

# *The Gift of Meditation*

*January 6, 2011*

It's been two years now since Grandma passed away. We did a special chant for her just now, so let's dedicate the meditation to her as well.

When you dedicate a meditation for someone else, you start out simply by thinking of that person. As if you're talking to them, you say, "This is for you." That way, you're doing the meditation for both of you. It should be an extra encouragement to do it well. You're giving a gift. And of course, when you give a gift, you want to give something nice. You don't want to give something that's moth-eaten, dirty, or full of holes. In the same way, you want your concentration to be solid, smooth and continuous. Each time you feel tempted to slip off, remind yourself, "I'm doing this for someone else. So let's do it well." Then, at the end of the meditation, you make the same dedication, "This is for you. May you be happy. May you enjoy the happiness coming from the good that I've done."

After all, the goodness we do here as we practice doesn't have clear boundaries. You're not doing it just for yourself. You realize that, in training your mind, you're helping others. At least you're making their lives lighter. You learn how to take care of yourself and you're less of a burden on them. If you're able to say No to your greed, aversion, and delusion, then other people don't have to be exposed to your greed, aversion, and delusion, either. All of the goodness we do in the practice—in terms of generosity, virtue, concentration, discernment—is the kind of goodness, the kind of happiness that spreads around, that doesn't have clear boundaries—which is what makes it special.

As the Buddha said, when you look after yourself, you're looking after others; when you look after others, you're looking after yourself. There's no clear boundary. In other words, when you're kind to others, when you develop goodwill and you actually act on that goodwill, you benefit, just as the other people benefit. When you're focused on your development of mindfulness and concentration, other people benefit, too.

So think of meditation as a gift, both to yourself and to the people around you. This is a major misunderstanding that people have, that we're just here for ourselves, that we're selfish, parasitic, not doing anything for the world. But how much *can* you do for the world? And what are the best things that you can do for the world? We all know that we're suffering and there's a lot of suffering that comes from external conditions. But as the Buddha said, the suffering that eats deep into the heart is the suffering that we create for ourselves, that each of us creates for him or herself. So the best you can do is to learn how *not* to create that suffering, not to burden yourself down with it.

In that way, you're setting an example for others. If you're able to explain what you're doing—so that they can understand and apply that understanding—that's fine, too. But even without

that, the simple fact that you're showing that this is how it's done... Like the Buddha images here at the front of the room, sitting there showing how it's done. Sit with your legs crossed, your hands in your lap.

Then look inside. This, of course, is the part that you can't pull out to show other people. But they will see the effects, the fact that you're able to calm the mind down. When you're coming from a position of strength, you're a lot less likely to do unskillful things. Some people will sense that. And even if they don't consciously sense it, you're putting a different energy into the world, and that's of benefit as well.

So what are you doing as you calm the mind down? Often we talk about working with the breath, but sometimes you have to just let the breath go. It's going to do whatever it's going to do. You find a spot where you feel safe and secure, and just hold out there for a while and watch. Because it's only when the mind is really still and watching things consistently that you can see things very clearly, to detect precisely what's going on. To understand them more, then you might want to experiment based on what you've seen. You may notice that certain kinds of breathing are good. Can you recreate them? Are they good this time around? If nothing seems to work, well, just go back and be very quiet again.

You want to learn how to balance, on the one hand, the fact that you're going to be active, and on the other hand, the fact that you have to watch, to give things time to show their results. The Buddha talks about this in terms of the factors for awakening. Some of the factors are more active: analysis of qualities; persistence, which means right effort; and rapture. These things energize you. In other words, you analyze what's going on in the mind to see what's skillful and what's not skillful. If you see that something is skillful, you try to encourage it; if it's not, you try to discourage it. This means, on the one hand, if something unskillful has arisen in the mind already, you do what you can to let it go.

