Embodying Goodwill

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When we practice concentration, it’s a very direct, very immediate way of showing goodwill for ourselves. We give the mind a good place to settle down. We breathe comfortably. That simple fact right there makes the present moment a lot more pleasant, a much nicer place to be. Because if the present moment is not a good place to be, you’re not going to want to settle down. That’s why the mind keeps wandering around, looking for a better place to go, sometimes thinking, “Well, think about the past. That will be reassuring.” But then you run into things you did in the past that you don’t care to think about. So you go off into the future, hoping to find some nice thoughts to think about in the future. But then again, there’s that whole uncertainty of what’s going to happen. The few things that are certain about the future are not all that reassuring—aging, illness, and death. So the mind bounces around, looking for a good place to settle down. It’s when we realize that the best opportunity is right here in the present moment. In spite of the pains, in spite of the discomforts in the body, you can adjust things. You can play with the present moment in spite of the discomforts in the body in such a way that it becomes a nicer place to be, principally through the way you breathe. The breathing process is something we overlook so much, and yet it has so many possibilities. It can do so much for the mind if you only pay attention to it, if you give it the attention it deserves. But it’s important that you learn how to relate to the breath in a way that doesn’t make it unpleasant, too. There’s a certain amount of forcing that goes into practicing concentration, but you have to do it with intelligence. John Fuhrman once said that you should learn how to play with the breath, play with your meditation. He was not talking about any kind of desultory, just playing around or fiddling around. As I said this afternoon, that’s the way Michael Jordan plays basketball, or Yo-Yo Ma plays the cello. There’s an element of play, but there’s also an element of seriousness. You’re trying to learn as you play. Try adjusting the breath. Try adjusting the texture, the length of the breath, the rhythm of the breathing. You can adjust the amount of pressure you put on the breath, because it does require a certain amount of pressure for the mind to stay with the breath. You have to learn through experimentation how much pressure is enough, how much is too much, how much is too little. Then there’s the question of how you perceive the breathing. Which sensations in your body are breath sensations? Which parts of the body are doing the breathing? Which parts are cut off from the breathing? If you find any part that’s cut off, can you learn how to include it? As you pursue this, you find that all the qualities you need to develop in making the meditation interesting, absorbing, are right there. There’s the desire to do it. When you make the process entertaining, when you make it absorbing, you have the desire to do it more. It’s not a chore. As you get interested in exploring this feel of sensation you have in the present moment, you stick with it more and more and more. You give it more and more attention. You start using your ingenuity. This element of ingenuity is important. There’s a passage where the Buddha said that a way of gauging another person’s intelligence, another person’s discernment, is to see how they approach a question, how they frame a question. Because meditation is supposed to help develop discernment, you have to meditate in a way that teaches you how to frame questions. If you’re simply following somebody’s instructions, forcing the breath into a particular mold, forcing your mind into a particular mold, you’re never going to learn how to ask questions. There’s no way you’re going to develop your own discernment. The meditation has to include this process of learning how to ask questions and learning how to judge which questions give results, which questions don’t give results. When you run up against a particular problem, you use your ingenuity to think up a new question, to try to get a handle on how you’ve been perceiving things subconsciously or unconsciously, bringing it to light and asking new questions to get a new perspective on what you’re doing, how you relate to the whole idea of the breath energy in the body. Do you have this solid lump of the body that’s pulling the breath in and pushing it out? Or is your immediate experience of the body the energy already? When you perceive all your perceptions in the body as aspects of the breath, what does that do to the way you breathe? You learn how to explore things in this way, and it becomes a lot easier to stick with the meditation and begin to realize that the more you meditate, the more you really are showing goodwill for yourself, providing the more you are in line with the basis it needs in the present moment to have a sense of well-being, so it’s not threatened by pain, so it’s not threatened by physical or mental pain. It has a good place to stay, a place that provides it with a good, solid foundation. One of the Pali terms for meditation, gamatthana, literally means the basis for action. When your mind has a good, solid basis like this, the actions that come out of that mind are bound to be more and more skillful. So this is another way in which you’re showing goodwill for yourself by creating this center, this foundation in the present moment. It’s not that it only feels good only in the present moment, but it also gives you a good, solid foundation from which to