

A Healthy Attitude Toward Happiness

November 1, 2015

It's been a long day, in two ways. One, because of the time-change: many of us got up early. Actually, we had a really nice extra hour to meditate.

The other, of course, is because of all the activities from the Kathin.

So after a long day like this, our minds need some refreshment. They need to be gladdened, as the Buddha put it. So first refresh the mind with some really refreshing breathing.

There's nothing else you have to think about right now, nothing else you have to do. Just sit here and breathe. Try to be fully conscious of the breathing so that you can get the most out of it.

We tend to think of breath as just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but there's more to it than that. There's the whole energy-flow throughout the body. When you breathe in, energy flows down the nerves, energy flows through the blood vessels. In areas where there's tightness or tension, the breath energy doesn't flow very well.

So try to go through the body right now and see where it's tight, where it's tense. Let those parts of the body relax. Try to gauge how straight your posture is. If it's leaning over to the left or the right, or leaning forward, try to relax any of the muscles that are causing it to lean. Bring everything into alignment.

Then pose the question in the mind: "What kind of breathing would feel really good right now? What kind of breathing would replenish the energy that you've been spending today?"

See how the body responds. If it doesn't respond, you can force the issue a little bit. Try long and deep breathing. Think of the breath energy going deep down inside: down into your bones, down into the middle of the brain, working through any tension that might be lurking there inside.

If that feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't, you have all kinds of other ways of breathing you can test: in-long/out-short, in-short/out-long, in-short/out-short, deep or shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow. See what kind of breathing refreshes the body right now.

As for gladdening the mind: Think of all the good things that were done today —things you did, things other people did.

This tradition of having merit-making ceremonies like this where people practice generosity all for a common cause, is a tradition goes way back in Buddhism. We're carrying on a tradition that goes back thousands of years, where

people are getting together for a good purpose. Instead of getting together to argue or whatever, we're getting together to work together on a project that feels worthwhile. Everybody pitches in; it's all volunteer.

There are two words in Pali that are very closely associated: There's *mudita* which means empathetic joy, where you're happy for other people's happiness and you're also happy for your own happiness. And there's *anumodana*, which is when you express your approval for something, especially when someone has done something good. The words come from the same root: The *moda* and the *mudi* are related roots.

It's a quality of seeing happiness and being happy for it, approving of it. Your ability to appreciate other people's happiness is going to help your ability to appreciate your own.

It's not infrequent when people come to meditate that they gain a sense of pleasure from the meditation and they don't feel that they're worthy of it. They feel they don't deserve it. To get past that feeling, they should look back on their own attitude toward not only their own happiness but also toward other people's happiness. If you resent other people's happiness, then it's going to be hard for you to feel that you deserve happiness. The question of deserving gets in the way.

When the Buddha was teaching, as in that passage we chanted just now on how to put an end to suffering, there was no question about how this teaching was only for people who don't deserve to suffer. The path to the end of suffering is for everybody, for all kinds of suffering, "deserved" or not. The question never comes up in his teachings—simply the question that people are doing things that cause suffering, and everybody would be better off if we learned how to stop. It would be better for us, better for people around us.

So it's good to stop and develop an attitude of empathetic joy for all the goodness that people have done and *anumodana*: thoughts of approval for the goodness that people have done. That allows you to relate to your own happiness in a healthier way.

Because an important part of the meditation is giving rise to a sense of well-being. In Pali, well-being and happiness and pleasure and ease and bliss are all the same word: *sukha*. This is a quality we need to develop if we're going to stay here in the present moment and learn how to watch our minds. We need it because the more you get to know what's going on in your mind, the more you're going to see things that you don't like. If you don't have a sense of well-being to give you strength, you're going to recoil. You're going to pull away. You won't want to see those things, which means there will be huge blind spots in your mind. Blind spots don't help with the arising of discernment and they don't help with learning

how to see what you're doing wrong and how you can correct it.

So try to develop a healthy attitude toward happiness, a healthy attitude toward a sense of well-being right here. It's not that hard to develop. Learn how to breathe in a way that feels really good and you find that you're carrying around your own little air-conditioned room inside: When it's hot outside it's air-conditioned inside. When it's cold outside, it's warm inside. In other words, you have a sense of well-being that's resilient and doesn't depend on things outside. That's a really valuable treasure.

Otherwise, when things outside go up and down, your happiness goes up and down. You become a slave to those things. But if your happiness is independent, that gives you freedom.

So it starts with little things like this, just learning how to breathe in a way that feels really good. This is going to require continued attention.

The three qualities the Buddha recommends for this are mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness means keeping things in mind—in this case, remembering what you're here for. You're here to stay with the breath. And if you've learned any particular techniques that work, have those ready at hand so that if any issues come up, you have some idea of what to do.

Alertness means watching what you're actually doing and seeing what results you're getting. And if the results aren't good then you can change.

