

Like a River Full of Water

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When Ajaan Suwat gave Dhamma talks during the meditation, he'd usually start out by saying to approach the meditation with an attitude of respect, an attitude of confidence, because we're doing something important here. We're not just sitting here breathing. We're training the mind to find true happiness. And that's an activity you want to respect. To begin with, you want to respect your desire for true happiness. Don't let the world tell you that it's impossible to find a happiness that's beyond conditions, totally reliable. They want to sell you their lesser forms of happiness, so they teach you to have doubts about the possibility of true happiness can be found. The Buddha didn't speak in those terms at all. He said it can be found. It can be found through your own efforts.

And where do your efforts come from? They come from the mind, so the mind has to be trained. If it's not trained, it has a habit of creating a lot of unnecessary suffering and stress. So this is our major responsibility right here: looking after the mind. If we take care of the mind, then other issues take care of themselves. Even if you may have past bad karma, a well-trained mind can help you withstand the results of past bad karma.

The image the Buddha gave is of a large lump of salt. He says if you put it into a small cup and added a little water, could you drink the water? Well, no, because the water would be way too salty. But if you found a large clean river and put the lump of salt in the river, could you drink the water in the river? Yes, because the amount of water is so much larger. He said that in the same way, an untrained mind is like that little bit of water in the cup. When any bad thing comes as a result of your past karma, the mind is totally overwhelmed.

Whereas it's different if your mind is well trained and expansive. This means two things: one, that your thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity are totally unlimited, immeasurable. And two, that your mind is not the sort of mind can be overcome by feelings of pleasure and pain. When pleasure comes, you don't get worked up about it; when pain comes, you don't get worked up about it. If you train your mind in those two ways, then it's expansive. It's like the water in the river.

So those are the two things you want to focus on. The first is developing these attitudes called the brahmagaviharas, the sublime attitudes. You want to practice making them limitless. It's not just that you can feel goodwill, sometimes, or

compassion, sometimes, for some people. You want to train the mind so that you can feel these attitudes for everybody—people, animals—always and everywhere.

You start with yourself, but you don't end with yourself. You think of how the suffering of others doesn't benefit you in any way, so why would you wish suffering on others? If you see other people suffering, the automatic development of goodwill is that it turns into compassion. If there's something you can do to help those people, you try to help them. If you see that people are already happy, goodwill develops into empathetic joy. *Mudita* is the Pali term. You don't get jealous over others' happiness. You don't get resentful or envious. You don't feel that their good fortune belittles you. After all, when you have good fortune, would you like people around you to be envious? Well, no. Or resentful? Not at all.

As for areas where you can't be of help, that's where you develop equanimity. This applies to yourself, to other people, or to situations that you don't want to see happen but it's just the way things are. You can't make a difference in some cases, so you want to be able to develop equanimity in every situation where it's needed.

So the Buddha has you practice these attitudes during meditation. Develop goodwill for yourself, spread it out to people close to your heart, and then out in ever widening circles. Then ask yourself, is there anybody in the world for whom you have trouble feeling goodwill? You might think of some people you really dislike. The Buddha's not telling you to be dishonest with yourself, to pretend that you have feelings that you don't. He's not telling you to like people who are hard to like, but you should still have goodwill for them regardless. If you find the people who you really have trouble feeling goodwill for, you have to stop and ask yourself: Do you benefit from their suffering in any way? And the answer is No. When you wish for their happiness, basically you're wishing that they would understand the causes of happiness and act on those causes. So it's not as if you're going around with a magic wand, hoping to make everybody's minds happy magically. You're hoping that they will understand the causes of happiness and act on them. Is that a hard thing to wish? That evil people voluntarily change their ways? That's what goodwill means.

Then you do the same for compassion and for empathetic joy.

With equanimity, the Buddha has you remember the principle of karma. There are certain things that are going to be influenced by past karma. After you've tried to make a difference and find you can't, you simply have to accept that that's the way things are, not so that you become defeatist, but simply realizing that if you pour a lot of energy into an area where you can't make any

difference, then you're wasting your time. You're wasting your energy, energy that could be usefully used with other people, in other areas.

