Goodwill Breathing

December 27, 2012

When you sit and meditate, you want to get your body into position and your mind into position. Body in position, sit up straight. Place your hands in your lap close to your stomach to help keep you sitting up straight. Face forward, close your eyes. That’s getting the body in position. The mind in position takes a little more time, because you have to get the mind in the right frame of mind to settle down in the present. That’s one of the reasons why we start with thoughts of goodwill and also end with thoughts of goodwill. You start with thoughts of goodwill to remind yourself of why you’re meditating. You want a true happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. Most of the forms of happiness you encounter in the world involve one side gaining and another side losing. You gain money, somebody else has lost money. You gain status, someone else has lost status. So you want to find something that is lasting and harmless, because the gains and losses in the world just keep going back and forth, back and forth. There’s nothing really reliable about them. So our happiness is going to be stable. It has to be found inside. That’s why we’re meditating. And it’s also your way of showing goodwill for others, too. You show goodwill for yourself, as you’ll see in a moment, by the way you breathe. And also by looking for happiness you can rely on. You show goodwill for others by looking for happiness that doesn’t take anything away from them. So start thinking about your desire for true happiness and then a wish that other people, other beings, would find true happiness as well. It’s traditional to move from people who are close to your heart and then go out in ever-widening circles. People you know well and like, and people you like even though you don’t know them so well, people you’re more neutral about, and people you don’t like. Sometimes it’s good to get very specific about the ones you don’t like, so that when you spread thoughts of goodwill now, it’s not just an empty thought. You really do change your attitude toward those people. Reflect on how you wouldn’t gain anything from their suffering. And a wish for their suffering weighs you down. It means also that you’re not as reliable in your dealings with them as you’d like to be. So you don’t have to like those people, but wish them well. May they find the causes for true happiness. May they act on those causes and they actually find the true happiness. The world would be a lot better place if everyone could find true happiness within. Trust people, living beings of all kinds. Don’t let there be any exceptions to your thoughts of goodwill. These are good thoughts to think about every time you meditate, both at the beginning of the meditation and at the end. At the end, they remind you of how you want to act in the world. Because when you come out of meditation, you’re coming from a sensitive spot that sometimes doesn’t want to get involved with the world. But you have to remember, your life depends on other people. And as they say, you run away from all other people and you still are left with yourself. You’re still left with this person right here. So you want to approach the world as you come out of concentration with an attitude of goodwill that helps you to be happy. You become more reliable in all your dealings with other people, especially if you’re coming from a place of well-being inside. That’s what we try to create as we meditate. This is one of the reasons why we focus on the breath. The breath is one of the few processes in the body where you actually have some control. So take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths now and see how it feels. As you breathe in, try to breathe in a way that feels nourishing. Breathe out. Think of any patterns of tension there may be in the body and think of them dissolving away in the out-breath. As you focus on the breath, try experimenting with the rhythm. What kind of breathing feels good? How long a breath feels good? You can play with this in different ways. One is, just ask that question, “How long feels good right now?” and see how the body responds. Or you can consciously lengthen the breath for a while and see at what point it doesn’t feel so good anymore. In other words, as you breathe in deeply, you’ll notice there are different spots in the body that tend to feel strained as you breathe in. Can you relax those spots and can you keep on breathing in? There are lots of different ways you can play with the breath. Instead of just dealing with the length, you can deal with the depth. How deeply should you breathe in so it feels good, so it feels nourishing? What kind of breathing feels energizing when you’re tired? What kind of breathing feels relaxing and soothing when you’re tense or not feeling well? Try fast breathing, slow breathing, heavy or light. Try to find a rhythm and texture that feels just right right now. And you’ll find that the needs of the body will change, and so keep on top of the breath. Notice when you need to adjust it again. There’s nowhere else you have to go, nothing else you have to do right now. Just stay here with the breath. Get to know the effect of the breath on your body and the effect of the breath on the mind. What kind of breathing is easy to stay focused on? Sometimes something that feels good for the body may be hard to stay focused on. So your main purpose here is to give the mind a grounding. Notice what feels just right, something