

A Basis in Well-being

April 2003

When you settle into the meditation, you remember those thoughts of goodwill we chanted just now, “May I be happy. May all living beings be happy.” This is the motivation that underlies all our practice.

You look at the teaching on the four noble truths—which we take as the Buddha’s most basic teaching, most comprehensive teaching—and what is it but the application of wisdom and discernment to the question of how to be happy? In the time of the Buddha, lots of people were practicing meditation, and in many cases it was for the sake of power of one kind or another. But the Buddha saw that the best use of the power of the mind is to apply it to just this question: “Can human beings be happy? What can they do to be happy?” In other words, you’re applying your discernment to bring that wish to fulfillment.

So always keep that in mind when you’re getting strung out in the meditation, when things are getting difficult. Remind yourself that you’re here for the purpose of true happiness. In some cases, that’ll get you back on the right track. Because often when you’re getting strung out in the meditation and you’re off on the wrong track someplace, pushing the mind too much in the wrong direction, everything just breaks down. You lose your desire to stick with it.

So remind yourself: The purpose of this practice is for happiness, and the path that the Buddha teaches has happiness as one of its most important factors. The sense of pleasure and the well-being that come in concentration, the Buddha realized that these can’t be taken as the goal of the practice, but they are the path. They give you the strength and the sense of security you need in order to gain a really balanced discernment into the way you act, into the way you do things, into the way you could be more skillful about speaking, acting, thinking.

If you’re strung out in the meditation, it’s difficult to see these things with any real objectivity. It’s possible sometimes to have what might be called neurotic breakthroughs in meditation, and some meditation techniques seem to be aimed in that direction. They put you through hell, and the mind has to figure out some way to survive and there’s a kind of opening inside. Then the teachers can say, “See? There you are: results of your meditation.” But there’s a question of how useful those openings are, how real they are, and the extent to which they really resolve issues of suffering. The simple fact that the opening came while you were strung out doesn’t mean that it was true. The mind has to be in a well-balanced state of well-being for you to be able to trust its insights.

So this is what we’re doing as we meditate: working toward that well-balanced well-being. You work with the breath to make it comfortable, you want the mind to be comfortable with the breath, you want the mind to be comfortable here in the present moment. That’s your foundation, that’s one of the main factors of the path. It’s when the mind feels at ease in this

way that there's a good sense of well-being. Then you work from that sense of well-being to look into the issues of how suffering happens, how pain happens, how stress happens. You have to realize that it doesn't just happen, there's an element of your activity in there as well. You can see this best when the mind is really balanced.

So you take well-being as your starting point here. Now, you may ask, "Well, aren't we meditating in order to *attain* that sense of well-being?" Actually, there has to be some well-being in the mind someplace as a beginning foundation for the concentration.

So if focusing on the breath doesn't get you started in that direction—if you find yourself focusing on the breath or on the body in and of itself and after a while you get what the Buddha calls a fever, which could be a mental state of discomfort, distress, dis-ease—switch your mind to an inspiring topic, something related to the Dhamma that you feel good thinking about. It could be thoughts of goodwill, thoughts about the Dhamma, thoughts about the good things you've done in the past in terms of being generous, in terms of holding to your principles when it would have been easy and convenient or profitable to sacrifice your principles but you didn't, you held to the principles. The Buddha says to think about those things until the mind feels inspired and then you can bring it back to the breath again.

So you use whatever powers you have, either your thinking powers or your ways of focusing on the breath to create a sense of well-being, and then you come from that sense of well-being to analyze or work through whatever pain there may be in the body.

This is a principle that starts with the way you deal with the breath.

We were talking about this this afternoon. When there's tension in the body, you don't just plunge right into the tension. First you find a part of the body where the breathing feels good, the energy in the body feels good. You settle in there first and then, working from there, you've got a better perspective for dealing with the tension. One, you've got good breath energy to send in that direction, and two, the mind has calmed down so that it's not on edge. At the same time, when you're in touch with that sense of relaxation, that sense of well-being, it gives you a measuring stick against which to measure the tension. Because sometimes there's a lot of tension in the body and you hardly realize it until you've had something better to compare it with.

