

Large-hearted Goodness

October 2, 2018

When you settle down with the breath, and the mind is willing to stay here watching the breath consistently, making it smooth all the way in, all the way out, it's food for the mind. And it's good food. It's food inside, not food out in the world. You get a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, of being soothed by the breath when you need to be soothed, energized when you need to be energized, relaxed when you're tense. There are a lot of ways the breath can bring things into balance in the body. And the sense of well-being that comes with that comes with a good intention, one that's aimed at a blameless sense of comfort and ease. It's a good place for the mind to stay, a good place for the mind to feed.

Otherwise, it goes feeding out in the world. And when you start feeding out in the world, you run into conflict with other people. The Buddha says that before he began his quest he had a vision of the world: It's like a stream drying up, filled with fish fighting one another over the little remaining water. Of course, the water is going to run out and the fish are all going to die anyhow, yet they keep fighting. He said he looked everywhere in the world and he couldn't find anything that wasn't laid claim to. Where was he going to find a happiness that he didn't have to fight other people for? Then he realized that the problem lay within the heart, but that the solution also lies within the heart as well.

What we're doing right now is one of the beginning steps in the solution: learning how to feed off of the sense of well-being that you can create inside as you watch the breath, adjust it here, adjust it there, figuring out what kind of breathing feels good right now. Then, as the needs of the body change, you keep up with them. Think of that sense of well-being spreading through the body. Think of it going down the spine, going down the legs, down to the tips of the toes, the spaces between the toes. And going down your arms, down to the fingers. Starting in the middle of the chest right at the heart and then going down through the stomach and the intestines. This is good nourishment, because you don't have to fight anybody for it. It's right there, it's free, and it's very immediate. When you get familiar with the breath and the different ways of breathing, you find that you can provide yourself with whatever you need—in terms of being soothed, energized, whatever. You don't have to depend on outside things for your well-being.

This is one of the ways in which you lift yourself above the world. As long as we're still looking for food in the world, we're under its power. The mind becomes

a slave to the world, a slave to craving. And as the passage just now said, the world is really insufficient.

There's another passage where the Buddha said that even if it rained gold coins it wouldn't be enough for the needs of the heart, the desires of the heart for the kind of food that the world can provide. But if you provide the mind with the food that comes from concentration, the food that comes with discernment, the heart will achieve a state of satisfaction, a sense of enough that the world can never supply.

So this is where we look: We look within. And we try to maintain this quality of the heart. Don't let the world come in and smother it. You need this independent source of food because otherwise you keep going back to the food offered by the world, and then the world can order you around.

The Buddha has some images for the mind that's learned to find a satisfying sense of well-being inside. One of the images has to do with discernment. He says it's like being up in a tower looking at people down below. You've got your food up in the tower, so you don't have to fight them for their food. You see them fighting and it's sad, but at the very least you're not involved in the fights. The mind is lifted up above them.

The Buddha also compares the mind that's well-fed with the Earth, with a large river like the Ganges, and with space. And here the images have to do both with the qualities of goodwill that you try to maintain for the world and with your powers of patience and endurance.

The Buddha prefaces these images with the story of a woman who had a reputation for being mild and good-mannered. And she had a slave who was very good at her work. The slave began to wonder, "Is my mistress really mild-mannered on her own? Or is it because my work is good? Why don't I test her?" So she started waking up later in the day. The woman scolded her for waking up late, and the slave said to herself, "Ah, yes. There is anger present in my mistress. How about if I test her some more?" So she woke up even later in the day and then later in the day, until finally the woman who owned the slave beat her over the head with a rolling pin. So the slave went outside with her head broken open and called to all the neighbors, "Look, ladies, at the handiwork of this woman who you thought was so mild and good-mannered."

The Buddha told this story as a lesson. You want to learn how to make the goodness of your heart something that's not dependent on other people's goodness. Otherwise, when things outside don't go well, then the goodness in your heart gets destroyed. And it's especially destroyed by the unkind words of other people. We want other people to like us, we want them to respect us, and

when they don't, it bothers us. Well, we've been feeding on their words. As Ajaan Lee says, when they say bad things to you and you feed on them, it's as if they've spit something out on the ground and you pick it up and eat it. Then you get sick but who are you going to blame? *You* were the one who picked it up and ate it. The fact that there's bad food out there doesn't mean you have to eat it. This is why it's good to have this independent source of nourishment inside.

