

Genuine Goodness

December 28, 2006

Think thoughts of goodwill: goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. Goodwill as a wish for happiness, but what we want here is a special kind of goodwill—a wish for true happiness, a happiness that doesn't change, that's not affected by time, not affected by any conditions at all. That's a special kind of happiness, and this is a special kind of goodwill.

Ordinary happiness, the happiness that depends on conditions, is limited. It keeps changing. And often what gives happiness to one person is going to bring suffering to someone else. Say, for instance, that we want rain here at the monastery. The kind of winter in which we get really enough rain usually tends to be the kind of winter where *someplace* in northern California is going to get washed off into the sea. They'd just get way too much rain. When they get the right amount of rain for them, we're left high and dry.

So given the way the world is built, the way the world functions, there's never really enough for anybody. The inter-relatedness of things, which some people tell us we should celebrate, works out in such a way that not everybody gets equal shares.

As I said, the kind of weather pattern that brings us enough rain brings too much to somebody else. The summers in which we have really nice weather, they have crazy weather in other places of the world. And it's all connected.

So this interconnectedness is not something to celebrate. In fact, it's the problem. The happiness that depends on conditions always has its limitations. What we want is something that's unconditioned. And the Buddha said that it's possible to work toward that.

Given the way that conditions are so complex, it actually works out that causality leaves room for doing something that goes beyond action, fostering conditions that can open up the way to something *beyond* the conditions.

That's the kind of goodwill we want. It's a wish that we and other people will find the true happiness of the unconditioned, because this is a happiness that doesn't have any restrictions. As the Buddha once said, one of the amazing things about nibbana is that no matter how many people enter it, it never gets full. There's always room for more.

Your true happiness doesn't have to conflict with the true happiness of anybody else. That's what's good about it. And it's good to reflect on that before you meditate. It reminds

you why you're here.

And it sets your sights high. It's a principle in any kind of target practice that you're never going to hit higher than you aim—so aim high.

At the same time, remind yourself of the goodness of the path that we're on. So many other paths through the world end up causing suffering in one way or another. Often they cause harm. But this is a totally harmless path. There may be difficulties along the way, but if you actually follow it, you find your sufferings falling away, falling away. And they're not falling away to land on somebody else. They just disappear. So this is a really good path that we're on here.

The question is, how do you stay with the path? It requires mindfulness, alertness and ardency: the desire to do it really skillfully.

Remember, this is a skill that we're working on—the training of the mind. So approach it as you would any skill, something you do again and again and again, so that you can observe: What are the best ways to bring the mind to stillness? What are best ways to gain a sense of well-being in the mind? Focus on the breath, see how it feels. What kind of breathing feels best?

In focusing on the breath, you're also learning about the mind. As Ajaan Lee says, the breath is like a mirror for the mind. When you put the breath in good shape, it requires that the mind be in good shape as well. You're putting the mind in good shape because you're learning to be observant, you're learning to be precise, you're learning to be circumspect, you're learning to be alert. You develop a sensitivity: sensitive to what's going on in the body, sensitive to what's going on in the mind. And you begin to see connections.

That's where the practice of concentration turns into a way of developing discernment: As you try to figure out what ways to bring the mind to stillness, you begin to see how things work in the mind.

A lot of things in your life that seemed very solid and set begin to seem a little bit more fluid. Certain problems you had in life, that just didn't seem to budge, or that seemed to be a given of your life: You begin to realize how they're constructed, how the mind puts these problems together. And when you see that these things are constructed, then you can construct them in new ways.

From the Buddha's point of view, there's very little in life that's really given in the sense that it has to be that way. Particularly in terms of the suffering that we place on ourselves: They

don't have to be that way. We have the choice not to suffer.

We have the choice of putting things together in the mind in a way that, instead of being a burden for the mind, actually becomes a path out of suffering. This is an important insight: realizing that the way we suffer is based on a choice. We have a whole series of choices and we can undo those choices. They're not inscribed in stone.