So in developing these brahmaviharas, you want to be as wise and discerning as you can, because they're a way of developing discernment. They're not just nice thoughts or restful places to put the mind. As you're developing these attitudes, you want to develop the discernment that's realistic, clear eyed, so that these attitudes really can apply to your day-to-day life. Otherwise, you find yourself sitting there thinking thoughts of goodwill and then you get on the road and somebody cuts in front of you in traffic and all of a sudden you're thinking black thoughts about that person, as if your meditation had nothing to do with what's actually happening out there on the road. You want to develop these attitudes in such way that they really do apply to difficult situations in life. After all, that's when you really need them. That's when you can develop that mind liker river full of water: clean, pure, something you can be happy to drink no matter how much salt is poured into it, because the water is just so much more.

The same principle applies to developing the proper attitude toward pleasure and pain. When you sit here in the meditation, there are going to be pains: pains in your leg, pains in the back. If you find yourself defeated by these pains, you're going to have a lot of trouble in life. After all, the pains of aging illness and death, don't last only for, say, half-hour or an hour.

One of the sad things in life is that, especial toward the end, there can be long illnesses. Most people with untrained minds say their minds grow weaker and weaker through the illness, and at the same time, the pains grow stronger and stronger. They're totally overwhelmed. When they start thinking about the future, they see a big blank wall, so their minds immediately revert to the past, and they start feeding on thoughts of the past. Often, if the mind is weak, they think of something unskillful they did or somebody else did, and they get really worked up into really unskillful states.

You've really got to strengthen your mind so that it's not overwhelmed by pain. This means not just sitting with it, but also learning how to understand it. What is this sensation of pain? What's the difference between the pains, say, of the body or the aggregates, and the pain that comes from craving and ignorance, clinging and ignorance? That's an important distinction, because the second kind of pain—the clinging and ignorant pain, the pain that affects the mind—is what really makes you suffer. It's what takes the pain of the body and imposes it on the mind. If there's no craving, no ignorance, then the pain in the body is just there. The mind can be aware of it but not overcome by it.

So as you're sitting here, you want to have the right attitude toward the pain, that this is something you want to study, it's not something you just want to get past. You want to study this issue of pain, and that requires that the mind have a good solid foundation in concentration. That's why we're sitting here breathing in such way as actively to create a sense of pleasure. That's the foundation the mind is going to need. If its pleasure comes only from nice things outside, it's going to be constantly running away from pain. But if it has an internal source of pleasure, an internal source of ease and well-being, then it doesn't feel threatened by the pain in the body. It can investigate it and notice at what moment the mind feels burdened by the pain. What does the mind do that takes the pain of the body and makes it an issue in the mind? What perception of the pain does it have? How does that perception create a bridge into the mind? Can you drop that perception? What happens when you do?

Try to develop the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment, so that you can see into these issues. In other words, you learn how to use pleasure, learn how to use pain, so that pain is not something you just run away from, and pleasure is not something you just run toward. You want to learn how to use them both as tools so that you can gain an understanding. The greater the understanding, the more the mind becomes free of the influence of pleasure and pain, so that these things don't overcome the mind, so that you can develop that mind like a river full of water: clean, pure, so even though big lumps of salt get thrown in, as the Buddha says, you hardly notice them. That way, the mind can rise above its conditions, expansive, free.

This is something you can do with the mind. The mind can be trained in this direction, but it's each person's responsibility. As Ajaan Suwat used to say, each of us has only one person we're responsible for. You can't be responsible for other people's behavior—even people in your family, even your own children, to say nothing of the other people you meet in the course of the day. If you waste your time hoping that they'll be nice like this, and nice like that, you're neglecting what it's really your responsibility: making sure that your mind is strong, expansive, well-trained.

Make sure that you take the time to carry out this responsibility. If you don't, nobody else can do it for you. And if you don't do it now, one, you're just leaving yourself open to a lot of suffering, and two, it's not going to get easier as you get older. It's not something you want to put off.

So be very clear about what is your responsibility and what's not. As the Buddha said, this is a sign of a wise person: You know what your responsibility is and you do it. As for the things that are the responsibility of other people, you

leave them alone. It's a very basic level of wisdom that we tend to overlook. But as is so often the case with really basic teachings, it's really important. You always have to keep it in mind.