

Brahmaviharas at the Breath

April 13, 2021

I came across an interesting Dhamma talk by Ajaan Suwat in which he reverses the usual order for spreading thoughts of goodwill. He says, “First you start with other people.” You’re planning to sit down to meditate; you don’t want thoughts of issues from the day to get in the way of your meditation. So you clear the decks, remind yourself: You’re here to have no ill will for anybody.

If any thoughts of ill will come up in the course of the meditation, you’ve prepared for them. You’ve thought about the matter. What does ill will accomplish? Nothing at all. The desire to see somebody else suffer: Part of the mind may say, “It’ll be good for them, teach them a lesson,” but how many people really respond well to suffering, to pain?

The usual reaction is to find a scapegoat outside. That doesn’t help. What you want is for them to understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. No matter how impossible that thought may seem in the case of some individuals, at least *you* have that attitude toward them.

That’s the best way out of a lot of the suffering in the world. You don’t have to settle scores. Because if you start tracing back, who knows where things started?

There’s a famous story about Somdet Toh. A young monk came to see him one time, complaining that another monk had hit him. Somdet Toh looked at him, and said, “Well, you hit him first.” The young monk replied, “No, he just came up and hit me out of nowhere.” “No, you hit him first”—back and forth like this. The young monk got frustrated and went to find another senior monk, to complain about Somdet Toh. The other monk came and asked Somdet Toh what that was all about, and Somdet Toh said, “Well, obviously he’s got some kamma with that other monk in the past.”

But then, of course, the question of who hit whom first: That’s really unanswerable. You could trace things back over many, many lifetimes, and you’d lose track of who’s playing which role. The whole idea of settling a score becomes meaningless. It’s better to tell yourself, “The best way to get out of that back and forth is to just get out”—with goodwill.

“And then,” Ajaan Suwat would say, “you turn the goodwill on yourself.” As you’re sitting here meditating, just think of it: You’re sitting here learning how to breathe in a way that feels really good. Have some goodwill for the breath, goodwill for yourself. Be happy when the breath is comfortable.

When it's not comfortable, show some compassion. Try to figure out why it's not comfortable. Are you putting too much pressure on it? Are you focusing in the right place or the wrong place? What perception of the breath do you have in mind? Is there a perception that can make things easier?

I've talked about the perception of the body as being like a sponge, where the breath can come in and out of the body from all directions. You're aware of the whole sponge, and there's nothing in the way.

You could also remember that, of the various elements in the body, the breath is first. So if it runs into a pain, don't think of the pain as being able to block the breath or to hem it in. The breath was there first. The breath can penetrate anything.

If there's a feeling of pressure someplace in the body, that's not breath; that's the blood or the lymph being pushed around. Those liquids run up against the solid walls of the blood vessels or lymph vessels, which is why there's pressure. The breath is different: It can flow between atoms. Hold that perception in mind. See if it helps make the breath easier.

In other words, you don't just sit there with an uncomfortable breath. You try to figure out what you can do to make the breath better. That's how you show compassion for yourself.

Then, when the breath does go well, you stick with it. "May you not be deprived of the good fortune you have attained": Think that. You've got the breath going well now; stay with it, protect it, hover around it. That's empathetic joy.

And then there's equanimity for times when nothing seems to work. Now, that doesn't mean you give up. It means that if you're going to figure out a solution, you need to be very calm about the whole thing, and not get upset. Keep your mind on an even keel. Remind yourself that we all have kamma.

Maybe there are some times when nothing seems to work. So, what do you do? You take your safe attitude, which is: You're going to watch; you're going to learn. That attitude can help you through a *lot* of difficulties. Remind yourself, after all, that someday you're going to have to die, and ideally you're going to approach death with equanimity, too. Accept the fact of what's happening, but realizing that there's work you can do. You don't just give up at that point. There are choices that will have to be made, and they'll have long-term repercussions.

So you want to be able to make the mind as calm and as steady as possible, and then watch, to see if you can catch something you never noticed before: about the way you're breathing; about the way you're talking to yourself; about the perceptions you hold in mind, the way you relate to your feelings—all three forms

of fabrication. The Buddha lays them out as a list of alternatives: bodily, verbal, mental fabrications. If something's going wrong, it's with one of these. Which is it?

If you've run through your repertoire of different ways of breathing, different ways of talking to yourself, and different perceptions to hold in mind, and nothing seems to be working: Watch. And be okay with watching for a while.

You learn a lot of lessons about the brahmaviharas in this way. One of the most important ones is that equanimity is not giving up; it's for when you don't see a solution to a particular problem, and you realize have to watch it to see if there's something you haven't seen.

That attitude is useful all around. If we simply want things to be the way we want them to be, there's a lot we're not going to see. All we see are our desires and the things going against our desires. You have to remind yourself that there's a lot you don't understand. And how are you going to understand those things? Well, you watch and you pose a few questions in the mind.

This is what the Buddha's teachings are good for: They give you some ideas for good questions. His teaching was not the sort of teaching that tried to nail things down for you, or give you potted answers to every question. There are things you're going to have to learn, and you're going to have to learn how to learn. And you start out by asking questions. You get some idea of which questions are useful, and which ones are not.

Learn to ask some unexpected questions, like—when there's a pain that seems to be in the chest—“Is it *really* in the chest?” What if it's a pain in the back that you've gotten mislabeled? What would happen if you relabeled it?

When the breath comes in, “Does the breath energy come in or is it just the air that comes in?” The breath itself doesn't originate outside. The breath energy originates in the body. Can you switch your focus to see where it emanates from, and to make sure that it doesn't run into any restrictions as it spreads through the body?

And how are you relating to the breath? Breath instructions often begin by saying, “Watch the breath.” But that can create some problems. Tell yourself, “Don't watch the breath. Feel it. Wear it. Bathe yourself in it.” After all, you're dealing with proprioception, the body as you feel it from within, and the breath is not in front of your eyes. If anything, it's behind them. So back into the breath. See what that perception does.

The watching does involve some experimenting and asking yourself, “Is there something I haven't seen before? Is there a question I haven't asked?” Be very quiet, and remind yourself: We're not here to have a pleasant meditation all the

time; we're here to have meditations where we learn. And if you can learn from when it's pleasant, that's fine. But if you can learn from pain or from a mind that's not willing to settle down quickly, that's even better. It means you can take the right approach no matter what, as long as you have this inquisitive attitude. And that goes along with the equanimity.

If you have this inquisitive attitude, you're a moving target. The pain can't get you, or at least it can't get you quite so easily. If you just sit there and take it, take it, take it, you're simply putting yourself in the line of fire.

That's another lesson you learn about equanimity: It goes along with being inquisitive. It's not, "I don't care." It's, "I don't understand, and I want to find out." *That* kind of equanimity will take you far.

So you learn a lot of lessons about the brahmaviharas by applying them to the breath as you're sitting here. You bring lessons in from outside, then you gain more lessons inside, and you can take those lessons out and apply them outside as well. The benefits go all around.