

After-work Meditation

October 22, 2011

I once had a student in Singapore who told me that at the end of every day, when he came home from work, he'd sit down and dump out all the garbage in his mind. At work, he felt like a garbage pail. At the end of the day, after all kinds of people had been throwing their garbage into his pail, he came back and, in order to survive, before he did anything else at home, he had to sit down and meditate for a while, to dump the garbage out. As I told him, ideally it's best not to keep the garbage even that long. See if there's some way you can cut a big hole in the bottom of your garbage pail, so that when people throw things in, it just goes right through.

This doesn't mean that you ignore criticism, because sometimes criticism is useful, sometimes it's right. There are things you can learn from other people. But there is that tendency to hang onto things, especially when the criticism is not right. The sense of being abused, the sense of being mistreated, is probably the strongest sense of self we have. But what does it accomplish? You suffer from it, and it just compounds your suffering.

So that's something you've got to look at: the extent to which you hold onto the fact that you been victimized, that you've been mistreated, especially when it's true. We're not denying that there are victimizers out there. But you're actually helping them in their mistreatment of you by hanging onto it. They say something once, and you say it over and over again in your mind many times. It's as if they stabbed you once with a knife and then they threw it down on the ground, and then you pick it up and you keep stabbing yourself with it.

So this is a habit we've got to learn how to overcome so that we don't carry these things around. If you find that you *have* been carrying this sort of stuff around, it's wise at the end of the day to sit down and see how much you can clear things out.

Of course, meditation is an ideal way of doing this. But many times it's hard to get with the breath. So you have to look at what you're saying to yourself. As you sit down to meditate, what's the topic of conversation? Instead of doing walking meditation, do talking meditation. We have to learn how to talk well to ourselves. This is what directed thought and evaluation are about. To get the mind to settle down, you have to talk to it, to get it in the right mood. Talk to it in ways that will allow it to let go.

So take a couple of good, long, deep, in and out breaths. Make that your foundation. And remind yourself of some of the topics of inner conversation that can help you let go of those things you're holding onto.

One is the reminder of the principle of karma: that the things that have happened to you are not nearly as important as the things you do. What's coming at you could be the result of old karma, but that's no reason to get down on yourself if it's very negative. After all, everybody has negative karma in the past. But you have to ask yourself: How are you responding now? What are you making of that? What other people do to you, as the Buddha once said, is not going to make you go to hell, but what you do could make you go to hell. So we don't have to worry about hell after death. Focus on the hell that you put yourself into right now.

So ask yourself not what other people did to you in the course of the day, but what did you do? It's like that woman who wanted to train her son to think. So at the end of the school day, she didn't ask him, "What did you learn?" She asked him, "What questions did you ask?" Think about what you're able to do in the course of the day, and what actions you did that were not all that skillful, and make the resolve that you're going to try to be more skillful the next time around. This way, you change the focus. Remind yourself that you do have a role where you can be more proactive in life, and that it's what you *do* with the situation that makes all the difference. The situation may be bad, but you can turn it into something good. It's like being an alchemist. You take lead and other base metals and you try to turn them into gold, i.e., an opportunity for you to do good.

There was one time when Ajaan Fuang took a group of his students up to the chedi on one *wan phra*. When they got up there, they found that someone had left garbage all over the place. So Ajaan Fuang led the group in by picking up the garbage. Someone complained, "How could anybody think of throwing garbage around a place like this?" And Ajaan Fuang replied, "Don't complain. They gave you an opportunity to do some good. Here's your opportunity to clean up."

That's one way you can reframe things. Another is to spread thoughts of goodwill, starting with yourself. Remind yourself that the kind of chatter that makes you miserable is not showing goodwill to yourself. It's not helping anything in anyway. And learn how to speak to yourself in a way that shows compassion, that shows goodwill, really does wish for your true happiness. A part of the mind has a tendency to believe in the negative things more than in the positive, so it feels fake to remind yourself of how much you really do want true happiness. But don't you want to happiness? Can't you allow yourself to think that thought? Part of the mind will say, "But look at all these horrible people and what they're

doing.” Well, that’s their business. That’s their karma. You don’t have to go around collecting other people’s bad karma and weighing yourself down.

