

Cleansing the Mind

April 12, 2015

Today we had the water blessing. And as I mentioned, water doesn't clean the mind.

Good actions clean the mind: words, deeds, and particularly the three teachings the Buddha has on right mental conduct. It's good to keep these in mind. They're a foundation for the meditation, a foundation for the practice.

They're mentioned in a sutta where a brahman comes to see the Buddha and asks about brahmans who can wash away your sins.

The Buddha doesn't mention it in that context, but there's a fine poem in the Pali Canon where a slave woman is going down into the edge of a river one night to get some water for her mistress. She sees a brahman bathing in the cold water at night and asks him why he's doing that. He says it's to wash away his sins. She has a great line: "If the water of the river could wash away your sins, then all the turtles and fish and crocodiles in the river would go to heaven, too."

When the Buddha's talking to the first brahman, he teaches three types of conduct for the mind: lack of inordinate greed, lack of ill will, and right view: "making your views straight," he calls it.

How do you develop lack of greed? Part of it is the practice of what's called empathetic joy. You see that other people have good things and you're happy for them. You see them doing good things and you're happy for them. You're not envious; you don't want to take what they've got.

The word for empathetic joy, *mudita*, has lots of other cognates in the Pali language. One of them is *anumodana*, which is what the monks do when they chant at the end of a meal or at the beginning of a meal after a donation: expressing happiness not only for the fact that other people have things but also that they're doing good things.

This is an attitude that's really worthwhile to develop. You see other people being generous, you see other people being virtuous, you see other people meditating, and you're happy for them. You'd like to encourage them. That's what the *anumodana* is for. It's an expression of encouragement and empathetic joy.

When the Buddha talks about the various levels of concentration you can get into, there's one passage where he says that *mudita* can get you into the third *jhana*. Goodwill can get you into the first. Compassion into the second. But the happiness of seeing other people doing good things in the world can get you even higher, into the third.

So when you see them reaping the results of their good actions, you want to be happy for them. It's an attitude that's often hard for us to develop. A lot of our society is based on envy.

When they used to have those TV shows, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," they wanted to make you envious of other people so that you'd aspire to the same sort of things.

Like that cartoon in *The New Yorker* where people are walking along a city street. Each one has a stick rising up from his backbone up over his head (or her head) and a string dangling down in front of the face, and a carrot on the end of the string. Off to the side is a guy in a convertible sports car driving down the road looking very happy. Everybody else is looking pretty miserable.

Our society makes us focus on things we don't have, the things we lack, to spur us on to work harder. But the Buddha has us spur ourselves on with goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy. Empathetic joy's not to make you feel lazy. You see other people doing the good things leading to happiness, and that should be an inspiration for you to do the same things as well. You're happy for them, for their good deeds, their good merit. And you realize if you're going to have anything good in life, it's going to have to come from your own actions.

Now, the desire to gain wealth in that way, the Buddha actually doesn't criticize. He calls it *utthana-sampada*, being consummate in initiative. It's one of the bases for happiness in this lifetime.

The kind of greed he's talking about that has to be cleansed out of the mind is the greed where you see somebody else has something and you want what they've got, and you're willing to do any kind of thing to get it. That causes so much strife in the world, so much trouble. And it's a blemish on the mind, something you want to wash away. So you wash it away with empathetic joy.

Will you wash away with goodwill. Stop to think when you're wishing goodwill for someone: What are you wishing? You're wishing that they understand the cause for true happiness and they act on them to the point where they get results. Is there anyone out there for whom you cannot feel that?

You might be able to think of a few people. You'd like to see them squirm a little bit before they finally get on the path to true happiness, after all the evil they've done. But the Buddha didn't condone that attitude. There was the case of Angulimala, who'd killed hundreds of people. The Buddha had compassion for him, was able to teach him the Dhamma, and Angulimala was able to escape a lot of the bad karma that would have come to him if he'd continued his ways.

A lot of people, however, were not happy for him. They wanted to see him suffer first. They would throw things at him when he was on his almsround. But

you want to ask yourself, “Do you want to be the type of person who throws things at an arahant?” If not, try to develop goodwill even for people who’ve been really evil. May they change their ways.

So stop and think if there’s anybody out there who for whom you cannot feel goodwill. It’d be good to cleanse your mind of that attitude right now. Take yourself patiently step by step by step to the point you can say, “I hope this person would understand the causes for true happiness and act on them.”

When you can think in that way, you become a more trustworthy person. There’s no sense that you have to get back at somebody or settle a few scores. When you have this attitude, then you can trust that no matter who you deal with, you will deal with in a skillful way. This is what you want to be able to trust: that you’ll act skillfully regardless of the circumstances.

You have to maintain your sense of honor. You might say, “Well, because so-and-so did something bad, that gives me the right to do something bad in return.” But that kind of attitude is what tears the world apart.

The attitude that can have goodwill even for people who are doing evil, so that when you’re dealing with them you can trust yourself: That’s what keeps the goodness in the world going.

If you had to wait for everybody to be good before you’d treat them well, we’d all be at each other’s throats pretty quickly. Goodness has to start *here*. And you have to decide it’s going to start with you. If you can have this attitude, it cleanses the mind.

Finally there’s straightening out your views, looking at things in terms of karma: that what you do will shape your future as it shapes the present moment.

Now, karma’s not tit-for-tat. You’re not going to have to go through and pay all your old karmic debts before you can gain awakening. But a certain type of action will lead to that type of result.

If you know that you’ve got some bad karma in the past, this is when the Buddha has you develop two things: One, as he says, is your ability to not let your mind be overcome by pleasure or pain. This is a quality we want to develop in the meditation: that we learn how to deal with pleasure and not get overwhelmed by it. We also learn how to deal with pain and not get overwhelmed by it. When you’ve got the mind trained in that way, then you can take anything that comes your way.

Secondly, you spread goodwill, develop all the brahmaviharas, so that the mind is limitless.

The image that the Buddha gives is someone who’s in debt. If the debt collector comes and it turns out you’ve got lots of money, the debt collector can

take that amount of money and you don't feel any problem. If you have no money at all, though, the debt collector will throw you in jail. So you develop goodness in the mind right now, and that helps to counteract the effects of past bad karma.

These are the three ways of cleansing the mind that form a good foundation for the meditation. They remind you of why we're sitting here learning how to deal with pain, why we're sitting here learning how to deal with pleasure, why we're trying to find a happiness that's blameless. Because a happiness that comes out of greed or ill will: There's a lot of blame with that.

Realizing that in mastering our actions and developing skillful karma: That's how we get out of that blame. It's one of the reasons why we're meditating. It's good to keep in mind, because we cleanse the mind in this way. We can live in the world in a clean way.

As you look around you, you find that that's something really hard to see. So be a good example for yourself and for other people around you. It's one of the ways in which you can show your appreciation for the goodness that's been done to you.

And you want to pass it around even more to the world.