

## *Well-being Despite It All*

*January 12, 2007*

There's often that juxtaposition in the evening chant: on the one hand, the reflection of aging, illness, death, separation; or the chant on the world being swept away, with nothing enduring, no shelter. And then the chant that says, "May I be happy. May all living beings be happy."

The first series of chants sounds pretty bleak, almost as if it offers no hope at all. But there is that reflection, "I'm the owner of my actions. I'll fall heir to all the good and evil I do." In other words, the good you do leads to happiness. The good you don't do, or the things that you do that are not good, lead to unhappiness. So the hope is offered right there in your own actions.

And this is where, you might say, the Buddha throws a lifeline. He recognizes that life without happiness is hardly worth living. People talk about how the drive to survival is basic, but actually a deeper drive is the drive for happiness. There are times when survival, if it offers no prospects for happiness—isn't worth it. People would rather die. But here there *is* the prospect for true happiness. As the Buddha said, there's an ultimate happiness that's not touched by aging, illness, or death. This is why he talks so openly about these things.

The chant just now—that we're all subject to aging, illness and death—can also be translated as, "Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal." Yet normally we don't like to think about these things. We push them away. And then because we push them away, when they *do* come, they're overwhelming.

I had a friend who's a psychotherapist and one time was giving a talk at a conference on menopause. Most of the other speakers were talking about the various therapies to delay menopause. Her theme was, "Menopause is actually a good thing because it gives you time to stop and take stock of the fact that life is changing, and you don't have much time left. It's good to think about what's really worthwhile in your life and focus on that." She had the feeling as she was giving the talk that nobody wanted to hear that message. The organizers of the event told her afterward what a wonderful talk it was and how much everyone learned from it. But she knew deep down inside that it wasn't true. And sure enough, the next year when they had that same conference, they told her that she was not going to be invited.

This is what happens in a culture like ours that doesn't like to look at these things, that will try anything to avoid them, to push them away. Deep down inside it doesn't think there's anything you can do about them. But the whole reason the Buddha brings them up as a daily reflection—not only that *I* am subject to aging, illness and death, but *all beings*, no matter where they are, are subject to aging, illness and death—is to put things into perspective. It's to put your quest for happiness, your happiness and the happiness of people you love, into

perspective as well. You've got to take these things into account. And then you've got to find the way to train the mind so it can find a happiness that takes these things into account as well.

This is what we're doing as we meditate. Given that our hops lies in our actions, what is the source of our actions if not the mind? It's through our intentions that we act. And if we can learn how to train our intentions, that's where the prospect for happiness lies.

So this is why we focus inwardly as we meditate. We're focusing, to begin with, on the breath. The breath itself may be subject to change but it gives you something to hold on to. It's difficult right in the beginning to focus directly on the mind, so you focus on the breath instead, because the breath is near the mind, it's near your awareness. Anywhere that you're aware in the body, that you're aware *of* the body, is because of the breath energy. The word "breath" here doesn't mean just the in-and-out breathing, but also the flow of energy throughout the body. So notice where you feel that flow. It might be around the nose, or it might be in the chest, in the abdomen. You might feel it in your shoulders, anywhere. When you really get sensitive to this energy flow, you can feel it even down in your fingers and toes. But in the beginning, focus on the areas where you can feel it most distinctly: knowing, "Now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out."

And allow the breath to be comfortable. Try not to force it or squeeze it too much.

One of the first things you'll notice is that the mind has trouble staying here. It's going to wander off. That's because wander around is what it normally does. This is why we take birth. The mind gets curious about a certain idea or a certain state of being and it goes for it. You suddenly find yourself in a different world, a different thought-world. The process that you see on the small scale here in the mind is the same process that happens on the large scale, when you die and are reborn. So when you find yourself slipping off into another thought-world, just drop it. You don't need to pursue it, you don't need to see where it goes, or to tie up any loose ends. Just leave the loose ends dangling and come back to the breath.

And again, come back in a way that's like coming back to an old friend. After all, the breath *is* your friend. It's what keeps you alive. When you learn to get sensitive to it and can maintain the breath energy with a sense of ease, then it does more than just keep you alive, it keeps you healthy, it gives you a sense of feeling at home here in the present moment.

So as you're focusing on the breath just pose the question, "What kind of breath would feel good now?" and then, "What would feel good *now*?" Just keep that thought up with each breath. Because sometimes the needs of the body will change over time.

