

Brahmaviharas at the Breath

February 7, 2010

We chant the brahmaviharas, the four sublime attitudes, every evening before the meditation. It's to remind ourselves of the attitudes we should bring to ourselves and to other people: attitudes of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy or appreciation, and equanimity. You notice that the chant starts with extending these attitudes toward ourselves. One of the difficulties in learning how to master these attitudes is learning how to develop them at the right time, the right place. Because there are times when we have goodwill for ourselves and times when we don't; when we have compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, toward ourselves, and times when we don't. And it's not necessarily the case that we can easily master the question of when is the right time, and when is the right place, for each of these attitudes. So it's good to think of the meditation as an opportunity to learn that skill with the breath.

Come to the breath with goodwill: May the breath be easeful; may you relate to it well. And what does it mean to relate to it well? On the one hand, you want to explore it, and on the other hand, you want to learn how to direct it. Explore its various ins and outs: long, short, deep, shallow, fast, slow, heavy, light. Explore the range of its possibilities. At the same time, learn to explore what the body needs in terms of the breath right now. What kind of breath would feel good? Make that your intention right now. That's the beginning of goodwill: learning how to find pleasure in a harmless way; learning to explore the various resources you have right at hand.

One of the themes in the teachings of the forest ajans is that all you need for awakening is right here. You have it. You've got the body, you've got the breath, you've got the mind thinking and aware, and that's really all you need. Simply learn how to familiarize yourself with what you've got, the potentials of what you've got, for the purpose of a happiness that's true, lasting, harmless, blameless. So come to the breath with that attitude: You're here to learn its potentials, and then to see what, out of that wide range of potentials, is best for right now.

Following right in the wake of goodwill is compassion, on the one hand, and empathetic joy on the other. In other words, when things are not going well, you want them to go well, you want to explore to see what's going wrong, why the breath isn't comfortable so that you can make adjustments. Why is the mind not settling down with the breath? You put in the effort to find out: That's an expression of compassion. When things are going well, you learn how to maintain

them. On the one hand, this means not abandoning whatever you've got; on the other hand, it means not getting so excited that you ruin what you've got. This is an important skill in the meditation. When things are going well, how do you keep them going well? Not abandoning means that when you're having a meditation that's going well, don't stop. Suppose you've told yourself that you're going to meditate for an hour, and the hour is up. You say, "Well, that's it for right now, we'll just stop right here." Well, no. Try to maintain that sense of ease and well-being. If you have chores to do, you get up, and you try to maintain that sense of ease as you're doing your chores.

Ajaan Fuang once noted that if you're doing a chore around the monastery and you find you've lost your meditation, stop, and be still for a while, until you've got it back, and then continue. That's an expression of empathetic joy: When you've got something that's going well you don't want to abandon it. At the same time, when you find yourself suddenly settling into a state of mind that's more peaceful, more rapturous, more pleasant than anything you've noticed before, you might have a tendency to get excited, and that ruins it. So you want to develop the attitude that when something good comes along: "Oh. There's this, too." No exclamation points.

And just because something seems good right at the beginning doesn't mean that it necessarily is good. So you want to watch it for a while. Learn how to maintain it, and watch it to see how it shows its true colors. Admittedly, this is going to be a difficult skill to master because it's so easy to get excited about something new in your meditation. You've been trying so hard for so long that when finally something seems to be a great breakthrough, you get excited. Well, just chalk that up to experience, and remind yourself: The next time this comes, you don't have to get excited about it. It's there, the potential is there for you to return to. Just keep your cool, and maintain that attitude: "Oh, there's this, too."

And then, finally, you'll find that there are certain things in the breath that, no matter what you do, you can't change: certain pains in the body, certain difficulties in breathing, as in when you have a cold, or the simple fact that things are not going well, and for some reason you just can't figure it out. Well, you try to maintain an attitude of equanimity. This means not getting upset, just keep plugging away, developing the patience you need to stick with the problem. But if you find you really can't get anything to change, you learn how to accept that fact for the time being. With pains in certain parts of the body, as Ajaan Lee once said, it's like going into a house where some of the floorboards are rotten: You don't lie down on the floorboards. If there are pains in your knees, pains in your hips, you

don't make that the focus of your attention. You focus on the parts that are comfortable. And you remind yourself, after all, that those knees and those hips are not really yours. You have the choice as to whether or not you want to lay claim to the pain in those knees and hips, or just notice, "There is a pain," in the same way that there is a heater over on the other side of the room, or cold outside, or whatever the condition is that you can't really change, things you learn how to accept about the world. And you work with what you *can* change.

In this way, the meditation is practice in these four attitudes, learning when which one is appropriate and how to generate the appropriate one when you need it. This means learning how to develop the sensitivity to what you can change and what you can't change, and to make the most of what you can. Because all too often we focus on the things we can't change, get upset about them, and all these other potentials that we could really benefit from just stay undeveloped. But as you meditate, this is where you move from beginner's mind to expert's mind. In beginner's mind there are a lot of potentials, but a lot of them are unrealized, and you're totally unaware of them. Someone who's truly expert has learned how to find those potentials and explore them, to develop a sense of which potential you want to work on, which potential you're going to leave alone, where the possibilities are, and where the limitations are.

And hopefully, as you develop these skills in your meditation as they apply to the mind here, dealing with the present moment, looking after its own well-being, you can apply them to the situations around you. Because a similar principle applies: You want to have goodwill for yourself and for everybody around you. If there are things you can do to help improve a situation, you work to improve it. When the situation is going well, you try to maintain it; you do your best to keep it going. With things you can't change, you learn how to accept that fact, and work around it.

When you develop this kind of sensitivity, you find that it really is for your true well-being, and for the well-being of others. Because the basic principle in Buddhism is that happiness is not an either/or proposition. It's not a zero-sum game. In other words, your happiness doesn't have to depend on other people's suffering, and it doesn't mean that, in looking after your happiness, you're ignoring other people's happiness. Developing happiness through generosity, virtue, meditation, is a way of developing happiness that spreads around, and the dividing line between your well-being and other people's well-being gets dissolved.

So try to bring these attitudes to your meditation, develop them in your meditation, so that you become more sensitive to which of the attitudes is appropriate at any one time, and to how you can actually generate that attitude

when it's needed. And then realize that these skills are not limited to how you relate to the breath. They relate to how you deal with the people around you, the situations around you.

And in that way they really do become brahmaviharas. The brahmaviharas aren't just goodwill, aren't just compassion, or empathetic joy, or equanimity. To be brahmaviharas, these attitudes have to be unlimited and you have to be able to apply them to any case where they're appropriate at any time, to all beings. This is going to take work, because these attitudes don't come to us more naturally than their opposites. The potential for skillful attitudes and unskillful attitudes is always there in the mind. Heedfulness is what helps you develop the skillful ones—the realization that your choices are important, that life is short, our time here to meditate is short, our time with one another is short, and so you want to be as careful, as vigilant, and as discerning as possible in how you learn to get the most out of our short time here.