

Respect for Happiness

June 19, 2007

Face straight ahead, close your eyes, and focus on your breathing. Know when you're breathing in; know when you're breathing out. Notice how the breathing feels. Where does it feel comfortable? Are there parts of the body where it doesn't feel comfortable? Sometimes the breathing may be constrained or tense. It can be too long or too short, or maybe too shallow. You don't feel really nourished by the breath.

A good way to start out is to try a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. See how they feel, and if they feel good, keep on breathing in that way. If they don't feel good, you can change. Try shorter breathing, longer, deeper, more shallow, heavier or lighter. There are lots of ways you can experiment with the breath. Try to find a way of breathing that feels good for the body right now. When you're feeling tired, try to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. If you're feeling tense, try to breathe in a way that's more relaxing.

This is one area of your life where you have a lot of freedom. There's no price on the breath; they haven't privatized it yet. Nobody else has to know how your breathing is going. But it's something you can know for yourself if you pay attention. And you find that when the breath is comfortable and nourishing, the body feels better, you feel better, the mind feels better—a totally free way of finding some pleasure in life. All it requires is a little discipline and curiosity, wanting to find out. Here you have this energy flowing in and out of the body, flowing around the body all the time. How does it affect your body? How does it affect your mind? Take some time to notice, and you find that you benefit in all kinds of ways.

One of the Buddha's terms for the mind when it settles down with the breath in the present moment is *vihara dhamma*, "a home for the mind." A lot of us live like homeless people. The mind doesn't have a place where it can find shelter, where it can feel safe. So you wander around, and you put up with all kinds of hardships. You find your food in all kinds of places. In other words, you look for happiness in places that can often be harmful. There's a lot of bad stuff in dumpsters.

We don't think of ourselves as living that way. But when you look at the mind and see how it looks for happiness in ways that are harmful, you have to wonder: Why does it do this? Part of the reason, the Buddha says, is that we aren't really paying attention to what we're doing. If we look more carefully at what we're

doing, starting with the breath and moving out from there, we begin to notice what ways we cause harm to ourselves, what ways we cause harm to other people, and what ways of acting and speaking and thinking *don't* cause any harm.

One of the reasons we bow down to the Buddha is because he teaches us to respect things in ourselves that are worthy of respect—to begin with, our desire for happiness—and not just any old happiness. We want a happiness that lasts, one that's not going to go away as we start getting older, or when we get sick, or even when we're dying. It would be good to have a happiness that's not shaken by anything, that's not affected by anything. And the Buddha teaches us that this is a reality; it's a possibility. The rest of the world teaches us that it's not. This is why they say to go for the quick fix, go for the quick pleasure, because that's all you're going to get in life. But basically, they say that because they're selling a quick fix—they're selling a quick pleasure—and you have to learn how to question them. At the same time, you have to question the part of your own mind that wants to go for the quick fix and the quick pleasure, that wants everything easy.

So where do you look for guidance? You look outside and there's a lot of unreliable stuff. You look inside, there's a lot of unreliable stuff. What the Buddha's telling you, though, is that there is a way to find certainty in life. There's a way to find a happiness in life certain that's certain. It comes from training the mind: looking at your actions, looking at your words, looking at your thoughts, and seeing what results they give. We were talking this afternoon about a person who's willing to learn from mistakes, and this is precisely how the Buddha has you learn.

Of course, he warns you ahead of time that certain things are going to be mistakes. You don't have to try them out for yourself. This is why we have things like the five precepts. You don't kill, you don't steal, you don't engage in illicit sex, you don't lie, you don't take intoxicants, because doing these things always leads to trouble in one way or another. But there's a lot in life that's not covered by the five precepts, and that's where you have to learn how to develop your own powers of observation.

He says, before you act, ask yourself: What are the results of this action going to be? A lot of the time, you already know. If you know that it's going to cause harm either to yourself or other people, don't do it. Why cause harm to yourself? After all, you're here looking for pleasure, looking for happiness, so why engage in activity that you know is going to cause harm? Either you harm yourself directly or if you harm other people, it comes back to hurt you. If your happiness depends on somebody else's discomfort or pain, they're not going to stand for it. They're

going to do what they can to destroy your happiness. So you have to take their well-being into account.

But if you think about what you want to do and you don't see any harm, or you're not sure, go ahead and give it a try. See what happens. And if while you're doing the action—or saying the words or thinking the thought—you find that harm is happening, stop. There's no need to carry through with that kind of activity. You don't see any harm? Then continue with the activity. When you're done, you can reflect back on what you've done. What were the actual results? If you see that it caused harm, the Buddha doesn't say to be down on yourself, to think you're a horrible person. He simply says look at that action and remind yourself: I don't want to do that action again. Then talk it over with someone else who's more advanced on the path to see what advice you can get.

That's one of the reasons why the Buddha has the Sangha—people who dedicate their lives to the practice—because the world out there has all kinds of weird ideas about where happiness comes from. So it's good to have some people to associate with who are not blown around by the opinions of the world so that you can get reliable advice. But even then, you take other people's advice and you put it to the test. If you act in line with what they say, do you really find yourself more at ease with yourself? Do you have more self-esteem?

