

Goodwill, Gratitude, No Guilt

August 9, 2014

When you focus on the breath, try to breathe in a way that feels really refreshing. Think of the breath energizing your entire torso all the way down, and then even beyond the torso down through the legs, down the back. Any part of the body that seems tired or tense, in need of a little refreshment, a little bit of soothing: Let the breath do that.

One of the ways you're going to get the mind to stay here is by making the breath interesting. As I said this afternoon, if you can find a task to do with the breath, so much the better.

There may be a tightness or tension in some part of the body.

In the monastery where I was first ordained, they had a skeleton hanging in the side of the sala. Sometimes I would sit in front of it and notice that its spine was straight. So I'd ask myself, "Okay, can I tell if my spine is straight now?" I was able to feel that there were different muscles pulling it out of alignment. "So how about allowing those muscles to relax?" Do that as you breathe in, breathe out. Think of the breathing helping with the relaxing process, so that you can straighten your spine, work through tension in any part of the body that feels like it's blocked or tight or solid in a way that's interfering with the breath.

Hold in mind the perception the breath can penetrate anything. After all, it's energy. The solid parts of the body are composed of atoms that are mostly space. So let the energy go through.

This way, you give yourself a grounding, something to do in the present moment. Otherwise, if you're just here—"in out, in out"—the mind suddenly goes out and it doesn't come back in. It's bored. Nothing's happening. The mind needs something to do, so give it something good to do, something here in the body.

Another exercise is to go through and think of what you've got here in the body. Think of your head: There are the bones of the skull, there are the various parts of the brain, all the muscles, the skin. Just go down through the body, thinking of the various parts—and as you're thinking of them, think about how the breath energy is flowing in them.

You need something to connect you with the present moment, because the mind has so many stories and other issues that pull it off to the past, to the future, to other people. They always seem to say, "This is more important. This is more

important. Think over there, what I've got over there." You've got to remind yourself, "No, this is more important right here in the present moment."

You may feel like you're abandoning your responsibilities outside, but that's not the case. You've got to remember that each of us is a karmic being, you might say. In fact the whole sense that we are a being is a kind of karma. We're constantly doing things that have an impact both on ourselves and on other people.

Where does that impact come from? It comes from the mind. The mind is making choices. If it doesn't pay much attention to what it's doing and it's not really determined to change things, it just goes along in its own ways, forgetting that it's creating all kinds of influences on people and things around you. The mind is an active principle. If you're wise, you want to train it so that it can be active in ways that are skillful.

One of the most responsible things you can do, both within yourself and in your relationship to other people, is to take time out to get the mind well-trained.

You'll find yourself arguing with different voices in the mind. There's the voice of guilt, saying that you're being irresponsible. But the Buddha never encourages guilt as a motivation. He says that if you reflect on things that you've done wrong, where you've harmed yourself or harmed other people in the past, realize that remorse and guilt are not going to undo the harm. The best you can do as a human being living in time is to make up your mind that you're not going to repeat that mistake. Then try to strengthen the resolve. And guilt is not one of the ways you strengthen it.

There are two attitudes that the Buddha recommends. One is goodwill, which means goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others, realizing that punishing yourself is not going to strengthen you, but actually makes you weaker. If you have goodwill for yourself and goodwill for others, it's a lot easier to act on skillful motives, to do skillful things.

So how do you develop goodwill? You remind yourself of where happiness comes from: It comes from the mind and it gets expressed through your actions. Your actions can have an influence on your happiness and the happiness of others, so you want to be very careful about what you do and don't do. This is why the precepts are a part of goodwill, an expression of goodwill. And goodwill is a motivation for the precepts.

Not only that: The Buddha said that one of the best things you can do for someone else, if you're really working for their benefit, is to get them to observe the precepts, too. Now, you can't go around telling people they have to do this. You can tell your children and teach them. But the best way to teach them, of

course, is to set an example. So you look at your precepts. Where are they still lacking? This is one way you can be kinder to yourself and kinder to others. It's interesting that the Buddha says that to work for your own benefit is to observe the precepts; to work for the benefit of others is to get them to observe the precepts. If you're breaking the precepts, you're working for your own affliction. And it follows that if you're getting other people to break the precepts, you're working for their affliction. Notice, afflicting others doesn't mean hurting their feelings. It means teaching them the wrong things to do or giving the wrong example for them to do—because they're active beings too, and they'll have to meet with the results of their karma.