Working with the breath is a good way of getting to this insight. You begin to see that the breath can function in ways that you might not have expected before. Parts of the body can breathe that you might normally not think of, in any way, related to the breath at all, and yet they do play a function. They do play a role in the breathing of the body.

The whole body can breathe. There's breath energy coming in and out of the body, through every pore. All along the nerves, all along the blood vessels, everywhere in the body, there's breath. It's simply a matter of learning how to be more sensitive to it. Open your mind to that possibility and then you see: There it is.

It's like the ozone hole, the hole in the ozone layer down over Antarctica. For years they were getting the data from the satellites that this hole existed, but the program rejected the data. It had been designed to reject anything like that. But finally somebody noticed it and they looked back and said, "Actually, the data has been coming in for a long time, it's just that we'd trained the computer not to see it."

In so in many ways, our suffering is just that: It comes from things that we could see through. If we only looked at them carefully, we could understand them, but we've trained ourselves not to look there, or to reject the data coming in.

Like the breath energy in the body: We tend to squeeze it off so as not to be distracted by it so that we can focus on other things, like the things we need to do in order to make a living, the things we need to do in order to function with other people. We've learned how to function by blocking out this area of our awareness.

So, we have to unlearn that habit. Try to get more sensitive to what's going on in the body, because that gets you more directly in touch with what's going on in the mind. It also opens up new possibilities in the body, new possibilities in the mind, new ways of relating to things that cause less suffering, that are less burdensome. And you learn this by observing.

As with any skill, you do it again and again and again, and after a while, if you're observant, you begin to see that you have some very inefficient or awkward ways of doing it. They don't have to be that way.

You can focus on the breath in such a way that as soon as you sit down and close your eyes to meditate, there you are. There doesn't have to be the pushing and pulling, the tug-of-war that ordinarily goes on as you try to settle down and you're fighting distractions. It comes simply from the matter of knowing that when the mind is concentrated, it tends to focus on a certain part of the body in a certain sort of way, the breath is a certain way, and you can create those conditions right away. And just hang on there.

Part of this, of course, is learning how to resist the temptation to think about all the 108 different things that you ordinarily occupy yourself with. That's an element of discernment, right there: realizing you don't have to think those things. There's nothing necessary about them. You can live perfectly well without following them around.

So try to be observant as you work on this skill. The more observant you are, the more you see—and the more suffering you'll be able to cut away, cut away, because you see it's unnecessary.

When you can deal with the suffering that you inflict on yourself, then once that's taken care of, you realize that that's the only suffering that really weighed you down. Things that come in from outside weigh you down only if you pull them in and make them part of your ongoing project to burden the mind. But once you end that project, the stuff coming in from outside doesn't touch the mind at all.

When the mind stops causing itself suffering, there it is: It gets in touch with the unconditioned—the happiness that we really want, the happiness that causes no harm at all to anyone.

This is why this practice is a very genuine expression of goodwill for yourself, as well as for the world around you. The Buddha never drew a hard and fast line between working for your own good and working for the good of other people. As you begin to cleanse the mind of its defilements and let the defilements go, you're not the only person who benefits. The people around you benefit as well. As you find a stronger resource of happiness from within, one that doesn't have to depend on things outside, the more you have to offer other people.

It's like that water they've found in earthquake faults. It doesn't depend on rainfall. Most wells depend on having a good year of rain. When the rainfall is scarce, many of the wells dry up as well. But there are certain wells in different parts of the world near earthquake faults that never dry up. No matter how dry it is outside, no matter how little rainfall, these wells just keep on producing water. They have an independent source. Even in times of severe drought,

they've still got water.

It's the same with the mind. When you have this independent source inside, you can offer the cool water of your happiness, of your inner sense of well-being, both to yourself and to the people around you, even when the world is overheated with anger and lust. This is why this is such a good path.

As Ajaan Mun once said, "The goodness that doesn't have any drawbacks, that's true goodness." And this is what we've got right here, a path to true goodness. So focus as much energy and attention as you can on learning the skills that can put you in touch with that goodness, so that you can know how truly good it is.