Goodwill for the Breath

October 30, 2003

We start each meditation session with chan-san, goodwill, metta, to remind ourselves of why we’re here and what we’re doing. It’s because we wish for true happiness. As the Buddha once said, wisdom and discernment begin with that question, “What can we do that will lead to our long-term welfare and happiness?” Then the whole teaching comes out of that question. We practice generosity, we practice virtue as means for long-term happiness. We come to meditate. It’s for the same purpose. So we’re going to do the meditation with an attitude of goodwill. Goodwill for the people around you, goodwill for yourself, and goodwill for your breath. That’s the object of meditation you’re going to be working with. There is a relationship to the breath that doesn’t go very far. The breath won’t open up. If you push it around too much, you never really get to know it. If you don’t do anything to it at all, just try to watch it without really getting to know it, all your subconscious ways of dealing with the breath become underground. They stay subconscious. You don’t see them. It’s by adjusting the breath, getting sensitive to how your mind interacts with the breath, and then learning to do it in a more and more friendly way, a more sensitive way, so that the mind and the breath get along together. Notice how the breathing feels as it comes in. Notice how it feels as it goes out. Put aside your preconceived notions of where the breath comes in and where it goes out. Just notice, what does it feel like to breathe? Imagine you’d come out of some other plane of existence and you suddenly found yourself in this body. What would the experience be like to someone with fresh eyes? Then notice where the breathing feels good. Which part of the in-breath may feel like it’s a little bit too long, where you begin to notice that it’s too long, or if it’s too short. How do you notice these things? The best way to learn is to experiment. The same with the depth of the breathing. Whether it’s deep or shallow, experiment to see what feels good just now. There may be times when you push things a little bit too much, well then back off a bit. Or sometimes if you’re not experimenting enough, that can lead to problems as well. You just don’t learn as much as you could. The breath doesn’t get as satisfying as it could. So all of this is something you have to learn through trial and error. The important thing is you maintain that attitude of goodwill all the way through. You’re not struggling with a breath. You’re not trying to push it or squeeze it into some sort of shape so that you can step on it and climb up to nirvana right away. It doesn’t work that way. You have to go there together. And so you treat the breath with respect. You treat it with goodwill. And you listen carefully, you watch carefully, as the Buddha said, to get to know anybody. One, it takes time, and two, you have to be observant. You get to know someone’s virtue by living with them for a long time. You get to know their honesty by dealing with them over a long period of time. You get to know their resilience by watching how they react to misfortune or any unbizarrable situation. You get to know their discernment by how they approach questions. But in each case, as the Buddha said, you have to not only notice these things, but you have to be very sensitive, very observant, and watch for long periods of time. So this is why we meditate for hours and hours and hours to get to know the breath. It’s not the case that you breathe in once, breathe out once, and you know the breath. You have to stay with it over and over again. Feel your way. Notice the results. This way, as you get a bit of better terms with the breath, the breath begins to open up, and then you begin to see that the whole flow of energy in your body is very direct and directly related to the mind. But many times, once you get sensitive to the breath, you begin to notice things happening in the breath before you realize that they’re actually happening in the mind, and the breath is simply reflecting them back to you. This is why the Buddha used the breath as his main meditation object. He taught this method more than any other method, taught it in more detail than any other method, because the breath, once you give it some space to do its thing and get to know it better and better, you get more and more sensitive to it. It starts showing you many things about the mind that you didn’t know, because the energy flow in the body is very directly related to the mind. If we’re the type of people who tend to be in our heads an awful lot, we find that from the neck on down things are kind of blocked out. Well, this is a way of opening up that block. As you do, you begin to realize that there are other areas of awareness that tend to get blocked off as well. Now you’re more open to them, you begin to see them more clearly. They’re less subconscious, they’re more brought into the light of day. So subtle little decisions, just the decision to focus on this or focus on that, close off this, close off that, ignore this, deny that, you begin to see them more clearly. If you’re honest with yourself, you can have a lot to learn here. You begin to see what you’re doing to create unnecessary suffering for yourself. Why did you have to close off those areas of awareness? Because they’re painful. And yet, when you’re working with the breath and the breath feels stable, solid, soothing, where it’s a really friendly place to be, you’re in a position where you can begin to explore those painful areas, not be threatened by them, not be overcome by the pain. There’s less denial. There’s more openness. And this way, that attitude of goodwill spreads throughout the meditation, leading up to discernment. After all, if the Buddha didn’t base his teachings on goodwill, on the desire for true happiness, why would he focus on suffering? That is his main issue. It’s because he wanted to free himself and free us from suffering. That’s why he focused there. So that you wouldn’t have to keep putting up with false happiness all the time. Because that’s the problem with false happiness. It turns so quickly into suffering and stress. It betrays us. So what we’re doing here is we’re taking our desire for true happiness seriously. We don’t want a happiness that turns into something else. So that’s why we focus on the issues of suffering and stress, even as you get into concentration and after a while you begin to see there are subtle areas of stress. Well, that’s where you can begin to do your discernment work. Figure out exactly what it is that causes that suffering and stress. At that point, many times, it’s so subtle, the word “suffering” doesn’t seem to apply. It’s just where you can detect inconstancy in the state of stable concentration and well-being that you begin to depend on. You begin to see that even here, there’s a little bit of stress and suffering. Well, what are you doing to cause it? What else is going on at the same time? Look for that. This is how concentration work goes together with insight work, or how tranquility and insight work to develop concentration and then deepen it and at the same time bring more insight about it. So the two qualities go together, insight and tranquility. And how the concentration deepens them and is deepened by them. Many of the four Ajahnas make the point that when the path comes together in the mind, it’s not the case that you can clearly divide concentration, tranquility, insight apart from each other. They all come together. It’s the stillness that allows you to see, and it’s the clearest seeing of even subtle stress that allows the mind to be more and more still. So in this way, you and your breath become friends working together. The breath becomes more comfortable, the body gets healthier, the nerves get soothed, the mind has a good, soothing place to stay, a restful place to stay. The breath and the body have somebody looking after them. So you walk the path together. You have a sense of goodwill. Be friends with the breath. You’re going to be living with it for a long time. And the friendlier you are with it, the more you take a friendly interest in the breath, the more it’s going to have to offer to you. The more it will show to you, the more you can learn from it. But as with any friendship, it takes a certain amount of exploration. The breath is going to try you, test you as a friend. You have to be willing to be tested, sit through some uncomfortable periods so that you can get to know exactly what works and what doesn’t work. But the friendship gets over those difficult periods and becomes a more solid one, as long as the goodwill is still there.

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