Then you learn ways of dealing with those really hard decisions—the ones where there's something you like to do but you know is going to cause harm, or things that you don't like to do but are going to cause happiness. Sometimes, you can't just will yourself to avoid the harmful things that you like or will yourself to do the things that you know are good for you but you don't like doing. You need to have strategies; you need to have ways of talking to yourself, to cajole yourself, to do only the things that are going to be harmless.

This is one of the reasons why we practice meditation. You find after a while that sitting here—if you really pay attention to the breath and give yourself over to it—you really do feel more and more at home with the breath. You've got a center of well-being that you can tap into simply by sitting down and breathing in a very calm and nourishing way.

A lot of the time, the reason we do unskillful things is because we're hungry for pleasure. We don't see any pleasure inside ourselves, so we go out and gobble down whatever we can find that we think will give us pleasure outside. And more often than not, when you're hungry, you really don't see straight. So one of the purposes of the meditation is to give you a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness inside, that allows you to see things clearly, and not through the eyes of hunger. Simply breathing in, breathing out in a way that feels really good, the mind is in a

much better position to make the right choice—to see clearly what’s the least harmful thing to do and to follow through with it.

In this way, you learn to take cause and effect as your guide. In other words, just because somebody outside says something, it doesn’t mean you have to believe it. Just because your opinions say something, you don’t have to believe them. But you learn from your mistakes. You do something and you realize, “Boy, this has really caused a lot of trouble in my life!” Okay, you make up your mind not to do it again. You find some other way of looking for happiness.

When you learn how to train the mind, that other way is often inside. You can sit very calmly and breathe and feel a lot better. When you feel better, the mind is going to be sharper, and it’s easier to make the right decision. So you become your own best friend. This is a problem with a lot of us. We’re often our own worst enemy, doing things to ourselves that we’d never stand to have anybody else do to us. And yet, because we’re the ones who are doing it, we let it happen.

So of course, we’re going to make mistakes. But the Buddha’s teaching is for people to learn from their mistakes. There’s a passage where he gives instructions to his son on how to make up his mind on what to do, basically the instructions I was telling you just now. He doesn’t say don’t make mistakes. He says if you make a mistake, this is how you handle it. This is how you learn from it so that you don’t repeat your mistakes.

And again, he doesn’t advise that you get really down on yourself or browbeat yourself for being a horrible person. He says to put that idea out of your mind. Simply look at the action and say, “Okay I see that I harmed either myself or harmed someone else. That’s not an action I want to repeat.” And then spread goodwill to everyone, including yourself.

So his teaching is very humane. He teaches you how to have respect for yourself. You can train your own powers of observation.

Ultimately, you can train yourself to be a happy person, to know where true happiness lies. You can put together the causes that will lead to true happiness. This is why we respect the Buddha. He teaches us to have respect for ourselves, to respect the things within ourselves that are worthy of respect: one, our desire for true happiness; and two, the qualities of mind we can develop that will bring about that true happiness. So when you bow down to the Buddha, you’re bowing down to what’s good in yourself—what’s admirable in yourself.

But the bowing isn’t enough. You want to actually develop what’s admirable in yourself. This is why we have the training: the training in virtue—in other words, learning to abstain from things that harm yourself and harm other people; and training in concentration like we’re doing right now—learning to be mindful

and alert, developing your strength of mind to stay with one thing consistently, to really learn from it, to really observe it, both so that you gain knowledge and so that the mind can have a place to settle down, where it can gather its strength and develop a sense of well-being that doesn't have to depend on anything outside.

When you've got this independent source of happiness inside, it makes it a lot easier to deal with the world. Because, as I said, there are a lot of influences out in the world that want to push you around. They want your money; they want all kinds of stuff out of you. You need a place inside where you can take your stance and be free from those outside influences. You can stand on your own two feet.

This is why we work with the breath, because the breath is something you're always going to have with you as long as you're alive. It's kept you alive this long. If you pay more attention to it, you find that it does a lot more than just keep you alive. It can provide a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. If you suffer from stress diseases, working with the breath can work through that stress and dissolve it away so that physically you're healthier, and mentally you have a home. Wherever you are, you're at home.

So take some time to make this house into a home. Make the body comfortable right now. Think of the breath not just as air going in and out through the nose, but as the whole flow of energy in your body. As you breathe in, where do you feel the sensation of movement in the body? If you watch very carefully, you'll see that there's a subtle movement that goes throughout the whole body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. If you relax into a good posture, you find that that energy is nourishing all over the body. And you realize it's something you can learn how to tap into whenever you need it.

This takes practice. Don't get down on yourself if you find yourself wandering off. Just come back and say, "Okay let's try this again." And again and again. It's the person who's willing to learn again and again and again who learns the lesson well. This is a way of showing respect for yourself, realizing that you do have the potential within you for finding true happiness. Give it some respect, give it some time, and you'll be amazed at the results.