

Ending Suffering

April, 2003

We begin each session with the chant spreading thoughts of goodwill because that's the motivation that underlies the whole practice. Goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for other people: This is what underlies the practice for trying to put an end to suffering.

If we didn't feel goodwill for ourselves, why would we care whether there was suffering or not? It wouldn't be the issue that it is. But it's a big issue in life. From the very beginning, we come out of our mothers' wombs crying, and there's nobody to explain to us what's going on. But we know there's suffering. We want an end to it.

The problem for most people is that their lives go all the way from birth to death without ever finding an end to suffering. In fact, as death comes, it just gets worse and worse and worse. You lose control of your body, lose control of your mind. The pains come on, and there's less and less and less you can do about them.

These are the parentheses around our lives: the pain at the beginning, the pain at the end, punctuated with more or less pain all along the way.

The desire for an end to this is what follows on this intention to develop thoughts of goodwill for ourselves and for other people. We don't just sit around thinking nice thoughts. We actually act on them, noticing what we're doing that's causing stress, causing suffering, and seeing if there's some way we can change what we do.

If we couldn't change, there'd be no purpose in practicing. It's because we have this ability to change ourselves, change our actions, change our intentions: That's why we practice.

It requires some imagination. For many of us the idea of a total end to suffering just doesn't register on the radar.

It was a mark of the Buddha's greatness that even as a young prince he said that there had to be this possibility in life. Otherwise, human action was just worthless. We struggle, struggle, struggle to get something, and then it doesn't stay with us very long. But if human action could lead to a total end of suffering, that means that action is worthwhile. He was able to imagine that possibility. Then, from imagining, he was able to pursue it.

So we have to imagine that possibility in our lives as well. There can be an end to suffering. We are the types of people who can do it.

Sometimes we look at our actions and they don't seem to be suggesting any

ability to put an end to suffering. But we start with the little things and build up from there, and allow our imagination to grow large enough to encompass that possibility.

After all, what motivates most of our actions if not a desire to avoid pain of one kind or another? We find that some strategies work, other strategies don't work, some strategies work in a limited way. And a large part of the practice is learning how to overcome our limitations, to develop our ability to look at our actions, judge their results, and then improve on them.

Some people cringe at the word *judge*. For them, it sounds judgmental. But there's judgment and there's judiciousness and there's judgmentalism. They're three different things.

You pass judgment to decide if something's good or bad. You look at what you've done and you take a realistic appraisal of what you can do to improve what you've done. If you're wise, you're judicious in how you use those judgments. If you're not, you could use them just to pound yourself over the head—that's not judicious at all. It starts getting judgmental.

This is where the element of imagination has to come in, because so many times we're addicted to certain ways of behavior. It's our inability to imagine something better, something different, that keeps us addicted.

So, when you see yourself causing yourself suffering, one, look to see that it is something you're actually causing yourself. Sometimes we feel like we're simply being oppressed by other people. They're having an undue influence on us, and we can't close that influence off. Well remember: You're the one opening the way up to that influence. The mind has a choice to expose itself or not.

Imagine the possibility that you can learn how to be more in control of what influences you take in. Then learn to imagine yourself reacting in other ways that are more skillful so you don't constantly repeat the same old mistakes over and over and over again. When you have a mature attitude toward your mistakes and a mature attitude toward your ability to improve, to develop more skillfulness in your actions: That's what puts you on the path.

We see it right here as we meditate. You focus on your breath: If the breath doesn't feel comfortable, well, you can change. No one is going to put you behind bars for changing your breath.

Often we feel that as a meditator we have to simply watch what's going on without participating in it at all. But that leaves you totally helpless, totally exposed. You *can* change the way you breathe; you *can* change the way you focus.

With practice, you can get quicker at noticing when the mind is going to slip off the breath and you can bring it back to the breath in more and more skillful

ways. Then you find that you can stay with the breath for longer and longer and longer periods of time. You can resist some of the waves that seem to wash over you and would wash you away from the breath. You get more and more firmly rooted in the breath.

Just this practice makes you more and more sensitive to what the mind is doing, what the results of its actions are, and how you can go about changing things for the better. That's when you start being judicious.

This is the good side of change. The Buddha didn't say that change is a bad thing. Sometimes we hear about his teachings on impermanence and inconstancy, and it sounds like he has a really negative attitude toward change. Well, that's not the case. If it weren't for our ability to change for the better, there wouldn't be any use for the practice. What we're doing here is learning how to change our habits.

The impermanence that he was more critical of was our desire to place our happiness on things that are going to betray it. We want to depend on something that doesn't have the stability that we can really depend on. He said that if you keep on coming back to that as your hope for happiness, then you've got to change your ways. You've got to see the drawbacks of those things that you think you depend on.

You depend instead on the factors of the path, the instructions on the path as a source for more and more reliable happiness, until they open you up to something that's totally unchanging.

So the Buddha pointed out the fact of change and also provided a context for judging it judiciously: which changes to focus on, which changes to regard as a sign that you're heading in the right direction, which changes are a sign that you're heading in the wrong direction.

Always keep in mind the possibility that you can change—and it can go either way. But if you make up your mind you're going to be more skillful in your actions, then the changes head you in the right direction.

That desire for true happiness is what underlies all of this and makes all the difference. Keep that possibility in mind. And keep reminding yourself what's going to make the difference in terms of true happiness: your own actions, your own intentions, your own sensitivity to what you're doing, and your imagination in figuring out ways of doing things better, more skillfully.

Fortunately, the Buddha doesn't leave us totally dependent on our own imaginations. He gives us teachings that try to stretch the mind, stretch our conception of what's possible. Our willingness to allow his teachings to stretch us this way: That's what opens us up to a possibility there really is a true happiness, there really is an end of suffering, and you can find it in your life.

So even though the parentheses of the body—in other words, the pain of birth, the pain of death—may be unavoidable, they don't have to make inroads on the mind. The mind can find freedom in the midst of all this.

It all depends on whether you're serious enough to wish for true happiness and honest enough to see the suffering that results if you don't.