The Buddha went on to give a series of similes. He said you want to make your goodwill as large as the Earth. People can come and spit on the Earth and urinate on the Earth and dig in the Earth and try to make it be without earth, but the Earth is just too big. Their efforts seem puny in comparison. You want your goodwill to be *that* large. Even when people say unkind things, you simply remember that this is the way human speech is in the world: There's kind speech and there's unkind speech, well-meaning speech and ill-meaning speech. When people criticize you, sometimes it's with good intentions, and sometimes they just want to criticize you to be nasty. That's just the way human speech is, so don't take it personally, and don't let it have an effect on your goodwill.

Because after all, we have goodwill for other people both for their own good and for ours. It's for our good in that we realize that if we don't have goodwill for certain people, we're going to behave in unskillful ways toward them, and then that's going to be our karma. So we have goodwill, wishing their happiness, both as our own protection, to make sure we keep creating good karma, and as protection for them.

The Buddha went on to say, "Make your goodwill as large as the River Ganges." People can bring a torch and try to burn it up but it's not going to burn away. The River Ganges will put out the torch.

And make your mind like space. People can try to write things on space, but there's nothing there to catch their words. When people say things to you, think of your mind being like space—that what they say just doesn't stick. There's nothing in the mind to catch their words. If you let their words stick and you take them home and think about them, again, you've gathered up what they've spit out and you're taking it home to feed on. So don't let it stick to begin with.

Then finally, he says, even if bandits were to pin you down and try to saw off your arms and legs with a saw, if you had ill will for them then you wouldn't be following his teachings. To follow the Buddha's teachings even in a situation like that you'd have to have goodwill for the bandits and then from them spread it out to all beings. Why? If they've got you pinned down, there's nothing much you can do to prevent what they're doing, but you *can* make sure that your mind doesn't do anything unskillful. After all, you don't want to be reborn through the power

of ill will, because it would create a miserable birth for you. You want to make your mind larger than the events of the world to ensure it doesn't have to be pushed around by the world. So as the Buddha says elsewhere, protect your goodwill as a mother would protect her only child. See it as that precious to you.

So these are some perceptions to hold in mind to maintain your well-being. We've talked about the power of perception in shaping your experience. As the Buddha said, if you can keep the image of the saw in mind—that even if people were sawing your limbs off you should have goodwill for them—then if someone says something nasty to you, you can tell yourself, “At least they're not sawing my limbs off!”

There was a monk one time who was going to go to a savage part of India, and so he first went to take his leave of the Buddha. The Buddha asked him, “You know, the people there are really savage. What if they say nasty things to you?”

The monk said, “Well, I'll think that these people are very nice and civilized in that they're not hitting me with their fists.”

“What if they hit you with their fists?”

“I'll say to myself that these people are nice and civilized; they're not hitting me with stones.”

“What if they hit you with stones?”

“I'll say these people are nice and civilized in that they're not stabbing me with a knife.”

“What if they stab you with a knife?”

“I'll say these people are good in that they're not killing me.”

“What if they kill you?”

“I'll tell myself, 'At least my death wasn't a suicide.'”

And the Buddha said, “Okay, you're ready to go there.”

In other words, it's the perceptions you hold in mind, the ways you talk to yourself, that can make all the difference in the world.

But you want to put yourself in a position where you can hold these perceptions in a sincere way, and talk to yourself in a sincere way. This is why we try to develop this sense of nourishment inside, so that we don't have to worry about the words of other people, the actions of other people. We can see that they're a lot smaller than the state of our minds, because our minds are well-fed and strong from their independent source of food inside.

This is how we enable ourselves not to be overcome by the world, how we can maintain our goodness no matter how bad the world behaves. It's too bad that the word “goodness” is something you rarely hear nowadays. A while back I looked up the word “goodness” on Amazon to see what kind of goodness they were selling.

And it was all cookbooks: baked goods, cakes, pies, cookies, that kind of thing. That's the kind of goodness we have now in our world. But the Buddha's offering something much better, the goodness of the mind, the goodness of the heart. He says that when you develop this kind of goodness and give it a good foundation, then even when the body dies your goodness doesn't die.

That's when your mind is lifted up above events. Things happen that you like, things happen that you don't like, and in neither case do they have to leave an imprint on the mind. Think of your mind as being like space, large like space, unaffected by anything, because you've developed this inner nourishment that's more than enough to sustain you.