Take a couple of good, long, deep breaths again. Air things out. Think about how petty a lot of the issues are that you get worked up about—the things that people say and do. You know that ten years from now you’re going to totally forget them. Or you’ll look back on today and say, “How could I let myself get so worked up about those things? Why did I waste my time?” So try to take a longer view of the day. It’s not just today. You’ve got a whole life, and it’s a being eaten away day by day by day. Do you want it to be eaten up by these things?

Take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths again. In other words, learn how to talk to yourself in a way that’s really helpful until you can decide that, yeah, you are ready to let go of the issues of the day, and try to get back to your home base, which is the breath.

You’ll find that once you can enlarge your awareness to fill the body like this, it’s harder to think about the past and the future. It’s as if the mind, in order to think about the past or the future, has to make itself very small, and then it can slip down the passageways. But if you’re firmly here, fully inhabiting your body right now, it can’t fit down the passageways. Think that you’re one with the breath energy in the different parts of the body, you can use that breath energy to spread healing and soothing energies.

Ask yourself: Where do you feel okay right now? Take that as the center of your awareness. Then for areas that feel tense or tight, overworked, think of the good energy from your good spots spreading to those other spots. Again, the emphasis here is on the positive. The more soothed the body feels, the less it wants to hang onto the things that make it suffer. It’s funny, it’s because we suffer and indulge in our suffering and complain about it that we make ourselves suffer even more. If there’s a sense of well-being that you can breathe into the body, you can start asking yourself: Why would you want to hold onto those things? In this way, you can gradually pull yourself out of those old habits of thinking, of going around and picking up the garbage and carrying the garbage around.

The mind does have this tendency to be like a vacuum cleaner: It picks up all the dirt and all the dust. To what purpose? Shake out the garbage, shake out the vacuum cleaner bag, then, to whatever extent you can, be aware of the breath here in the present moment. Focus on that wherever you feel it. Again, make the emphasis on the spots that feel okay. They may not feel overwhelmingly rapturous or blissful, but the bliss and the rapture come from the areas that are simply okay to begin with. Give them some space. When you give them some space, they can develop in intensity. The body does begin to feel blissful; it does begin to feel

rapturous. Try to allow these feelings to fill, and to seep into all the parts of the body that have been starved. You might think about the area inside the brain, the area in your shoulders, all the parts of the body that tend to carry the tension around. Let them have as much good breath energy as they need.

In other words, try to get more and more interested in what you can do here in the present moment, the opportunities you have for creating a better energy field in the body, soothing the patterns of tension, soothing the areas that feel overworked, so that the mind has better things to feed on.

Spread thoughts of goodwill to all the people you've dealt with in the course of the day, and that you're going to be dealing with tomorrow. You do that at the beginning of the session: That's to help clear the air so that you can meditate. Then do it again at the end of the session to set your intention straight for the next day. Because if you come at the other people with a sense of being hungry and suffering, they're going to pick it up. And then they may want to just throw a little extra garbage your way. Come with the sense of goodwill, a sense of fullness and strength: That'll change the equation.

This is what you carry out of the meditation: the reminder that it's not what other people do that matters, it's what you do. And you want to be more proactive, developing the strength inside so that your pro-activeness fills more and more of your attention, and grows more and more skillful. That way, you'll begin to find, as you come home in the evening, that you've been collecting less and less garbage, and you'll have less to throw out.

This is how you put that hole in the garbage pail, so that whatever gets thrown in, goes right through. You have the choice of keeping only the good things and letting the bad things just vaporize. The image I sometimes use for meditation is good for going through the day: Think of your mind as a large screen, like the screen on a window. The wind blows through, but the screen doesn't catch the wind. Allow all the negative things to go through, go through, and you'll have less to weigh you down.