And sure enough, the mind will go wandering off again. Well, you bring it back. And bring it back, as I said, as if coming back to an old friend. Learn to see your thoughts not in terms of their content but in terms of their steps as a process. The mind creates little worlds but you can stand outside them. There's actually a point where you choose to go with the thought, get inside it, and go with it to wherever it's going to take you. Most of us don't realize that we have the choice. These worlds just are *there* and we're *in* them and we don't know what happened

in the meantime. It's as if someone came up and threw a big sack over us and picked us up and tossed us on a truck and dumped us someplace else.

When you find that happening, just come back to the breath. Re-establish, as they say, your awareness right here on this level, the level of the body being right here.

There are three qualities you need to develop in order to do this, once you've made up your mind you're going to be with the breath. The first quality is mindfulness, which means keeping the breath in mind. Don't let yourself forget. The second quality is alertness. Try to be as sensitive as you can to how the breathing is feeling—knowing when it's coming in, knowing when it's going out, knowing when you're with the breath and knowing when you're not, knowing whether it's comfortable or not. The third quality is ardency, which means trying to do it well. When you realize that you've left the breath, you just drop wherever you've gone to. No matter what the thought is, no matter how compelling it may seem, that's not what you need right now. What you need right now is some peace of mind with the breath. So as soon as you realize you've slipped off, come right back. While you're with the breath, ardency means, on the one hand, being as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels; and then also continuing to pose that question, "What would feel good right now?" and then going with it, whatever feels good. So those are the three qualities you need to bring to this practice.

Again, watch out for the mind slipping off.

Years back, when I was in Thailand, I was bitten by a dog one day on almsround. I was taken into the hospital and given a tetanus shot. The dog wasn't a mad dog, it was just an angry dog. So I was just given a tetanus shot. And then the next day as I was walking on my almsround, the pain got really unbearable. My leg started swelling, and I happened to get back to the house where I'd been bitten by the dog. As the wife of the house was putting food in my bowl, I fainted. And just before I lost consciousness, I had a vision of America. I was out like a light for a while, and then I came back to.

Later on, I happened to mention that to Ajaan Fuang, and he said that if I'd died at that point, that's where I would have been reborn, in America, in line with the vision. This is what happens as people die: A thought-world appears. And at that point they realize they can't stay in the body any longer, so they just go with whatever appears.

A couple of years later, I had an accident in which I was electrocuted. And the first thought that went through my mind as I realized I was being electrocuted was, "I'm going to die from my own stupidity. I didn't check the current first before I touched this thing." And then lots of thoughts came up: thoughts about how hard this would be for my father, regret about things I had done, regret about things I hadn't done. And I realized I couldn't let myself go with those thoughts. It was like watching little worlds come up: thoughts about this person, thoughts about that person. I just kept saying, "No, no, no. I'm not going there. I had to stay, to the extent that I could, with the body."

Fortunately, the current turned off very quickly. People who saw the incident said it was just a split second, but for me it was like five minutes. When the mind realizes it's in a tough position, it spins a lot faster than normal. But again, I had a strong sense that if I had gone with any of those thought worlds, that's where I would have gone if I'd died.

So it's really good to learn this skill of stepping out of your thought-worlds so that you can at least choose where you're going to go. You can step out of those thought-worlds. You don't have to jump into whatever comes up. This is why mindfulness, alertness, and ardency are so important.

After all, these are qualities you *can* develop. It's like developing a muscle. You exercise it. You want to be strong, but it's not the case that you have to wait until you get a strong muscle and then exercise it. You take the weak muscle you have and you exercise that over time. Gradually, it becomes strong. It's the same with these qualities in the mind. In the beginning, it's easy to get discouraged as you see the mind wandering off for the umpteenth time. But don't get discouraged. The fact that you see it is a good sign. It shows that you're getting more alert. You bring yourself back. That ability to bring yourself back is what's going to turn into your concentration, turn into good stronger mindfulness, stronger alertness. So try to enjoy bringing yourself back.

You come to realize that this spot being here with the breath—where you can watch what's happening in the mind, watch what's happening in the body—is really the best place to be. You can monitor things. You can gain some control. There's even an element of control over the body as you get more sensitive to the comfortable sense of the breath. You can learn to maintain that in different situations, and it's good for the health of the body. A sense of the breath energy flowing throughout the whole body means that every part of the body is getting properly nourished with energy, with the blood flow. It's much more likely to stay healthy, and you cut through a lot of stress diseases.

