

## *Practicing from Gratitude*

*July 27, 2012*

One of the traditional idioms for practicing meditation is “making an effort.” And key to making an effort is to want to do it. Otherwise, you find your mind drifting off, getting engaged in other things, and not really accomplishing anything through the meditation. In fact, part of the definition of right effort is that you generate desire. This is why Ajaan Suwat often said, when we would start meditating every evening, “Look at your mind and give rise to a sense of conviction, inspiration that this is something you really do want to do. If you find that your attitude is neither here nor there, think in ways that give rise to that sense of desire.”

One way of thinking that I’ve often found helpful is to think of all the help we’ve received from other people: from our parents in giving birth to us and training us, teachers, everyone who has in one way or another showed us something about the goodness of the human heart and has provided us with these opportunities. You look around you here in the monastery: Everything is the result of someone’s generosity—the land of the monastery, all the things that have been built in the monastery, all the activities that keep the monastery going. It’s all the result of generosity. And ideally the purpose of all that generosity is to give us an opportunity to practice. Anyone who wants to come and is sincere about the practice is welcome. There are no restrictions placed on what family you came from or what your background was. Everybody can come and practice if you want to practice.

That kind of generosity is hard to find in the world, so you want to carry it on. And one of the ways of carrying it on, of course, is by practicing. Actually, meditating is a gift. It’s a gift not only to yourself, but also to other people as well. When you think in these ways, it gives you a sense of inspiration. Here all that’s asked of you is that you train your mind through virtue, concentration, and discernment. These are the main things we focus on. This is how we train ourselves. All of these are a form of generosity.

The Buddha also talks about the precepts as gifts, in that we’re giving protection to all beings. You decide that you’re not going to kill anybody, not even little insects. No stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. Ever. Once you decide that these are things you’re going to avoid in all situations, and you carry through with that decision, it’s said to be a universal gift. You’re

giving protection to everybody. And then you have a share in that universal protection as well.

The practice of concentration is also a gift. Instead of looking for happiness in areas where you would have to fight other people off or where you gain something and someone else has to lose, you're looking for it in an area that's totally your own territory. It's your breath, the sense of the body that you feel from within. This is totally yours to explore and to exploit, in the sense of making the most of it.

So take this time to look at what you've got here. You've got the breath coming in, going out. It has an effect on all the different parts of the body, the way you breathe. So stop and take stock of that. How are you breathing right now? What kind of breathing would feel really good? Try a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths to see if that feels nourishing or energizing. If it does, keep it up as long as it feels good. If it starts feeling like it's too much, then you can calm down, make the breath shorter, more shallow, or keep it in long but out short, or in short and out long, depending on what you feel would be best for the body right now.

And notice where the feeling of the breath is most prominent. It can be anywhere in the body. Let your attention settle there, and take that as your guide for what's going to feel good. Think of the breath as nourishing that part of the body every time you breathe in. If there's any tension in that part of the body, allow it to dissolve each time you breathe out. If you find that there's a sense of well-being—it doesn't have to be overwhelmingly nice, just a reasonably good—let it stay there. Protect it all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. If you notice that you squeeze it in any way, or push it and pull it in any way, either with the in-breath or the out-breath, stop right there. See if you can breathe without the squeezing or the pushing or the pulling.

If you get distracted, just come right back. The more quickly you can come back, the better. Because a lot of your sensitivity to how the breath is going to feel in the body requires that you stick with it continually. It's like being an inspector in a factory. Say it's a cloth factory. The cloth is going past, past, past, and you can't allow your eye to leave the cloth even for a second because you want to make sure the whole cloth is smoothly woven. The more continual your gaze, the more refined the sense of the breath will become, and the more refined the sense of pleasure you get from it. It'll go deeper and deeper into the heart.

