

Analysis of Qualities

July 30, 2011

It's always good to start the meditation with thoughts of goodwill. Remind yourself that you do really want to be truly happy. That's why you're here. That thought helps to focus you. Where are you going to look for true happiness? You have to look inside. Every happiness based on things that you see and hear and smell and taste and touch and think about eventually has to change. If you place your happiness there, if you identify with those things, your happiness is going to have to change in ways that you don't want it to. So you have to look inside.

What's deeper inside than these things? That's what we're looking for in the meditation.

Fortunately, the path to that happiness doesn't require that we have to cause anyone else to suffer. And the happiness itself places no burden on anybody at all. So we're on a good path, going to a good goal.

One way of guaranteeing that we stay on the path is to spread thoughts of goodwill to others, too: people close to your heart, people not so close, and then spreading out into ever-widening circles. That thought helps to open up the mind. As the Buddha said, it's like a large river of water. If you put a lump of salt in the river, you can still drink the water from the river. It wouldn't be too salty because there's so much water. But if you had just a little cup of water and put salt in, you wouldn't be able to drink the water at all because there's so little water and so much salt. The same way if you carry around all your own personal concerns all the time: Any little pain can suddenly seem like a huge lump of salt. But if you think in larger terms, it makes the little pains a lot easier to deal with.

This also parallels the way the Buddha approached his own awakening. On the night of his awakening, his first knowledge had to do with his own narratives. But before he focused on the present moment in his third knowledge, he went through the second knowledge, where he thought of all beings. He pictured the cosmos as a whole. He saw everybody passing away and then being reborn in line with their actions.

It was because he saw the larger picture that he was able to see an important pattern that he could then apply to his experience in the present moment. Because if he had just focused on his personal narratives, there's a lot he would have misunderstood. As he said, sometimes you do good in one lifetime and then suffer in the lifetime immediately following. Sometimes you do bad in one lifetime and

in the next lifetime you enjoy something really pleasant. If you don't see the larger pattern, you wonder: Is there any connection between your actions and the results?

The same question applies to a lot of other issues in life as well. When you just look at yourself and are concerned about your own personal problems, your own immediate circle all the time, you miss some larger patterns. That narrative can start weighing you down. But if you can air out your mind by thinking about all beings, you've got the larger picture. It's a lot easier to come into the present moment with a sense of equanimity, with a sense of solidity, confidence that this is something you can do, and it's something important to do.

The chant we had just now on aging, illness, death, and action, is only part of the Buddha's recommendation for how to reflect on those things. He says you reflect not only that you're subject to these things—aging, illness, death, separation, and that fact you're responsible for your own actions and your actions are going to bear results—you also see that these facts apply to everybody: men, women, lay, ordained, old, young. They're universal principles. He says when you think about them just concerning yourself, it helps to give rise to a sense of heedfulness, that you really have to be careful of what you do. But if you think about them in reference to all beings, it gives rise to a sense of *samvega*. There's this huge ocean of beings, and they're all subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, no matter where you go. That, he says, helps to get you on the path, realizing it would be good to find a way out of it this ocean, out of this flood.

So when you've thought in these larger patterns, then you can focus in on the present moment. Look at where these floods are coming from: They're coming from the mind. You're more in the mood to look at them because it's not just you being responsible for your own mistakes, which sometimes is hard to take, especially if you're still wound up in some narratives about who's right and who's wrong in your life. When you see the larger pattern, you realize that everybody's doing the same thing. Everybody's suffering from the same patterns. This thought takes a lot of the personal sting out of what you're going to see, to see where you've been unskillful. And when the sting is gone, it's a lot easier to be willing to adopt some new patterns that are more skillful.

That's another thing that's good to think about with regard to other beings, people who have actually followed the path, and who have gotten benefits. You can think: They can do it, so can I. All those people in the past who were almost suicidal were able to turn themselves around and actually become noble ones, become arahants, to find true happiness, to find true freedom. It's something that any human being can do.

So it's good to think in these larger terms. It takes the sting out of your personal pains right now, out of your personal troubles right now. Especially when you look at the larger picture, not only in terms of all beings, but also in terms of the whole long stretch of time. This stuff has been going on for a long, long time. When you come at this with a sense of "enough," then you're really ready to settle down and see what's going on here in the present moment. What patterns in the mind need to be examined? Which ones need to be fostered? Which ones need to be put aside?