Then you try to figure out how not to let it arise again. This requires some planning: an aspect of meditation that many people overlook. If you know that you're about to face a difficult situation, apply the end of the meditation period to that. Say you're going to go into something difficult and you're probably likely to feel some anger or some lust or some fear or anything else that's unskillful. If you're addicted to certain kinds of behavior, you can ask yourself, "How does the mind give in, even though it knows that this is unskillful? What arguments does it finally get weak in front of, arguments with itself?" Then you can think of some good responses, some good counter-arguments. Can you find alternative sources of pleasure so you don't give in to that kind of behavior? In other words, you have to sit and plan for a while.

As for the unskillful things that already have arisen, you can let go of them.

Then there's the development of skillful qualities in their place. You work on your concentration, you work on evaluating the breath so that it gets more and more comfortable. This gives rise to a sense of refreshment.

These things are all energizing. They're the active side of the meditation. You need them for times when the meditation is getting dull and lifeless.

But then there's the other side. Sometimes the mind is overwrought, worked up, and analyzing things and trying to manipulate things just makes everything worse. This is when you have to be very still. Find a place that's relatively comfortable and just hang out. If the body's going to breathe, that's what the body's going to do. You don't have to get involved. Try to develop a quality of serenity, equanimity, concentration, patience.

Let things just settle down on their own. Because sometimes the mind is like a beaker full of water that's got impurities in it. If you keep stirring it around, the impurities are not going to settle out. But if you let the beaker sit there for a while, things eventually settle down. The impurities fall to the bottom or float to the top. In that way, the water gets clear, and you can see what's in there a lot more easily.

So it really depends on what the mind needs right now: whether you want to approach it from the point of view of being very still to begin with, to give it a chance to calm down before you work with the breath; or if you're feeling sluggish, do what you can to get things moving. You learn to read the mind's needs; you learn to read the body's needs in terms of breath energy.

This way, your skill becomes more balanced, and you develop a range of skills for dealing with different situations. Sometimes the situations are determined by events of the day, sometimes by the physical condition of the body right now. As a skilled meditator, you want to be able to have an approach for whatever the situation. It's like being a good cook. You walk into a kitchen and whatever's there in the kitchen, you can make good food out of it.

This means not having a doctrinaire approach to the practice. Learn to feel things out; get a more intuitive sense of what needs to be done, where the mind is out of balance and how you can bring it back in.

There's that passage where Sakka the deva comes to ask the Buddha a whole series of questions, and one of them is, "Is equanimity to be developed or not?" The Buddha says, "There are certain kinds of equanimity that are, and certain that are not." How do you know? You put them to the test. You notice, "Okay, when I practice equanimity in these situations, skillful qualities arise. When I practice equanimity in those situations, unskillful qualities arise."

In other words, you don't take a doctrinaire attitude that equanimity is what you need all across the board. You try to develop a sense of time and place. In this way, as you get more and more skilled, the mind does get into a better state—and more reliably into a better state—because you learn how to maintain your balance. When you maintain your balance, it's a lot easier on the people around you to maintain theirs. You're not falling on them all the time and pulling them down.

So just this ability to maintain your balance is a gift. It's like that image of the acrobats, one standing on the shoulders of the other. Each has to look after his or her own sense of balance,

and in that way they both stay safe. So finding your sense of balance is a gift. It's a gift whose effects ripple out, sometimes in ways that you might not expect.

So remember, you're doing this not just for yourself but also for other people. There are some times when you don't feel up to it, you feel a little bit lazy, but you do it anyhow. It's like that scene at the end of *Franny and Zooey*, where they remember how their older brother kept staying, "Well, tie your shoes, look good. Do it for the fat lady." They never found out who the fat lady was. Each kid in the family had his or her own ideas about who the fat lady was. The important point is always to remember that there are people who benefit from your skillful activities, both inside and out, even if you never find out who they are. If you're feeling a bit lazy about it, say, "Well, it's good for them. Maybe I'm not in the mood, but it'd be good for them." That gives you a little extra push, so that the gift you give is a really good gift, something you're proud to give.