

## *Pure Action*

*October 10, 2005*

We have the chant on goodwill every evening to remind us of why we're sitting here meditating. We're trying to develop goodwill of ourselves, goodwill for everyone around us, which means that we're aiming at a true happiness, a happiness that lasts, a happiness that doesn't take anything away from anyone else. Everyone on earth is looking for happiness, and for most of us, it's a very frustrating experience because we don't get the true happiness we want. At the same time, we seem to be causing a lot of trouble for ourselves and for everyone around us. But the Buddha found a way to search for happiness that actually develops the qualities we don't usually equate with that search, a search that develops compassion for other people, a search that develops wisdom, a search that develops purity.

Purity comes from realizing that our actions are important, that they determine whether we're going to be happy or not, along with the realization that the ones leading to true happiness are those that harm neither ourselves nor other people. In the Buddha's instructions to Rahula, he starts out by saying, "Look at what you're going to do, look at what you're going to say, what you going to think, and ask yourself what the results are going to be. This action that you're planning, is it going to harm anyone? If you can see that it's going to cause any harm, then don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you can go ahead and do it. But while you're doing it, check to see if what you foresaw was actually right. If it wasn't, if you see that the action is actually causing harm—after all, sometimes your actions give immediate results—then stop it. If you don't see any harm, then continue. When you finish, look back on the long-term results of your actions, and if you realize what you did actually did cause harm to yourself or other people, then make up your mind not to do that again. Then go talk it over with someone else who is on the path. See what advice they have for you. It's through this process, the Buddha said, that people develop purity: purity in our thoughts, in our words, and in our deeds.

As for compassion, you realize that you want happiness, and everyone else wants happiness, too. We all have that same basic desire in common. So you should have sympathy for others. But also, in a very practical terms, that means that if your happiness is based on somebody else's misery, they're going to be doing whatever they can to overturn that happiness. So you realize that your

happiness, if it's going to last, will have to depend on making sure that other people's happiness is a part of your happiness, that they go together.

That means you have to look inside for your happiness. This is why we're meditating, because every other happiness depends on taking resources. If you get those resources, other people can't get to them. But the happiness that comes from meditation is something that doesn't take anything away from anyone else. And as you develop it, you find that you begin to have more than enough, so you can share it with others.

It's like farming your acres. You have four acres here: the properties of earth, water, wind, and fire in the body. You till them and you plant your crops. You cultivate them. They grow and then they produce more than enough for you eat. That means you have the energy to help other people in whatever way you can.

All this is based on developing another quality that the Buddha says leads to wisdom, which is asking the question: "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?"—with the emphasis on the long-term. As you pursue your quest for happiness using these three qualities—wisdom, compassion, and purity—and work on the happiness that goes along with those qualities of mind, you find that you gain a long-term happiness that really is good for yourself, and is good for the people around you. There's nothing blameworthy in your actions.

This is why the Buddha's way of searching for happiness is special. It's not selfish. It's not destructive the way most people's search for happiness can be. Ultimately, you can lead the mind to the deathless, which is a happiness that doesn't have to depend on conditions at all. But even before you get there, the path is a blameless path. It's all a matter of training the mind, and realizing that that's the true source of happiness: a trained mind.

So we're sitting here training the mind in what way? We're training it in mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind; and we're training it in alertness, the ability to be sensitive to what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. We start with something really, really basic, which is the breath. The breath is the basis for all other actions. It's connected with the most primitive part of the mind. If you're going to start any program of training, you have to start way back at the basics.

So how do you relate to the breath? Are you on good terms with your breath? This is important. Any ability to stay in the present moment with any amount of steadiness or stability requires that you be on good terms with the present, and the breath is essentially your present experience of the body. So you have to be friends

with the breath, listen to it, watch it, be sensitive to when it feels good coming in, when it feels good going out.

Ajaan Lee recommends playing with it for a while. Ask yourself: Would longer breathing feel good? Just pose that question in mind, and you find that the body will breathe a little bit longer. Then you can see whether it feels right or not. How about shorter breathing? Or in short and out long, or in long and out short? Or can you breathe comfortably no matter what the rhythm is? That requires that you think of the whole body as one large energy field. Wherever you see any sense of blockage or tension or tightness in the field, allow it to relax. Keep it relaxed as you breathe in, as you breathe out, and as you breathe in again.