We use our breath as our guideline in the beginning. You make up your mind to stay with the breath, and as for anything else that comes in to pull you away, you can say: not now. No matter how good it may seem or how important it may seem for the time being you say, "No, I've got something else to do here." Then you realize that if you're going to stay with the breath, you're going to have to make it interesting, you're going to have to make it comfortable. Otherwise, just watching in, out, in, out, in, out gets pretty boring after a while, and you're going to start roaming around, looking for some way to find a sense of pleasure in the course of the hour here. But you can remind yourself: The breath can get very comfortable, if you give it space, if you give it time.

If you jump around too much, you're not giving things an opportunity to develop and grow. So one of the skills that you have to learn is how to hover around the breath and protect it. The Thai word *prakhawng* is one Ajaan Fuang used a lot. It's the same word they use when a child is learning how to walk. You walk behind the child and you have your hands out ready in case the child is going to fall. But you don't grab the child before the child falls. You have to let the child learn how to do its walking on its own. It's that same sort of gentle care—unobtrusive, but ready to step in when necessary: That's the quality you want to bring to the breath.

Take a couple of good, deep, long in-and-out breaths, and notice where it feels good. If it doesn't feel good, there are two ways you can work with it. One is to notice, as you're breathing in, at what point does tension build up in different parts of the body? Can you keep breathing in without that tension building up? Can you consciously relax it? If it's building up in your shoulders, relax your shoulders and still breathe in. See if that works. If it doesn't work, then you can change the rhythm of the breath, making it shorter, in short and out long, or in long and out short, faster or slower or heavier or lighter, deeper or more shallow. Notice what kind of breathing you like right now.

This is one area in the practice where you really can indulge your preferences. What kind of breathing would feel really good? What would feel very gratifying?

Which parts of the body could use some nice breath energy right now? Play around in this. Explore. Now, you may find that by following the kind of breathing that you really like right now, you set yourself up for some problems down the line, but that's a good thing to learn. You wouldn't learn it otherwise. You might get fascinated with the breath energy in one part of the body and overdo it. Or try to straighten things out in such a way that you start developing headaches, say, or a sense of tightness in the chest.

These are all good things to learn because you're trying to learn cause and effect. This is what makes the breath interesting. You begin to see that certain ways of focusing on the breath, certain ways of playing with the breath, have a really good effect on the body. Other ways don't. That way, you learn the principle of what's skillful and what's not by observing cause and effect. And you learn to make yourself a more reliable observer, which is what everything in the practice depends on.

We know in the discourse where the Buddha is talking to the Kalamas, saying not to just go by texts or reports or traditions or legends, which is the part that everybody remembers. But he also says don't necessarily go by your preferences, or what seems reasonable. You take what seems reasonable and you test it in your actions to see what kind of results you get. And that means, one, a willingness to experiment, and two, a need to make your mind a reliable observer, so that when you test something, you can actually trust the results you see—or trust your estimation of the results. This is why we have to work on mindfulness and alertness and our powers of evaluation, again and again and again: to sharpen them, make them more reliable.

So that's the main issue we're working on: putting the mind in a position where you can rely on it. As your powers of observation develop, you can apply them to subtler things—not just the breath, but whatever comes up in the mind. You begin to notice certain ways of thinking that you've held on to for a long time that are actually causing you stress and suffering.

And keep in mind the possibility you don't have to suffer. That's what that larger picture is all about. Because it's not just about thinking about all those beings in the world who are suffering just like us, but remembering that some of them found a way out. That possibility is there. What that means is that you don't have to suffer, no matter how bad things get. The suffering is optional.

If you find a particular way of thinking that's causing a sense of burden on the mind, ask yourself: What would it be like not to go with that thought? Sometimes it'll be easy to drop, and sometimes not so easy. Which means that there's a part of the mind that really likes that kind of thinking. It's got other agendas, or it's

hoping that that particular kind of thinking will bring happiness in the future. Or maybe there's a sense of obligation, that you've got to think in that way, you've got to worry about this, you've got to worry about that.

Remember that woman who came to see Ajaan Fuang, and, after two days at the monastery, was ready to go back home because she was concerned about the family at home. How were they going to get along without her? He told her: Just tell yourself you've died. After you die, they're going to have to learn how to get by.

So give yourself a little bit of that freedom right now. Learn how to take that perspective on your thoughts. Wherever there's stress, look for the cause and allow yourself to drop whatever is causing it. Allow yourself that freedom. Because that's really when you show yourself goodwill. And it turns out that you're really showing goodwill for others as well—even for the people for whom you are ordinarily responsible. If you're less weighed down by the responsibility, you find it actually easier to meet your genuine responsibilities when you have to. So learning to let go is a gift not only for yourself, but also for other people, too.

Try to keep this larger perspective in mind, because it helps you to deal with things a lot more skillfully, a lot more appropriately, however important or unimportant they may be.