you can stick with in and out, in and out, all the way through the hour. Here’s one way of showing a very immediate sense of goodwill for yourself. The breath is coming in and out anyhow, but here’s a way of getting the most out of it. You can breathe in a way that increases the well-being of the body in the present moment, and increases the well-being of the mind in the present moment as well. When there’s a feeling of pleasure or ease, think of that sense of well-being spreading throughout the body, going down the nerves, down the nerve in the spine and out the legs, from the back of the neck down through the shoulders, out the arms, out to the tips of the fingers. All the organs in the front of the body as you breathe in and breathe out. The diaphragm feels good as it expands and contracts. Think of the breath flowing easily through the head. When we talk about breath, it’s not the air coming in and out through the nostrils. It’s the flow of energy in the body. So you want your body to be fully nourished with the breath, and you want your organs and your awareness to fill the body. If it’s too narrowly focused, it’s very easy to drift off. Especially when the breath gets comfortable, because we tend to associate comfortable breathing with the time when you’re about to fall asleep. So you’ve got to resist that tendency. The best way to do it is to fill the whole body with your awareness. Try to be as consciously aware of the body as you can, fully aware of the body, the whole body, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. Try to maintain that sense of broad awareness, because when the awareness is broad, it has trouble moving into the past or the future. Thoughts may go, but you don’t have to follow with them. If a thought materializes in your head, if it has to do with the breath, then apply it to the breath. If it has to do with anything else, just let it go. Think of your awareness here as being like a screen on a window. The breeze goes through the screen, but it doesn’t move the screen. In the same way, the thoughts can come through your awareness of the body, but you don’t have to latch onto them. Just let them go passing through. This is one way of showing goodwill for yourself. And as you develop a sense of well-being inside, you’re not the only one who benefits. Because when you act and speak coming out of this sense of well-being, it’s much less likely to be for the purpose of causing anybody any harm. Because you realize there’s nothing gained by it. Most of the harm that’s caused in the world is when people are feeling miserable and they say, “Well, as long as I’m miserable, I might as well make everybody else miserable.” But when you’re coming from a sense of fullness and ease, why bother? This is why we say that meditating is a way of showing goodwill for yourself and for others. You’re coming from a better place. You’re able to act and speak and think in a better way because you’re taking advantage of something that’s right here, that’s always there to tap into when you want to. The Pali word for meditation, bhavana, means to develop. You’re developing something that’s already here. Your awareness of the present moment, the breath and the body, your ability to be aware of what’s going on right now—these things are already there. You’re just learning how to connect them so that they grow, so that they nurture one another. If you find yourself slipping off after thoughts, just drop them and come right back. There’s a quality here that’s called ardency. It doesn’t mean that you have to strain in the meditation, but it does mean you really do try to do it well. You try to be observant. What can you do to get the breath more comfortable? What can you do to let the mind settle down more solidly? Once it’s there, what can you do to keep it there? If you find that you’ve wandered off, how can you get quickly back to the breath in a way that you feel at ease and comfortable staying with the breath? Each time you come back to the breath, try to reward yourself with an especially comfortable breath so that it gets easier and easier to come back. So as you work on this sense of ease, you want to learn how to develop it not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but when the body gets out of position—get up and go home or whatever—the mind is still in position. In other words, it’s right here. If the time comes to think about something, you consciously let the mind think about things, but then when that time has passed, you try to come back to the breath again. Because the breath is always here. It’s something you always tap into. So you have this sense of well-being not only when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but you’re able to attain it, tap into it, anywhere. That’s when it becomes really, really useful, and even more an expression of goodwill for yourself and goodwill for others. And you’re doing this as a skill. As with any skill, it takes time and it takes some effort for you to get a sense of what’s just right in terms of the breath, what’s just right in terms of your focus on the breath. And even though while you’re here focused on the breath, it’s just a matter of taking it between you and your own body. Remember, it’s not just that you are going to benefit from this. All the people you encounter are going to benefit as well. The more you master this, the more they’re going to benefit. So it’s a really worthwhile skill.

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