

## *Honesty & Integrity*

*December 25, 2005*

True happiness has to come from within. This is an idea we've heard many times, and everyone will nod in assent—and then go out and look for happiness outside. That's because we're more familiar with the quest outside. So it takes an element of will to turn inside, and it has to be supported by skills inside as well.

If you simply look inside you'll say, well, there's not much there. You have to know how to look and what to do in order to develop the resources you've got into a real happiness. That's what we're working on as we meditate: figuring out how to look, what to do, and learning where the obstacles to true happiness are.

To begin with, the main obstacles are distraction and pain. You sit down here, and pretty soon this part of the body hurts, that part of the body hurts, and you think, "I hope I can get past that to the real thing." Well, it turns out that the pain *is* the real thing. The same with the distraction: You learn a lot from distraction, if you learn how to handle it properly, just as you learn a lot from the pain.

In fact, all of the issues that come up in the meditation, if you look at them in the proper way, are lessons. When the mind goes into a blank, there's a lesson there as well. You learn what kinds of objects the mind can stay focused on and stay alert, and what kinds of objects are not conducive in that way.

Sometimes you stay with one point in the body, and that point begins to disappear as the breath gets more and more refined. You suddenly find yourself with nothing to focus on. The mind goes into kind of a stupor. So you've got to watch out for that. Realize that it's not a conducive object for focusing.

You stay with the breath, but as soon as the breath gets comfortable, you've got to spread it out to the different parts of the body: Spread the breath or the sense of comfort. Think of the energy as nice, easy energy, like melted butter going through the body—filling up all the little spaces, saturating all the dry parts—and then maintain that whole-body awareness.

In other words, you've got to give the mind work to do if it's going to stay alert in the present moment. You can't just try to force it into stillness and hope that it'll stay. It'll either rebel or just go into a kind of stupor, which is another kind of rebellion.

Then there's the issue of pain. Nobody likes sitting with pain, but you've got to work your way around it if you're going to handle it properly.

Again, take the sense of ease that comes from the comfortable breathing and spread it around the body. If there's a pain, say, in the left leg or in your hip, allow the breath to spread through the pain, around the pain, to breakup whatever sense of solidity there is in the pain, and then go right through it.

But in the beginning, don't make the pain your primary focus. Make the comfort your primary focus. As for the pain, if it's in the leg, let the leg have it. You don't have to hold on to it. You don't have to grab hold of it.

This gives you a very basic lesson in the whole issue of self: You begin to realize that your sense of who you are is pretty arbitrary. You can choose to identify with the pain or you can choose *not* to identify with the pain, and so you get a sense of when selfing is either skillful or not skillful: an important lesson.

Eventually, once that feeling of ease is solid enough, you can actually look into the pain and make it more the focal point of your awareness. Take it apart, this solid-seeming pain: Exactly how solid is it? What are the sensations that go into making it up? What are the mental acts?—your acts of perception, the narratives you have about the pain, about how much longer this pain is going to last. If you follow that narrative—of how much longer it's going to last, or of how long it has lasted so far—that puts a huge burden on the present moment.

Can you drop the narrative? Why get involved in it if it's going to cause more pain? And who are you acting out this narrative for?

In this way, you use the pain to see how the mind acts around it and reacts to it. And you learn a lot of interesting lessons about the mind: all the unnecessary stories, all the unnecessary perceptions that create the suffering. Why get involved with them?

Distraction offers other good lessons: How is it that the mind moves from one object to another? What's the process? Often you catch yourself in the act of thinking about something else, so you pull yourself back and swear, "I'm never going to move off again." Then a few minutes later, you find yourself moving off again, and you get disappointed. It's almost as if it had never happened before.

You can expect that the mind is going to wander, so the issue is: Can you catch it in the act of wandering? When you can, you learn a lot of interesting lessons about the mind. The process of becoming—how it creates little worlds for itself; and then birth—how it goes into

those worlds. This is one of the big lessons of meditation and it's happening right before your eyes.

So instead of getting exasperated about the wandering off, regard it as an opportunity to learn. See how quickly you can catch yourself. See how quickly you can catch the whole process before it even becomes a thought. Then again, learn how to use the breath to deal with this.

Sometimes there's a little stirring that's even hard to classify as to whether it's physical or mental. When it's in that in-between state, you can breathe right through it, and that zaps the stirring. That's the end of that thought: a very useful skill.

