

A Total Training

July 27, 2009

Start each meditation session with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is a wish for happiness, *true* happiness here. This is to remind you of why you're meditating. You want to find true happiness and you want a happiness that doesn't harm other people's happiness.

So you tell yourself, "May I find true happiness. May all living beings be happy," as we chanted just now. Which means, of course, that you're going to have to look for a happiness that comes from within.

Happiness that depends on outside conditions is not stable. And it's limited. There are only so many nice outside conditions that can go around. The way of the world is that if you gain something, somebody else has to lose it. Whether it's a physical object or a relationship or a job, things are limited in the world.

And if you're looking for a happiness in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, as the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, you wouldn't have enough money to buy all the sensual pleasures you wanted. So looking for that kind of happiness is a dead end.

This is why we turn and look inside, at the potential we have for happiness right here at the breath. The breath gives us a good comfortable place to stay, helps us create a sense of ease in the body, which then helps to create a sense of ease in the mind.

The mind has to be trained. It's as if you're training an animal. The animal has to trust you in order to put up with some of the harshness of the training. So one way to make the training easier is to learn how to use the breath as your friend.

Try to find what way of breathing feels really good right now. It could be long breathing or short breathing, fast or slow, heavy or light, deep or shallow. Experiment to see what feels best. When you find a rhythm that feels good, stick with it until it doesn't feel good anymore, then change it. Try to keep tabs on what the body's breath-needs are.

And "breath" here doesn't mean just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It means the movement of energy as you breathe in, the movement of energy as you breathe out, which you can feel in any part of the body. Once that movement feels good, think of it spreading to different parts of the body, so that the breathing becomes a whole-body process. Everybody's participating in the breath.

If the mind wanders off, bring it back and then see if the breath can be made even more comfortable.

This way, over time, the breath becomes more satisfying; the mind becomes more tame. You want the mind to become less and less stubborn and more and more tractable, because a large part of the training is learning how to focus it on things that are useful.

All too often, we spend all our time thinking about things that are totally of no help at all. You can sit here and make yourself miserable or you can sit here and make yourself happy, simply by the way you think. For the most part, the mind is very skilled at making itself miserable. It gets all upset about issues that are totally irrelevant. And can think about them for years and years and get all messed up inside.

This is why, when the Buddha taught, there were a lot of topics he just wouldn't get involved in. And you might say, "Well, where's my freedom to think?" Well again, you're free to make yourself suffer if you want to, but do you really want to? How about bringing the mind to think about things that really are helpful in leading to happiness instead?

This is why the Buddha stressed right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration in the practice. Right effort is when you see that a certain mental state or line of thinking is not helpful, that it's actually creating suffering, so you do your best to abandon it. If you know you're going into a situation where you tend to think in unskillful ways, you try to think in a way that's going to prevent those thoughts from happening. As for skillful thoughts, if they haven't arisen yet, you give rise to them. If they have arisen, you try to maintain them.

This applies not only to thinking but also mental states in general. And one way to give yourself a good grounding so that you can actually watch the mind is to practice right mindfulness. Find a topic for the mind to keep thinking about, to keep in mind. It could be the body in and of itself or feelings or mind states or mental qualities in and of themselves.

The difference between mind states and mental qualities is like the difference between a whole committee making a decision and the different members of the committee having different ideas. The mind state is the whole committee. Mental qualities are individual members of the committee.

But if you focus directly on the mental processes right away, it's very easy to get lost in them. So it's a good idea to take an aspect of the body like the breath as your frame of reference, as you're ardent, alert and mindful.

Mindful means you keep the breath in mind all the time, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-.

Alert means that you watch to see what's exactly going on. How does the breath feel? Does it feel good? Does it feel uncomfortable? How about the mind:

Does the mind stay with the breath or is it wandering around? You've got to keep watch on what's actually happening.

Ardency is the effort to do this right. Basically it's right effort applied to maintaining mindfulness and alertness. If the mind has wandered off, you bring it right back. You don't tell yourself, "Well, here I've got a whole hour to sit. I'll give myself a few minutes to sort of gradually settle down." Or, "I've been meditating all day so it's time to give the mind a little leash."

You can't think in those ways. As soon as the mind wanders off, just bring it right back. Show it that you mean business. In other words, you're training it.

