Care & Feeding of the Mind

July, 2001

Start out with thoughts of goodwill for yourself. Just tell yourself, “May I be happy.” It’s a good thought to think. Remember, it’s not a selfish thought. If you can’t wish for your own happiness, there’s no way you can wish for anyone else’s happiness. So it all has to start here. Remind yourself that the kind of happiness you want is true happiness, not the kind of happiness that changes into anything else. That means it’s a happiness that has to come from inside. What does it mean to have a happiness that comes from within? In the very beginning, it means learning how to look after your own mind. Not having to depend on things outside to put yourself in a good mood or to stop your worries or to stop any anxiety or any sadness. You have the skills you need to take the mind when it’s in a bad mood or when it’s sad or when it’s worried or anxious and learn how to put it back on the right track. So we’re working on a skill for the mind here. The skill is based on the fact that the mind is like the body has a food that it feeds on. It needs nourishment. In this case, its food is the things that it preoccupies itself with. You probably notice that sometimes you get stuck on a thought that just eats away at the mind, has you worried for hours and days on end. And when you finally can shake it off, you find that the mind feels really weak and exhausted. That’s because it’s been feeding on bad thoughts. It’s feeding on bad food. It’s feeding on junk food. It’s feeding on things that are poisonous. So we have to learn to turn around and bring the mind to something that’s good, something that’s nourishing, like thoughts of goodwill. When you feel goodwill for yourself, then you turn around and feel goodwill for the people around you, and from the people around you to people in all directions, out as far as you can think. May they all be happy, too. That kind of thought is nourishing for the mind. Then after you give it a good mental thought, you actually show goodwill for yourself. It’s not just wishful thinking. You learn a skill for putting the mind into a good mood and making it feel happy and well here in the present moment. That’s why the next step is to focus on the breath. Just be aware of the breath coming in, going out, and how it feels. Does it feel good? If it doesn’t feel good, you can change it. If short breathing feels tight or constricted, you can try longer breathing. Or if long breathing feels wearisome, you can try it a little bit shorter. You can make the breath deep. You can make it shallow. There are all different kinds of ways you can breathe. Here you are sitting here with nothing to do but breathe. There are no other responsibilities right now. Just stay with the breath. So it means you’re free to breathe in a way that’s as comfortable as possible. No one can force you to breathe in a way that’s uncomfortable, and yet you allow yourself to do that. It’s a sign that you haven’t yet mastered the skill of looking after yourself in a very simple, very basic, very direct way. This is what the meditation is for. It gives the mind something good to think about, something nourishing. After all, the breath is the basic energy in life. Without the breath, the body and the mind wouldn’t stay together. They’d have to go their separate ways. So the breath is what keeps everything together, keeps everything going. It’s your basic energy, and it only stands to reason that that basic energy feels good and nourishing. It’s going to be good for the body. It’s going to be good for the mind. The trick, of course, is to keep your mind with the breath. It means two things. One, keeping it in mind. That’s called mindfulness. And the other is just watching it, being as sensitive as you can to how the breath feels. That’s alertness. And then there’s a third quality that they recommend, which is called ardhansi, which means two things. One, as long as you’re with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how it feels. Any way the breathing feels uncomfortable, any way that it feels tense, you change it as quickly as you can. The second meaning is that if you notice that you’ve wandered away from the breath, you come right back. You don’t get discouraged. You don’t get upset. You don’t go wandering off sniffing at the flowers and looking at this, that, or the other thing. There’s work to be done. Important work. Learning how to look after your mind, learning how to take care of your mind. The world teaches us how to look after our bodies. But there’s very little training on how to look after the mind yet. That’s the most important training there is, because the mind is the source of all your happiness and sorrow. The way the mind deals with events makes all the difference between whether you’re going to suffer or whether you’re going to be happy. It’s the mind that makes choices of what you’re going to do. Again, that comes back to you as pleasure or pain. So the most important thing in life is learning how to look after your mind. Mastering the skills that are needed to keep the mind in good shape, keep the mind happy. You start with very simple, very basic things. It’s simply the ability to keep something in the mind, the ability to watch something. That’s about as basic as you can get, and yet it’s something we tend to overlook. It’s like playing tennis and not keeping your eye on the ball. You get distracted by other things, and as a result, you can’t play tennis very well. It’s the same with the mind. You lose track of the breath, you lose track of how the mind really is in the present moment, and that leaves an opening for all kinds of dangers to happen. So try to make friends with the breath here in the present moment. The more you get to know it, the more you realize that it can do for you as a basis for your awareness, as a basis for putting the mind in good shape, feeding the mind, nourishing the mind on what’s wholesome. What really will make it strong? So that’s the basic skill you start out with. As with any skill, you don’t want to get it too complicated. Just keep the breath in mind. Watch the breath as it comes in, goes out, and be ardent in what you’re doing. Really keep your mind there. If it wanders off a hundred times, a thousand times, you bring it back a hundred times, a thousand times. And when they’re wandering off, that’s natural. Your choice is in how quickly you bring it back. So you begin to show the mind, and it really seeps into the mind that you mean business here. You really are going to stay with the breath. And then try to be as sensitive as you can to the breath, how it feels. You can adjust it in any way you like. Breathe as deep into the body as feels comfortable so that you nourish the whole body with the process of breathing. Those are the beginning steps in learning how to look after the mind. Be responsible for your own mind. So you don’t have to go looking out for other people to put the mind in good shape, put you in a good mood. You can see for yourself, “Okay, the mind is not in good shape. What can be done to bring it back?” When you’re responsible for this way, you can rely on yourself this way. Then you’re less and less threatened by things outside, because you know how to look after the important part of life, which is the mind. Once that’s in good shape, then everything else falls into line. Everything else is manageable. It’s a skill we all need to learn. So, we’ve got a whole hour to work at it. Give it your best.

[https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/0107n2a1%20Care%20&%20Feeding%20of%20the%20Mind.mp3](https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/0107n2a1%20Care%20%26%20Feeding%20of%20the%20Mind.mp3)