Then think of that sense of well-being spreading. You don't have to push it or pull it out, just think of it radiating out. You'll find it'll go more easily to some parts of the body than to others, so work with those parts first. Again, you're not

trying to force it too much. Think of things opening up, opening up, opening up, so that you can allow that sense of well-being to go through the body, down through the torso, down through the legs, to the shoulders, out through the arms, out to the fingers, up through the head. Think of the whole body having a share in that sense of well-being.

As you stick with this and explore this enough, you'll begin to realize that there's a lot right here in the breath that you haven't been taking advantage of. Going out, looking for pleasure outside, is like someone who has a really good piece of land but tries to plant crops in somebody else's land: There are bound to be problems. Turn around and look at your own piece of land right here. Take care of that. See what you can grow right here. And you'll find not only that you will get a great sense of well-being, but it also begins to spill out for other people as well through your thoughts, words, deeds. Your sense of well-being here makes it a lot easier for you to act in skillful ways. You're not so hungry for things that are going to cause trouble.

The Buddha often talks about the sense of nourishment and fullness that comes from sticking with the breath like this as food for the mind, food for your effort, for that desire that you start with. If it just stays as desire and is not properly nourished, it's going to wear out. But as you feed it properly, you realize that if you stick with this, there are rewards. And that makes you want to do it even more. The mind can settle down and get a great sense of stability, solidity right here. Then you find, further, as you protect this state of concentration, that as the mind goes off into its ordinary pursuits, you begin to see more clearly which of those pursuits are actually skillful and which are not, which give rise to needless suffering and which are actually part of the path.

This is where discernment begins to grow out of the concentration. As you protect the concentration, you begin to see what destroys it, what levels of stress or suffering you add to your life. Some people say they don't have any suffering in life, but I don't know anybody who doesn't admit to having stress. Well, the stress that really weighs down the heart is the stress that you impose on yourself, often unintentionally, almost always unintentionally. As a general rule, we tend to desensitize ourselves to that. We think that is just part of the way that things have to be, so we put up with it. But once you discover that you can find this sense of well-being inside, you begin to realize that some of the things you've put up with you don't have to put up with anymore. And fortunately, the things that really weigh down the mind are things you do to yourself. So you have the choice to weigh yourself down or not.

This is how discernment begins to grow out of concentration. And, as the Buddha said, as your discernment gets more and more refined, it can begin to dig deeper and deeper into the mind, until it gets down to the roots of what's causing all this trouble inside: what the Buddha called *asava*, and we can translate as effluents. These are things that come flowing out of the mind: greed, aversion, delusion, flowing out of the mind. Our desire to be this or that: That comes flowing out of the mind. Discernment, when it's fully developed, as the Buddha says, can cut these things, cut the flow, and the mind is no longer flooded by suffering. This, too, is a gift you give to yourself that you also give to the people around you. Because those effluents, when they flow out, don't just flow into your mind. They also flow out through your thoughts, words, and deeds, the impact you have on other people.

So learning how to cut these things is part of the way of repaying some of your debts. They say that the person who has totally cut the defilements of the mind has no more debts to anyone, anywhere. In fact, one of the motivations for practicing is that the more you practice, the greater the rewards that come to the people who support your practice.

So that thought of gratitude with which we started the practice goes all the way through. It's like a thread that connects the practice of generosity, virtue, concentration, discernment, all the way to the freeing of the mind. After all, these are forms of goodness that don't have limitations; they're forms of happiness that don't create borders and boundaries. If your happiness depends on material gain, status, or praise, those are things that, when you gain them, someone else loses them, and that creates a boundary right there. But generosity, virtue, concentration, discernment, the release of the mind: Nobody loses, so these things don't have boundaries. This is why the practice is in no way selfish at all. It's a huge gift.

So this is one of the ways of giving a sense of inspiration, a sense of gladness in what we're doing here. It's one of the ways in which we repay our debts. We create more and more goodness to share, because the goodness of the world: Where does it come from? It comes from within the mind that's trained. And the world certainly needs a lot more goodness. Here's your way of providing it. Always try to maintain your sense of being inspired in the practice, because it's the best thing you can do.