So you start with goodwill for yourself, spread it around to people for whom it's easy to feel goodwill, and then you start extending the boundaries: Are there people out there that you have trouble feeling goodwill for?

Some people say that they have trouble feeling goodwill for themselves even to begin with. That attitude is picked up from some very unhealthy attitudes and influences in our culture, and you have to argue with that. In some systems of thought, the idea is that good actions come from putting other people ahead of yourself, and that one way of putting them ahead of yourself is to make yourself feel miserable about yourself—that you're an unworthy person, you're not worthy of being happy. Other people somehow are.

But that's not a healthy way of approaching the project. The healthy way is to realize that we all want happiness, and there's nothing wrong with that desire. It's simply that we have to learn how to behave more skillfully so that we can actually attain it. The question of deserving or not deserving doesn't come into the equation. So you have to keep reminding yourself: There's nothing wrong with the desire to be happy, especially if the desire is approached skillfully, i.e., you want to find a happiness that's harmless. Then, when you do, you'll be in a better position to work for the happiness of others. xx

So start with goodwill for yourself, and then spread it out. If you find anybody outside for whom you have trouble feeling goodwill—either because they've harmed you, or harmed people you love, or harmed people you care about or feel sorry for—remind yourself: Nothing is accomplished by making those people suffer. There's no need for them to suffer before they can come to their senses and realize that they're actions are wrong. Remember that they, too, are active beings, and goodwill means wishing for the happiness that comes from their own actions. In other words, they have to see that what they're doing is wrong and that they want to change their ways. That's what you're wishing for when you spread goodwill to others.

When you think about it for a while, it's not all that difficult. There's no reason why you shouldn't have goodwill for anybody. Keep this up until you genuinely can tell yourself, "Yes. I have no ill will for anyone. I don't want to see anyone doing harmful things."

Then look at the extent to which you actually can be helpful in that direction. This is where you have to balance your goodwill with equanimity, realizing that there are a lot of things you cannot change, a lot of people who will not change their ways. But any opportunity where you think you could be effective, you want to act for the happiness of others as well as your own. The two go together.

That's another revolutionary part about the Buddha's teachings. There are certain forms of happiness that are not a zero sum game—that when you're good, when you're happy, the happiness spreads around. In fact, it erases boundaries rather than creating them.

The other motivation for strengthening your resolve to do good is gratitude, realizing that you've benefitted from the actions of others, and you appreciate the effort that went into their actions. Actually, what you feel is more than appreciation. You realize that they had the choice *not* to help you, but they saw that it was worthwhile to help you. The proper response here is twofold: One, you want to do what you can for them. And two, you want to spread that goodness around. Seeing how much you depend on the goodness of others makes you realize that there are other people out there who could benefit from your goodness to them, too.

It's interesting that the words in Pali for gratitude and for repaying gratitude all come from the same root word, *kata*, which deals with action. You appreciate the *actions* of others. You may appreciate certain *things* in your life, but you really feel gratitude for the actions of others. And the way you respond is that you act in return.

The fact that you appreciate the goodness that others have done for you is a sign that you appreciate the difficulty entailed. You have gratitude for that. If you sense that, it makes you more willing to do difficult things to help others. If you have no gratitude, it's very unlikely that you're going to do anything good. You either think that the other people had to do that, or it wasn't really all that hard for them, so why should you go to any trouble? But if you realize that often the right thing is difficult, but people did the right thing, and if you have a sense of gratitude for that, it's easier to do the right thing for others even when it's difficult for you.

So when you ask yourself about what your motivations are for doing things, if you find that it's guilt or remorse, realize that those emotions don't really help,

because they can actually tear you down. Try to work on your goodwill and your gratitude, and in that way your goodness becomes healthy. And it really does act for the benefit of you and those around you, because it becomes a good example. They, as active beings, can act in wise ways, too.

That's how goodness spreads through the world from one person to the next: through the example of our actions. This is why we train the mind, because all our actions come out of here. So try to do what you can to get the mind well-centered here in the present moment, with a sense of well-being, a sense of being grounded, a sense of being strong, a sense of refreshment and nourishment here with the breath.

Because goodness requires strength. And this is one of the best ways in which the mind can develop that strength.