act so that your actions are more skillful. Not only your actions in the meditation, but your actions in the rest of your life come from a more solid place. As a result, they’re more skillful. You shape a better and better life for yourself. So this is another way you’re showing goodwill through the process of meditation. There’s another way, the Buddha said, you can test a person’s intelligence with regard to the actions that you choose to do. What are the actions that that person chooses to do? The Buddha said, basically, there are four kinds. There are things that are pleasant to do and give good results, things that are unpleasant to do and give bad results. That doesn’t take much discernment, he said. If it’s pleasant to do and gives good results, it’s very easy to do. If it’s unpleasant to do and gives bad results, it’s very easy to avoid. There are those other two possibilities, things that are pleasant to do but give bad results, or things that are unpleasant to do but give good results. Your ability to act in the proper way with regard to these two possibilities, that’s the measure of your intelligence. Then again, it’s not just a matter of forcing yourself to do what you know you should do. You’ve got to learn how to have techniques, approaches that make the mind more and more inclined to do what it knows in the long run is for its own good, even though it may be unpleasant to do. It may involve work. It may involve difficulty. And this, again, doesn’t come just from doing what you’re told. I mean, doing the right thing as long as someone is watching over you is good, but it’s not as good as learning how to do the right thing when nobody’s watching over you and nobody’s leading you by the hand and saying, “Do this. Okay. Do that. Okay.” It’s your ability to detect the results of your actions and knowing that even if it may be unpleasant to do but it gives good results, okay, you know ways to get yourself to do it. That, again, involves your own ingenuity, your ability to ask yourself, “Why is it you don’t want to do these things?” And the same things that you like to do but give bad results, you have to ask yourself, “Why do you like doing them?” Learn how to ask questions that get to the root of the matter. If you don’t learn how to ask these questions, you can force yourself to act in the right way for a certain period of time, but then there comes a time when the mind rebels. And it’s your discernment and figuring out new ways to get yourself to do the proper things. So what you feel like doing, you find yourself more and more inclined. It becomes more and more second nature to do what’s right. That’s a sign of discernment. And again, this is a quality you develop in the meditation. When you’re more and more in charge of the meditation, if you’re simply following instructions, you’re not in charge. You’re letting somebody else force a particular pattern on your mind, which in some instances may be good, but in others it may not be so good. You ultimately have to be the judge of what works and what doesn’t work. So you have to learn how to get your standards in line, learn how to gauge results of your actions, and how to be very clear with yourself, very honest with yourself when you’re not doing so well, when you could be applying more ingenuity, when you could be applying more persistence. This is why the meditation doesn’t have recipes. You do this, add these ingredients, do it this and this way, and we guarantee you that it’s going to taste good. You can’t do that with the mind. The mind is a lot more subtle. It requires a lot more sensitivity. And especially if you’re trying to develop discernment in your meditation, you’ve got to learn how to ask questions, and particularly ask questions in ways that allow you to act more and more skillfully in areas where it’s difficult to be skillful. What this means is learning how to play with your meditation, setting goals for yourself, setting manageable goals, but goals that pull you a little bit. Then once you’ve attained one particular goal, say that you want to sit for a certain length of time or make sure you stay with a breath for a certain length of time, what’s the next goal that you can set for yourself to pull yourself a little bit further? How can you do this in such a way that the development of your meditation becomes well-rounded, so it’s not just a matter of sitting a certain length of time or walking a certain length of time? That’s more an internal development. The mind is more and more settled. You find it easier to be persistent with a particular topic. You use your ingenuity to frame new questions to see what they do, how they affect the course of your meditation. That kind of meditation is the one that creates a discernment that really is organically developed from within. It’s not something that’s simply imposed from without, but it’s something that develops naturally from this practice of getting involved with a breath, playing with a breath, experimenting with a breath, and dealing with whatever issues come up within the breath or within the mind. There are instructions to help you, but they’re only beginning instructions that give you a general sense of the direction that the practice has to go. But what you make of those instructions is what determines the course of your practice. It will determine the level of your success in the practice. We don’t like to think in terms of success, but there it is. Either the meditation actually does embody your wish for happiness, your goodwill for yourself, or it doesn’t. So learn how to meditate in a way that does.

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