The Wisdom of Equanimity

June 2, 2016

Every evening, before the sit, we spread thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity to set the stage for the meditation, to put us in the right frame of mind, to remind ourselves of our motivation and why we're carrying that motivation out in precisely the way we are.

The first three—good will, compassion, and empathetic joy—are of a piece.

Goodwill is essentially a wish for happiness. And the more you think about it, it's a wish for true happiness: a happiness that doesn't change, a happiness that's not blameworthy, a happiness that doesn't cause any suffering to anyone else. And as you think about *that,* you realize that that kind of happiness has to come from within. And because it comes from within, your true happiness doesn't have to conflict with anyone else's. At the same time, as you think about true happiness, it reminds you that one of the tests is that it has to be harmless. Any pleasure that causes anyone any real harm is not the happiness you want.

Compassion is what goodwill feels when you see that people are suffering, or doing things that will lead to suffering. You want to help, if you can, overcome the suffering, or to help them stop doing the things that are going to lead to suffering.

Empathetic joy is what goodwill feels when you see that people are happy or are doing things that would lead to happiness. You're not jealous of their happiness. You're not resentful. And you're not resentful of people doing things that will lead to happiness. We see this all around us. It's something that people don't like to talk about it, but I've seen a lot of cases like this. Someone does good and someone else gets jealous of them, or resentful. If you really have goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others, you can't let that resentment have any purchase on your mind.

So those three all come in a set. They're basically expressions of goodwill in different circumstances.

Equanimity is something else. Now, it's not just acceptance or just indifference, which is sometimes the way people interpret equanimity. Look at the words of the reflection: "All beings are owners of their actions. Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir." It's a recognition of responsibility, and it's a recognition of cause and effect. This is one of the reasons why equanimity is said to be the highest of the brahmaviharas, because, to be skillful, it requires a large element of wisdom. It's a particular kind of acceptance. And it's a particular kind of indifference.

The acceptance here is that if you want happiness, you've got to do things to find that happiness. You accept the principle that your actions make the difference between whether your goodwill will actually be brought into reality or whether something's going to get in the way. The indifference is indifference to ideas that would look for happiness in other ways, aside from your own actions—such as depending on some outside power or some outside being to come and do things for you. You have to be indifferent to those ideas, because they lead nowhere.

So right acceptance is not simply accepting the status quo. It's accepting that there's a principle of cause and effect at work in the status quo. And if you want to change the effects that you experience, you've got to change the causes: what you do. This is what it comes down to.

This is why we're meditating. Meditating is something you do. You make up your mind that you're going to stay with the breath. Try to reinforce that intention each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, that this is where you're going to stay. Then you figure out that as long as you're staying here, you might as well make it a pleasant place to be.

Last night, two of us were on a plane. We were in the worst seats in the plane. It was one of those planes that has engines bolted right on the fuselage. Whoever thought that idea up was not thinking of the people inside the plane. We were in the very back seat: no windows; the engines roaring in our ears. And it's possible to make yourself miserable in a situation like that. But it's also possible not to be miserable. You can say, "Look. The engine is there. There's nothing you can do about that." What you can do something about is how your mind is processing all this. Any thought that comes up that would complain, you just put it aside. Any thought that comes up that stabs at you, you put it aside. And you figure out that even though the engine is making noise and you're hemmed in, you can still breathe. You can still breathe in a way that's comfortable.

This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath: to have a sense of creating a space in the present moment where it's a pleasant place to be for the hour, because the more pleasant it is, the easier it is for your mind to stay here, to settle in. And it's the nature of the mind that it needs a place to settle.

There's a teaching in the Dhammapada that there is no happiness other than peace. Sometime it's translated as, "There's no happiness higher than peace." But the actual statement is, "no happiness other than peace." Now, many of us could probably think of some unpeaceful ways that people are happy. But you look at the nature of the happiness of the mind, and it's that the mind can rest someplace and not be pushed out. When we start identifying with the parts of the mind that

push out, that complain about this, want this to be different, want that to be different and are upset about things: When those parts get what they think they want, then they think that they're happy.

But the actual nature of the mind is that if nothing like that is pushing it, it's perfectly content to stay. And it feels good to stay, to stay with one thing. So you're creating a pleasure for the mind, cleaning away the things that would push you away from the present moment, from being with the breath. This includes uncomfortable ways of breathing. It also includes complaints that the mind makes about the breath.

