

## *A Seeker's Habits*

*August, 2002*

Every evening, before we meditate as a group, we have the chant on goodwill. And it's not just an idle sentiment. It's something that forms the basic motivation for our practice: May I be happy.

And we're not talking about just any old kind of happiness. We want true happiness. That's why we're here, having seen the kind of happiness that the world outside has to offer, and realizing that it just doesn't give any true satisfaction, it doesn't stay with us. We want a happiness that stays, a happiness that's not subject to change, not subject to time. And there's only one place we can find that—when we look into the mind.

This is why we're meditating; this is why we're *training* the mind. An important part of the meditation, an important part of the training, is getting the mind ready for the meditation in terms of the way we conduct our lives. We have to build good habits outside, and then they start showing up inside.

This is why the Buddha starts out with the precepts, teaching you to be very careful about the impact of your actions—the things you do, the things you say. Make sure they don't harm anyone, don't damage anyone. This requires that you be really careful about your intentions, because the precepts are designed around intentions.

For instance, the precept on not killing: If you happen to step on an ant unintentionally, or without knowing about it, or without the idea that you're planning to kill it, the precept isn't broken. That means the focus is more on your intention as the source of the action, as the source of what you have to be careful about in the action. And that begins to focus your attention on what's really important in your life: the intentions that shape what you do. Because what you intend to do then in turn shapes your experiences.

If you're not skillful, it can go into a downward spiral. So you have to take a good look at your life to see which parts of your life are actually antithetical to the meditation and straighten them out. Get them more in line with what you're planning to do here.

In addition to precepts, the Buddha talks about general principles in action, general principles of behavior: like truthfulness, being energetic, putting extra effort in what you do to make sure you do it right—and not just hoping that you can slip by with a minimum amount of input, a minimum amount of effort. That kind of attitude, if you adopt it, starts showing up in your meditation. Whenever a problem comes up in the meditation, you start taking the lazy way out. So you have to look at the habits you're developing, above and beyond the precepts, to see which ones are conducive to the practice and which ones are not. After all, it's the same mind. The mind that's sitting here meditating right now is the same mind that gives the orders when you're out acting among people.

So you want to make sure that your habits are also in line with the fact that you're a meditator—that you practice training the mind. It all has to be aimed at that goal: What is true happiness? Not just little bits of ease that you can sneak in here and there, and that then change into something else. You want something that's really solid—which means that you have to be solid in your behavior.

Once you look at your daily life and you see, “Yes, this is solid,” you see that you're reliable, dependable, all those virtues that don't have a lot of flashing lights, but they do provide a good foundation for the practice: Then you find it a lot easier to settle down and get good results out of the action of sitting here focusing on your breath, keeping the mind with the breath.

Because the habits you develop outside are present right here. We're developing habits of mindfulness, alertness, and what the Buddha called ardency. In other words, you really are intent on to improving the qualities of your mind, because it's through the qualities of the mind that the training does make a difference.

It's interesting that when the Buddha toward the end of his life gave a summary of his important teachings, it was all qualities of mind. He didn't say that you have to believe this or that, above and beyond the principle of the power of your actions. He didn't tell his followers, “Okay, you have to believe that the world is round,” or, “The cosmos is finite,” or, “The cosmos is infinite,” or, “It's made out of atoms,” or whatever. None of that stuff.

The practice is all based on qualities of mind: You want to develop conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. You work on these, and as you work on these, they begin to make a difference. The one thing he asked you to believe was in the principle of karma: that what you do makes a difference.

So as you're sitting here meditating, it's not that you're sitting here waiting for something to come down and touch you on the head, or somehow for things to finally fit together without your doing anything, without your being observant. You have to be observant; you have to *do* the meditation.

And it *is* a doing. It's subtle, it's refined, but there is a doing there. The more you're aware of that doing, the more you're on the path to awakening.

But this is an aspect of the mind that we tend to be pretty much in the dark about. So we have to bring it into the light of day. Be very clear about what you're doing: How you're focusing on the breath, how the breath feels. Notice, when the mind slips off from the breath, when it's first getting ready to slip off. When it's beginning to settle down, notice how it settles down, the different ways it can settle down.

These are all things that you have to watch for: things that make your alertness a lot clearer, a lot more alert to what's going on. That way, your alertness becomes a better tool.

All these things the Buddha teaches are tools. The four noble truths are tools. The teachings on virtue, concentration, and discernment: These are tools.

It's interesting that when he talks about his awakening, he says a certain knowledge does arise, but again, the knowledge he learned *during* his awakening he used as a tool to free the mind. This is how he claimed that he wasn't stuck on particular views. In other words, he used views, he used knowledge, as a tool. But he realized that that wasn't the essence of his awakening, it was the *means to* his awakening. The awakened mind itself, the released mind: That was what lay at the essence.

So we're here working on tools, getting skillful in using our tools: the qualities of mind we're working on. Learn to use the breath as a tool, learn to use feelings of pleasure and pain as they arise in your meditation: Learn to use those as tools as well.

We tend to think of pain as something to run away from, and pleasure as something to hold on to, as an end in and of itself. But probably one of the most revolutionary teachings the Buddha had was that you *use it* as a tool.

The pleasure that comes from your meditation: When the mind finally begins to settle down, gets more and more solid in its concentration, the fact that it feels good, part of you will want to get attached to it. That's okay in the beginning, but after a while you begin to realize: "Okay, there's a use for this. It's not just a nice place to hang out. The concentrated mind is a good place to start seeing deeper into the processes of the mind."

So these feelings of ease, sometimes feelings of rapture—these become tools as well. And even insight into the four noble truths: That ultimately is a tool, a way of looking at things that helps you break free from attachments.

So this is very much a "doing" practice, but it's a very subtle doing. It starts from your outside actions and moves on in to the actions of the mind, and finally settles in on the real issue—how the mind does things that cause itself suffering: a suffering that's not necessary, a stress and a strain, pain, that are really not necessary.

When you can learn to see through those habits and abandon those habits, that's when the practice shows its real results. And that's when you really are showing goodwill for yourself, because up to that point you're still making yourself suffer, in ways you don't have to. Until you use virtue, concentration, and discernment as tools to get down to why this is happening—so that you can see for yourself that you don't have to identify with certain patterns—you'll still be stuck. It's always amazing to realize how sometimes there's a part of you that wouldn't know who you were without really negative, negative patterns in the mind. You'd feel lost without them. Well, why is that?

Virtue, concentration, and discernment are the tools for finding out. And as with any tool, the more you work with them, the more skillful you become. The more skillful you become, the more you see.

So even though this does require work—and often it requires really heavy, heavy effort—still it's all worthwhile. And it's all a way of showing true goodwill for yourself, true compassion for yourself. Always keep that in mind, that that's the motivation for what we're doing here.

Buddhism is the serious pursuit of true happiness, with the emphasis on the *serious* and on the *true*. It takes our good old American principle there and moves it up a notch—to make it something really noble and worthwhile.