That's what ardency is about: You try to put your whole heart into doing this well.

In other words, you remember what you should be doing and then you look at what you actually are doing, and then you put your whole heart into bringing what you are doing in line with what you should be doing.

The shoulds here are taken on voluntarily. Like so much in the teaching, this path is a voluntary path. That's why when the Buddha teaches generosity, which is where the path begins, he emphasizes the voluntary part. This is why in the activities today, everything was voluntary.

The duties you take on when you meditate are voluntary, too. Your duty with regard to suffering is to try to comprehend it. Now, the Buddha doesn't say you *have* to do this. He says only that if you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you've got to do. This is just how things work.

If you don't comprehend the stress and suffering you're creating for yourself, how are you going to be able to get past it? You have to understand it first, to see what it is that you're doing that's causing it, and also to see just exactly what it is.

When the Buddha talks about stress and suffering, he starts with a list of things we all know: the stress of aging, illness, death, of not getting what you want,

of having to be with things you don't like, of being separated from things that you do like. These are all things we know.

Then he boils it down to five clinging-aggregates. We hear that and it sounds very strange. The word aggregate—*khandha* in Pali, or *khan* in Thai—just means “groups” of things. They're activities that we do over and over again, that we feed on. That's what the clinging is.

We feed on these things because we hope to get pleasure from them. But the way we feed actually gives us a stomach ache. It actually leads to suffering. We feed on our sense of the body, we feed on our sense of pleasure and pain. We feed off our perceptions, the labels we put on things. We feed off the thoughts we put together. We feed off our awareness of these things.

And simply the fact that we have to be feeding all the time creates a lot of stress, because the things we're feeding on don't last. So we have to keep looking for new sources of food all the time.

What we're trying to do here is to teach the mind to find something deep inside that doesn't need to feed. That goes against the grain because all we know is feeding, either physically or mentally, emotionally. Because this is the only way the mind seems to know how to function, we're not willing to pull away and say “Oh, there must be something better.” At least it's hard to imagine something better.

But when you see the stress and suffering you're causing, when you get to the point where you feel that it really is too much, you've really had enough, that's when you're willing to look these processes until you comprehend them.

When you comprehend them, that's when you can let go of the cause because you see what's causing all this: It's your thirst for sensual pleasures, your thirst for sensual thinking, your thirst to be this or be that—or once you've got something or you become something you don't like it, your thirst to destroy that identity so you can take on a new one.

It's when you see how these different kinds of thirst are related to your suffering: That's when you can abandon them, which is the duty with regard to the second truth.

You do this by developing the path so that eventually you can realize the cessation of suffering.

These are the duties we take on: comprehending, abandoning, realizing, and developing. We take them on voluntarily because we see we've had enough suffering in life and we want to find a way out. Nobody's forcing us to do this. The only thing that forces us is simply the weight of suffering in the mind, the weight of stress that we cause ourselves but we don't have to.

Ajaan Maha Boowa's defines stress and suffering as basically anything that puts

a squeeze on the heart—when your heart is feeling squeezed by the way you’re living, the way you’re acting. You may not realize that it’s because of the way you’re acting. It just seems that life puts a squeeze.

It’s a hard problem to solve if you say, “Life is suffering,” or “Life is causing this.” After all, what is the alternative? But if you realize, “Okay, these are individual actions I’m doing that I don’t have to: That’s the good news of the four noble truths, the Buddha’s teachings on suffering.

Years back, I was at a commemoration for Ajahn Lee. Every year they would have a large Dhamma talk at the end. They’d either invite a senior monk from Bangkok or they’d invite one of the great ajaans from the forest to give the closing talk.

That year it was the turn for the senior monk from Bangkok. Everybody was there in the hall, waiting for him to come, when the phone call came that he was stuck in traffic: He wouldn’t be able to make it in time. So he said to have somebody else get up and give a talk.

So they got one of the forest ajaans to get up, who talked about how Buddhism is all about suffering, that’s its big topic. After he finished, the monk from Bangkok showed up, so they invited him to give another talk. And what he said was, “Buddhism is all about happiness.”

And they were both right. We focus on the issue of suffering because the Buddha found a way to put an end to it, to find a true happiness through our own actions. It’s because of our own actions that we create suffering but we can learn how to put an end to that suffering through our own actions.

And as the Buddha said, the kind of happiness he found is genuine health, genuine well-being for the mind.

So all these things are connected: the ability to see someone else happy and be happy for them; to recognize where that happiness comes from—true happiness comes from doing good things; approving when other people do good things; and learning how to approve of yourself when *you* do good things.

All of this gives you the sense of well-being inside so that you can take on this issue, when you’re suffering, of: Why are you causing it? What are you doing? How can you stop?

These are all the issues that come with meditation. Get the mind comfortable in the present moment so that it can see itself clearly in the present moment and sort all these problems out.