for other people—always realizing that the more skillful you become in training the mind, learning how to act with more precision, more skill, more finesse, then the less you suffer—and the less the people around you suffer. You have more positive things to share.

As the Buddha once said, there are only two things he taught: suffering or stress, and the end of suffering or stress. To get to the end involves understanding the principle of action: what you're doing, where it's skillful, where it's not, what you can learn from where it's skillful and where it's not. That way, you can ultimately reach the dimension where suffering ends, or as the Buddha says, you see it with the body or touch it with the body. In other words, it's a totally full experience—it's not just something in your head—where your happiness doesn't have to depend on any conditions at all.

That's when you can trust yourself. You don't need to feed on anything outside anymore. You've got something so solid that it doesn't need to be nourished. And it doesn't depend on conditions; it doesn't depend on space and time. So it causes no harm to anybody at all. As with all aspects of the practice, it's a gift to yourself and to others. Once you've experienced this, you can speak with more confidence about what really works, how the mind can be trained, what's skillful in training the mind, what's not skillful in training the mind. You can trust yourself, and other people can trust you more as well.

So this practice is not only a gift, it's also something good to give yourself to—because it gives so much back. You look at the world and there are so many things that clamor for your time and attention. But if you ask yourself, "If I gave myself to that, what would I be left with?" And you realize: not much. But this is one training, one practice that more than lives up to its promise. So give it a serious try.