Once you learn how to deal with the sleepiness and the pain and the distraction, you're beginning to master the skills for understanding the mind, mastering the skills for finding happiness inside. Underlying all this is a willingness to learn, to notice your actions, to connect cause and effect, and to figure out which kinds of causes are good causes and which ones are not. When you have that attitude—that you're here to learn—then no matter what comes up in the meditation, it becomes grist for the mill.

If you simply have it in mind that you want this or that to happen in the meditation and it doesn't happen and you get frustrated, that's not how you're going to find true happiness inside. It has to come from a willingness to learn, a willingness to observe, and particularly a willingness to being alert to your own actions.

So it's not just a matter of sitting there and watching whatever comes up. You've got to realize that you're playing a role in fashioning what comes up. So you've got to catch yourself in the act—so you can connect the cause and the effect.

It's not just the effects come floating around and you note, note, note this floats by, that floats by. Where is it floating from? How much of it is intentional? How much of it isn't? That's an important lesson to learn. And the only way you can learn it is if you're really honest with yourself and notice, "Okay, I did this, I did that. This is what happened as a result."

When you see those connections, that's when insight arises. And when you gain the insight, then you learn what to do, what not to do. It's all a question of skill.

Years back, I was teaching a retreat, and one of the themes of the retreat was just this: the skills of the mind, starting with skills in your outside behavior. If you don't have the attitude that you want to be skillful in your words and your deeds, it's going to be hard to develop an attitude of skillfulness in the mind.

One of the people on the retreat really objected. He said, “All this attention on what you’re doing here and what you’re doing there, cause and effect: Why not just open up to the Buddha nature that’s already there, that’s unmade and unfashioned? You’re distracting yourself from the real point.”

But I remember noticing, in the course of the retreat, the person’s girlfriend was there at the same time, and he was really treating her in a fairly abusive way. If there was anybody in the retreat who needed to learn how to be more skillful, he was the one. Yet he resisted precisely the lesson he needed to learn.

Focusing on your actions and their results is not a distraction. Because in what may seem to be opening up to the unconditioned, if you’re not clear about what you’re doing, you can be creating a nice little state there, but it’s your creation. It’s not unconditioned. It’s just something you’ve conceived and fashioned. And it may be a major state of denial, because denial can blanket everything—denial can feel really nice if you’re not observant.

But it’s when you’re really honest with yourself, “Okay, I did this, I did that, and these are the results”: That’s when you can learn: In these really nice open states of concentration, nice open states of ease and well-being in the mind, is it fashioned is it not fashioned? When you can see the element of fashioning, it’s still concentration. There’s still an intentional element here. You’ve got to work through that.

When you have that kind of willingness, when you have that kind of self-honesty, the knowledge you gain from the meditation becomes more and more reliable, the happiness you attain becomes more and more reliable. This is why that element of honesty, that element of integrity, is essential to insight. It’s essential to release.

Part of the meditation is getting the right method, but even the right method—if you’re not honest with yourself about what you’re doing and what’s connected to what you’re doing—won’t be able to break through because your element of self-honesty is lacking.

This is why training in virtue is an essential part of developing insight. You can’t just pull somebody off the street, sit them down, and give them a method and hope that the method will break through to true happiness inside. You’ve got to have that ability to see what you’re doing, what the results are of what you’re doing, to get sensitive to any little intention in the mind, skillful or not.

This is why the element of integrity comes in, because often we don’t like to admit to ourselves our unskillful intentions, or the mistakes that come about because of those

intentions.

This is why insight is not just a matter of being observant but also involves the element of integrity. Ignorance is not just a question of not having seen something. It's also a question of how we deny what's happened. We don't like to admit what's happened. We've willed ourselves into ignorance.

But when you learn to develop that quality of integrity—that when you make a mistake, you admit the mistake, and you resolve not to repeat it: When you can develop that quality in your day-to-day actions, it's easier to call on it when you're meditating.

That way, when you run into problems, instead of just moaning about the problems, you can sit down and look: "Okay, what did I do to cause the problem?" When you run into good things, you can check them out, "Is this truly good, or is this still something that's unstable, something that's unreliable in the long run?"

If you develop that quality of honesty, you'll be able to learn. The insight you gain from the meditation will become more and more reliable, the happiness you find will become more and more true—because *you're* true.