When it *is* with the breath, you try to be as sensitive to the breath as possible. As I said, if the breath feels comfortable, it's easier to stay. The more sensitive you are, the greater the pleasure you can derive from the breath. The more finesse you can use in adjusting the breath so that it really is just right, the more gratifying it feels deep down inside.

That's what ardency means: You're trying to do this skillfully. You *want* to do it skillfully. Desire here is perfectly fine. The desire to master the path is not a cause of suffering. It's what's needed to stay with the path. Sometimes you think about the goal at the end of the path and how good it would be to be totally free of suffering as a way of giving yourself motivation to stick with the path. But then you realize, "If I'm going to get there, I have to focus on what I'm doing here." So you come right back to be mindful of the breath.

As your mindfulness and alertness become more and more skillful, they turn into right concentration. You think about the breath; you evaluate the breath to gain a sense of singleness with the breath. In other words, the breath becomes the one thing you're continually thinking about. It's the one thing that fills your whole awareness of the body. When that happens, there's a sense of ease or pleasure, and a sense of fullness or refreshment, rapture. You allow that to spread throughout the body, too.

This is how you provide a foundation for the mind. And you get the mind in good shape so that it can start understanding what's going on in the present moment. Because the more steadily you can stay here with a sense of well-being, the easier it is to see the movements of the mind and to be honest with yourself about them.

This quality of honesty is very important. As the Buddha once said, "Let an observant person come, one who is honest and no deceiver, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma."

It's a lot easier for the mind to be honest with itself when it's in a good mood. It's as if you're doing an experiment. You want to make sure the scientists are well-

fed so that they don't start stealing the money from the experiment to feed themselves. There was a case years back about a malaria researcher who was stealing all the money that was supposed to be going into the malaria research. He got himself a nice car, got himself a nice house, fed himself very well. In other words, he was a hungry researcher. So, of course, the experiment never succeeded.

It's the same with the meditation: You've got to feed the mind well. And the Buddha often talks about right concentration as food for the mind: rice, beans, honey, ghee—all kinds of good things for the mind. When the mind is well-fed, then you can watch it and see where it creates suffering and stress for itself.

Oftentimes you find that it's caused by the things you like to do. This is why it's important that the mind be well-fed, so that it can look at its old likes and see their drawbacks and be willing to let them go.

So work on developing this foundation. It's a common fault as meditators that we want to go really quickly to the discernment before we've developed the foundation for it. As Ajaan Fuang once said, it's like building a many-storey building. If the foundation is poor, then even just one storey is going to collapse. But if the foundation is solid, you can build as many storeys as you like.

So focus on getting this foundation strong.

This is one of the reasons why in the forest tradition there's not that much emphasis placed on learning a lot about the Dhamma, reading a lot of Dhamma books, because the mind can get lost in all those theories. You want to read enough so that you understand what's going on and then actually create the genuine qualities in your mind.

The books are like roadmaps. And although sometimes it is fun to just look at maps, it's not the same as actually being there.

So you try to develop all the good qualities that are needed to get the mind there—"there" meaning right here in the present moment with a sense of stability, equanimity, purity of mindfulness. If you find it difficult to get here, look at your actions, look at your words, look at the way you think to see what's getting in the way. View every aspect of your life here as part of the training: as you work, as you talk, as you engage with other people, as you're sitting by yourself.

Always remember that you're here to train the mind, not just to let it go in its old ways. Because the mind can be trained. As the Buddha said, if it weren't possible to train the mind, he wouldn't have taught people to do it. If it weren't possible to abandon unskillful behavior and to develop skillful behavior in its place, he wouldn't have told people to do it. But it is possible. It can be done.

Many of the same principles that apply to training an animal apply here. On the one hand, you have to have a lot of goodwill for the mind. You have to want its

true happiness. But there are times when you also have to be very strict with it. Thoughts, words, deeds that don't really help in the training: Don't think that they're unimportant. They eat away at the progress you could be making in the meditation.

This is why the path the Buddha taught is not just right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right view. It includes right speech, right action, right livelihood, and right resolve. It's a total training.

While you're here at the monastery, make sure that all your time here is devoted to the training so that you get the most out of the experience.