Bring the Right Attitude

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It’s often useful to start each meditation with thoughts of goodwill. We carry so many random thoughts around in our mind that before you do the actual work of the meditation, you want to clear away some of the underbrush. In other words, clear a space for yourself where you can really do the work. Without a lot of interruptions. Because as you’re sitting here, there won’t be too many interruptions from outside, but a lot of things can come up from within. Thoughts about what this person did to you, what that person did to you. Things that have been going well in your life, things that have not been going well in your life. The negative things tend to have more staying power. They really tend to get in the way. So you want to clean those things away. A good way to do that is with thoughts of goodwill. Having goodwill to yourself, goodwill for yourself, and then goodwill for the people around you. This is one of the reasons why we have the chants every evening. Not just the chants of goodwill, but all the other chants that we recite. It’s to get the mind in the right mood to meditate. It gives you a chance to step back from your normal issues, your concerns of daily life. It reminds you of your larger values, the desire to find happiness. The desire not to let your life get eaten up by lots of little tiny concerns that ultimately don’t mean much of anything, don’t amount to much of anything. And even for just a little while, to work on developing skillful qualities in the mind. When people would first come to meditate with Jon Fu, he’d have them pay homage to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as examples of the values you want to have in your life. And then he’d have you focus on the breath. But some people had them spread thoughts of goodwill, to realize that this is one area of happiness within. It’s one area in life where your happiness doesn’t have to conflict with anyone else’s. So it’s really a good happiness. It’s not a narrow happiness. The narrow happiness of the world is that you gain some little thing, but there’s someone else who wants that same little thing. So it’s either your thing or their thing. It goes back and forth. As a monk, I don’t get to see many movies anymore, but occasionally when I’m sitting on an airplane, I can’t help but see the video screens. I’ve been struck by the number of romantic comedies they show on planes, and how a typical ending to one is the hero finally gets the woman he wants, the woman finally gets the man she wants, and they kiss, and all the people around them applaud. Their happiness makes everyone happy. Everybody else is happy. That is very rare in the world. Because often when you gain happiness of that sort, it means somebody else is missing out, has been deprived. So it makes a nice trope in a movie, but it doesn’t have much to do with real life. True happiness is something that comes from within. This is a broad happiness, a happiness without any boundaries, when you really work at it. Your happiness doesn’t take anything away from anyone else’s happiness. The fact that you’re working on being generous, trying to be virtuous, trying to gain some control over the impulses in your mind, other people are going to benefit. That’s adding to their happiness as well. So as you practice the Dhamma, you’re finding a way where your happiness dovetails with the happiness of other people. There are common images of the light of a candle. You light your candle, and then you can use that candle to help other people light their candles, and the flame in your candle is not diminished, and the light gets spread around. So keep that image in mind as you make your practice. As you meditate, you’re lighting a candle. It gives light to yourself and the people around you. And then you get to work. Focus on the breath. Allow the breath to be comfortable. And keep remembering that word “allow.” You can’t make the breath comfortable, but you can create the conditions that let it become comfortable. Try to find the right amount of focus. You can focus on any part of the body where you have a sensation of the in-breath and a sensation of the out-breath. Think of the breath as something that is supremely nourishing for that particular part of the body, and nourishing for the mind as well. You’re drinking in the nourishment that comes from the fact that you’re breathing. If you weren’t breathing, you’d die. So this is the force of life. Allow that force of life to come in as easily as possible. You don’t have to think of yourself as straining or pushing or pulling to bring the breath in. Let it go. If you allow it, it’ll just come in and go out on its own. All you have to do is hover around it to make sure that it stays comfortable. Nothing else comes in to destroy it. John Foong would use the word “brakong.” It’s the word you use when you’re holding something lightly to make sure that it doesn’t tip over, it doesn’t fall. It’s like a child learning to walk. You hover around the child, allowing the child to walk in a safe space. So if it trips, you’re there to catch it. But you’re not going to yank the child around. You let the child make the attempt to walk. A common image in the text is of holding a baby chick in your hand. If you hold it too tight, it dies. If you hold it too loosely, it’s going to fly away. So find just the right amount of pressure to keep it in your hand. But not so much that it harms the bird. This is very sensitive, delicate work that we’re doing here. So try to bring as much attention as possible to it, as much calm attention. Then you find that the calmness of your attitude starts a feedback loop where the breath calms down. As the breath calms down, the mind can calm down. And stick with that sense of being nourished by the breath. This is what keeps the concentration work from getting too tight and unpleasant, too confining. There’s a sense of ease in the breath. Think of that sense of ease spreading throughout the body. Survey the body to see if there are any areas where the comfortable breath energy doesn’t seem to reach. There’s usually going to be a tension or tightness in some part of the body that’s preventing the breath from getting to some other part of the body. So sometimes there may be a lack of energy in one part of the body, but you’ve got to survey other areas to see where that tension or tightness is, because it’s not always in the same place. It’s like a dog lying down to sleep. The dog will circle around a couple of times, and if there are any roots or stones or anything in the spot where it plans to lie down, it’ll scratch them away. Then it’ll lie down. If it finds that it didn’t get everything, then it gets up again, circles around again, scratches this, scratches that, and then lies down again. So for a while, you’ll find yourself circling around in the body to find which parts of the body need some work. Then you try to settle down, find one spot that feels especially nourishing, and just let your awareness be nourished right there. If you find that there are other areas that are not comfortable, well, get up and circle around again a little bit. Keep this up for a while until you find that you can really stay with that one spot. Not because you’re forcing the mind, but because you’re tapping into something that’s really nourishing—a sense of fullness, a sense of ease. And while you stay at that one spot, you can think of it spreading, but you don’t have to follow it out to make sure that it’s spreading everywhere. It just feels really good being right here. That’s the attitude, that’s the quality you want to develop. As John Lee says, there are three basic things you work on, three qualities you bring. There’s the quality of your intention, there’s the quality of the object, and then there’s that sense of ease and well-being that come from it. Finding the object and adjusting your focus so it’s just right. In other words, you stick with the intention to stay with the breath no matter what. No matter how many times you trip and fall, you get up and keep going. No matter how many other compelling thoughts come into your mind, you just let them pass. You’re going to stay with this one object. This is called having the right intention. Then there’s the right object. Adjust the breath so that the mind can stay with it easily. You don’t want to be so light that you can’t keep track of it, and you don’t want to be so heavy that it feels burdensome. So try to find just the right rhythm. Then, when there is that sense of calm and ease and fullness, allow that to spread so that your heart feels full, the lungs feel full, your whole body feels full, all the nerves in your body feel full. You’re not starving, you’re not lacking in anything. That’s the quality that you’re trying to work on in meditation. So what you’re doing here is creating a skillful feedback loop. Bring the right attitude to the meditation, and it helps engender the right physical sensations. You let those comfortable physical sensations nourish the mind so it can maintain the right attitude. They strengthen each other this way. To the point where it seems that the boundary between the body and the mind begins to dissolve. There’s just a sense of fullness, and it’s hard to say whether it’s physical or mental, because it’s both. So work on developing, maintaining the right intention, the right object, and the right quality. The deep sense of nourishment that you want from the meditation will have space to grow.

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