So look for those areas of well-being. Maximize them. Don't think of happiness or well-being as something you don't have at all and that you're trying to work toward. The trick is finding where it's already there and then building on that, nurturing that. This is a pattern that's common throughout the Buddha's teachings: He tells you to take the good qualities you already have and build on them. It's not that you don't have them or they're non-existent. It's simply you're not focused on them properly. You don't appreciate them. And when you don't appreciate them, you don't give them a chance to grow.

So as we're working with the breath here, this is a model for dealing with all kinds of things, both in the body and in the mind. Try to find where that sense of well-being is. If you can't find

it in the body, think of it in the sense of space around the body. Space is open, space is free, unobstructed. And then think of that space permeating through the atoms in your body to open things up.

When you have that sense of openness, then when you're operating from there, the choices you make, the insights you gain are a lot more reliable. They're not desperate. And they're a lot easier to digest, a lot easier to integrate because you're coming from a balanced, solid spot already. Sometimes we gain insights in the meditation when we're strung out, but it's hard to integrate them into a pattern that you can adopt throughout daily life, because you're not going to be strung out all the time. You've got to find a way of living where you're balanced, at ease.

And so as you look for the potentials, it's almost as if there are seeds waiting there in your more balanced states of mind. You look at them and allow them to grow, appreciate them, nourish them.

Many times when we hear the Buddha's teachings on the four noble truths— you know, stress, suffering, pain—it sounds like Buddhism is very pessimistic. But the four noble truths start from a deeper motivation, the desire for true happiness. Coming from that desire—and also learning how to use what basis you already have inside yourself for well-being, for pleasure, for ease—you build on those. From that position of strength, from that position of well-being, you can look at the four noble truths and at the question of stress and suffering in a lot more balanced light, because you're less threatened by it.

So it's a path of well-being, a teaching of well-being. After all, the Buddha said the purpose of his teaching is nibbana, which he said is the highest health. In fact, as far as he was concerned, it was the only true health. The health of the body is something temporary. Every part in the body seems to be designed to break down in one way or another. If you make a list of the different parts in the body, you have a list of the places where diseases can happen. Just go down the list.

Ajaan Suwat once made a comment that the body's always ready for suffering. If you don't believe it, he says, you can take an iron spike and stick it in any part of the body and it'll be in pain. I remember him saying that to a group of people in Massachusetts, and when I translated it, everybody in the room laughed. He looked at me, wondering what I had translated, and I explained to him afterwards that that thought was just so novel to Americans that they couldn't help but laugh. But for him it was basic. It's the way things are.

But that doesn't mean the body's totally in pain all the time, it's simply that there's the potential there. So what you're doing with the body is that you make the most use of it while you've got it. Wherever there's a sense of well-being here, make the most use of that. Think of the body as a tool for the practice, as a tool for learning. Some of the lessons it's going to teach are about aging, illness and death, but it also offers a basis for well-being, a sense of pleasure that you can build into stronger states of mind, stronger states of concentration, states where the

sense of well-being is not just bodily but also mental. And even though the basis isn't one hundred percent permanent and for sure, at least it gives you the opportunity to gain insights while you've got it.

So there's this side of the practice where you learn how to appreciate the skillful mental qualities you have, the sense of well-being you have when the breath is going well in at least part of the body. As Ajaan Lee once pointed out, if there was no place in the body where there was a sense of well-being at all, you would die. There'd be no place where you could settle down. So it's got to be someplace in this experience of the body, even if it's just the sense of space around the body or permeating the body. Learn how to focus on that, get the most out of that, so that your practice has a good solid foundation.

And so that the insights that are coming from your practice are not neurotic breakthroughs. Instead, they're a natural opening up that comes when there's a sense of well-being and balance. Things suddenly become clear because your gaze is steadier, it's less on edge, and you're more in a mood to watch things as they actually happen, to see things for what they actually are.

So try to cultivate this sense of well-being that's based on the seeds of well-being that are right here, right now, in the breath, in the mind. Put them together and allow them to grow.