As for the mind, it's good to have a place to stay. After all, the world is swept away. But here you've got a home that's not swept away by the world. You've got a place where you can take shelter. The world doesn't give you shelter but you can make your own shelter here. When things come up in the mind, you're in a position to decide whether it's worth going with them or not, especially when you can develop a sense of well-being being here in the present moment.

All too often we go with things from a sense of hunger, a sense of need. We're lacking something here in the present so we go looking for it someplace else. But when you can develop a sense of ease, well-being, and fullness here, then when you're coming from a position of fullness you're less likely to be hungry, less likely to go for things that you know deep down inside are not going to provide any genuine satisfaction and that can actually bring pain and suffering. You can also begin to question the compulsion to need to go with the pain and suffering, as if you owe it to someone else. Say you're suffering over what's happened to

somebody else and yet it feels selfish not to suffer with them. That's not the case at all. When you're in a good position, you're in a better position to help them: while they're here, and even after they've gone. Because the mind does transmit a current of energy.

You may have noticed that sometimes you walk into a room where two people have just had an argument, and the feeling in the room is very different from what it would have been if they'd just been sitting there chatting. The energy of the minds is what creates that atmosphere. If you can develop a sense of well-being inside, you're sending off good energy, which other people can pick up on.

So when you're meditating here, developing a sense of inner well-being, it's not a selfish process. You're turning your mind into a transmitter of well-being that can help people who are alive around you. It can also help people who've passed on. Especially when someone has just passed on, they're very sensitive to these currents of energy. So you want to give them as much good energy as possible.

So you focus on the breath, trying to develop these three qualities: mindfulness, keeping the breath in mind; alertness, being alert both to the breath and to whether you're staying with the breath; and then ardency, the desire to do it well, sticking with it, putting energy, being intent on what you're doing. That way, the mindfulness gets stronger, the alertness gets sharper. And you learn how to relate to the breath in a way where you really are friends. You're on good terms with the breath; the breath is on good terms with you. This gives rise to a sense of ease and well-being that comes from being steadily focused on something where you feel at ease with the object. The ease will grow.

At first it starts out like a general feeling of just being okay. But if you learn to protect it, it grows into something more. It's like shielding a little fire that you're trying to start. If you want a big fire, you have to start with a little fire. And you're starting a fire in the wind, so you need to protect it. If you start the fire and it seems small and then you snuff it out because it seems too small, it's never going to become a large fire. But if you start the small fire and then protect it, it grows. The stronger it grows, the bigger it grows, and then ultimately you reach a point where you don't need to protect it so much anymore. But in the beginning stages you have to watch after it very carefully because it's so small and the wind is so strong. So have a protective attitude around the breath, a protective attitude around your awareness of the breath. From this little tiny flame ultimately there'll be a larger sense of well-being that you can then suffuse throughout the body.

You yourself benefit from it and the people around you benefit as you begin to transmit the kind of energy that comes from a mind at ease, a mind that can live in the world—with its normal aging, normal illness, normal death, normal separation—and yet have a happiness that doesn't have to be affected by these things.

In other words, try to develop the mind so that it comes from a position of strength. Find the resources inside. They're there. Through the meditation, learn how to nurture them, so that

the wish for happiness, “May I be happy,” won’t sound so plaintive and weak in the face of the way the world is.

Think about the life of the Buddha. He was coming from a lot of wealth, a lot of power, yet he realized that that kind of happiness wasn’t enough. He asked himself, “Is there a happiness that’s not dependent on being young and healthy and alive?” All his friends said, “These are the things you need to be happy. Don’t think about anything beyond this.” And he said, “If you can’t think about anything beyond this, it’s a miserable life, it’s a miserable happiness.” And so against all the odds, he decided to drop everything he had and went out into the wilderness to see what the potential for human effort can do.

And fortunately for us, he found it: the deathless. It is possible through your efforts to develop a happiness that’s not dependent on conditions. Other people listened to his teaching, put it into practice, and all of a sudden it wasn’t just one person with a very plaintive and quixotic quest. A lot of people were finding that what he had taught really did give results.

This is why he was so open in talking about aging, illness, death, separation, and all the other things that make us miserable. As he said with that fifth reflection, we do have our actions, we have the power of choice, the power of our efforts. And these can make a difference. Even though they themselves are conditioned, they can lead to something that is unconditioned.

That turns the tables. The desire for true happiness is not a weak thing in the face of the world. It’s something that’s bigger than the world. So we start with this wish for happiness, we start with what seems like a little potential for it. But if you take good care of both the wish and the potential, they grow.