Often we tense up, say, around the in-breath or we pinch off the end of the out-breath, and that makes it uncomfortable to be in the present. So think of everything being wide open: All the pores of your skin are wide open, and the breath can come in and go out any part of the body at all. There's nothing to interfere. This way you can breathe quickly comfortably, you can breathe slowly comfortably—deep or shallow, heavy or light. The breath will start finding its own proper rhythm without your having interfere too much. You simply allow it to flow in any way it wants to in the body. All you have to do is check to make sure that you're not tensing or tightening up.

We often do that, either instinctively in the way we hold the body, or when there's an emotion coming into the mind—because it doesn't just come into the mind, in comes into the body as well. We talked a little about this this evening. Emotions involve all five of the aggregates. And one way to getting a handle on your emotions is to take them apart into aggregates. As you're working with the breath, that takes apart the physical side. When you hear something or think something that would normally get you to tense up, just don't tense up. Maintain that same sense of being open, and you find that the sense of tightness that would grow, say, when there's anger or fear, doesn't have a place to latch on to in the body.

When it doesn't have a place to latch on to in the body, it's not as firmly established in the mind, either. Often an emotion gets its reality because it has all those physical symptoms, the ones that say, "See? See? See? I'm angry. I'm afraid," and you've got all the physical symptoms to prove it. But if you don't let the symptoms to take hold, you can realize, "I don't have to be a slave to that feeling. It's not quite so imposing, so threatening, so overwhelming," because you've taken part of it and stripped it away.

So the breath, when you get to know it, really does have a lot to offer. This is why it's so important to be on friendly terms with it. If you're good friends with

the breath, it'll show you its secrets. It can do a lot for you. It's simply a matter of working on this basic process, allowing the breath to be comfortable at all times. It begins to loosen up a lot of other old habitual patterns in the mind and the body, so that the mind really does become ready to train because you begin to see viscerally the results that come from the training.

There's so much in the mind that resists any kind of change. It says, "This is the way I thought in the past, this is the way I breathed in the past, this is the way I moved and everything. I'm not about to change." That's its attitude. But if you can show it in a very immediate and physical way that it's good to train the mind, it's good to change your habits, you loosen up a lot of the other resistance in the mind, so that it can be trained. It does develop new skills.

This is what the Buddha's teachings are all about. They're skills. We're all looking for happiness but we end up causing suffering and pain because we don't act in a skillful way, we don't think or speak in skillful ways. You can read the teachings and think about them and even teach other people, but if it doesn't become a part of your toolkit of skills and strategies, it's just that: words. It doesn't have an impact. No matter how lovely or intriguing or inspiring the teachings maybe, if they don't get into your toolkit as ways you actually approach your actions and your words and your thoughts, then they'll never make a real change. It's when you can see that you can breathe in a different way, you can act in a different way, speak in a different way, think in a different way, and you suffer a lot less, and the people around you suffer a lot less: That's when the teachings will have their impact. That's when they really can make a difference. You get more intrigued and more interested in seeing how much further this difference can go.

So open up to the breath: what it feels like as you're breathing in, what it feels like as you're breathing out. Notice how the body would like to feel as you breathe and how it would like to feel as you breathe out. Be on good terms with it. And as you open up to it, it'll open up to you and tell you all kinds of things you didn't know before.

This is the basic pattern of Buddha's teachings: taking things that are really close to you, very near to you, and showing you possibilities in those things that you've never imagined. Even when his teachings talk about things are far away—past lifetimes, future lifetimes, other levels of being—the discussion always comes back to: Well, where do these things come from? They come from actions. And where are the actions happening right now? They're happening in your mind. It's the intentions in your mind that make all the difference: things that are very close

to us, and yet they seem to be mysterious because we don't pay careful attention to them.

This is why the Buddha's first instruction to his son were on intention. His last instructions to all the monks were about sankharas, which basically are intentional acts in the mind. Our intentions with regard to the body in terms of the breathing, or intentions in regard to the words in terms of how we frame the issues and think about them, our intentions with regard to the mind—perceptions and feelings: These things are really close to us and they have lots of potential. Yet we abuse that potential or let it go undeveloped.

So here we are. We're working with the breath; we've got the opportunity to develop all those sankharas. The breath is here, directed thought and evaluation—verbal fabrication: That's right here as we think about the breath and watch and evaluate the breath. As for the feelings and perceptions that are mental fabrications: They're right here as well. Everything you need to make a radical change in your life is right here. It's simply a matter of looking, probing, asking questions, listening to the answers, and looking some more.

That's some of what you can learn if you adopt the attitude that you want to be on good terms with the breathing, to become friends with the breathing, and to see how far that friendship will go.