Here it's important to make a distinction.

You will be evaluating things and figuring out: "This breath is not comfortable. That one is not comfortable." But you don't take it simply as a dead-fact, i.e., one that just sits there. You ask yourself what can be done. This is equanimity in action, together with your goodwill for yourself. It's a combination of the desire for happiness and the realization it's going to have to be done through cause and effect.

Now, if there are things you can't change in the present moment, you chalk that up to your past karma. Tell yourself, "Okay, this is an area that I have to work around." And a lot of the wisdom lies in figuring out which is which: Which are the things you can change? Which are the things you can't change? Of course, the best way to figure that out is to try changing things here and there; seeing what works, what doesn't. That gives the mind something to be interested in as well, because there is a part of the mind that likes to figure things out.

This issue of being here in the present moment: What does it mean to be here? How do you do that? After all, there is a sense in which there's an awareness that's in the present moment all the time. There's another part of your awareness, though, or other parts of your awareness, that seem to jump into little thought bubbles that go into the past and the future. How do you let go of the thought bubbles and bring out that part of the awareness that is always grounded right here? Connect that with the breath. And then protect it. This is the activity of meditation. You've got a quiet spot, but you also need a part of the mind to protect it.

I was talking to a botanist the other day. He was talking about how every plant, in order to be healthy, needs to have one area of the plant that's in what he called quiescence. It's not doing anything. But from that part in quiescence, the different parts that the plant develops come out: the flowers and the petals and the stamens and the leaves and the what-not. They come out of this part that's in quiescence. And the plant has to protect that quiescence. There's a lot of activity

that goes on in the plant to protect that quiescence, because if it doesn't, the plant loses its integrity. It loses its strength. The quiescent part then forgets what it's all about. It stops functioning. From that, you can make lots of analogies with the mind.

You get the mind quiet with the breath and part of the concentration is going to be spent in maintaining that quiet area, fending off the little thoughts that might come nibbling at the edge of your awareness. So the quiescence needs some activity surrounding it to protect it. And mindfulness is one of those activities, remembering that this is what you want to do. If you let go of that memory, you lose your focus. You lose your purpose. And the integrity of the mind begins to get frazzled. The mind loses its vitality, just like a plant whose quiescent center has forgotten that it's supposed to be quiet.

You're here to remember that you want to be quiet. So even though there is a little bit of activity in the remembering, that's what mindfulness is all about. Without that, the quiescence would be gone.

So learn to protect what you've got. If you see any things that are going to come up and deflect you from the breath, do what you can to deflect them back. It's in this way that you bring all of those brahmaviharas into being. Your desire for true happiness is right here, as is your equanimity, i.e., your realization that there are certain things you've got to accept in the world of cause and effect so that you can learn which causes to manipulate to get the happiness you want.

Acceptance isn't just saying, "Well, I'll just be okay with whatever comes up." Acceptance means, "I accept the fact that there are causes and effects governing my life. And I have my hands on a lot of the levers. So let's make sure that I've got my hands on the right levers and I'm pushing them in the right direction." Because of the main principle of cause and effect—that skillful actions lead to pleasant results; unskillful actions lead to unpleasant results: If this didn't work out, we'd be totally up the creek. There'd be no skills that we could develop. We wouldn't know who to depend on; what to depend on.

There's a strange passage at the end of one of the suttas where a king who has killed his father comes to see the Buddha and asks him some questions about the holy life. The Buddha gives one of the longest, most detailed, and most elaborate explanations in the Canon. As the king is sitting there listening to this amazing Dhamma talk, all he can think of is, "I really regret that I killed my father." So he confesses the murder to the Buddha, and then leaves.

The Buddha then remarks to the monks, "If the king hadn't killed his father, he would have become a stream enterer right there. But because he killed his father, he cut himself off at the root." The sutta then ends, saying, "And the

monks delighted in the Buddha's words." Now it seems kind of evil, their delighting in the fact that this king has wounded himself spiritually. But that's not what they're delighting in. They're delighting in the fact that cause and effect really do work. It's a principle that bigger than we are: bigger than kings, bigger than devas. But we can learn how to make use of it so that it can bring us the happiness we want.

This is why we're here to meditate. We're learning to be more skillful in the causes of the mind so that the effects become the effects we aspire to: an end to suffering.