



It's always a good idea to meditate before you listen to a dharma talk. So let's meditate right now. Close your eyes, and think thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is the wish for happiness. True happiness is found inside. There's no conflict between your true happiness and that of others, which is why this can be an unlimited attitude.

Start with thoughts of goodwill for yourself. Tell yourself: May I be happy, may I understand the causes for true happiness, and may I be willing and able to act on them. Then spread the same thought to others. Start with people who are close to your heart, and then work out to the entire cosmos. May all beings understand the causes of happiness and be willing and able to act on them. This establishes your motive for practice, which is to find a happiness that's harmless.

Bring attention to the breath. Take a couple of good long, deep in- and out-breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. It might be at the nose, the chest, or the rise and fall of the abdomen, anywhere where you can sense now the breath is coming in and now the breath is going out. And then check to see if those sensations are comfortable. If they're not, you can change. If long breathing feels suppressive, you can try shorter breathing. Faster, slower, heavier, lighter, deeper, or more shallow. Experiment for a while to see what rhythm and texture of breathing feels best for the body right now. If you have any pains in the body, you don't have to pay them any attention.

Focus on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable by the way you breathe. And if your thoughts wander off, you don't have to follow them. You can stay right here with the breath. If you do follow them, as soon as you've sensed that you've left the breath, come right back. If this happens ten times or a hundred times, just keep coming back. Don't get discouraged. Each time you come back, reward yourself with a breath that feels especially good so you'll be inclined to want to come back.



Now, as the breath gets comfortable, there is a tendency sometimes to lose focus on the breath and focus on the comfort, in which case you lose your foundation for your concentration. So to counteract that tendency, the next step is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and as you breathe out. Think of whatever sense of comfortable breath sensations you have at this spot you have been focused on spreading out to fill the body down the back, out the legs, down the shoulders, out the arms, and all through the head. Try to maximize the sense of well-being that you can get simply by breathing.

Hold in mind the perception of the breath. It's not just the air coming in and out of the nose. It's the movement of energy in the body which can be felt anywhere, all the nerves, all the blood vessels, and the entire body is coordinated. You can keep on meditating while I begin the talk.

One of the Buddha's most important insights was that what we experience in the present moment is not entirely caused by the past. Some of our experiences do come from past karma. But the important part is how we shape the raw material coming in from the past through our present intentions. The Buddha calls this process of shaping *sankhara* fabrication. There are three kinds. There is a bodily fabrication, which is the in- and out-breath. There is a verbal fabrication, which the texts call directed thought and evaluation. It's basically how you talk to yourself, the questions you ask and the judgments you pass on things. And then there's a mental fabrication, which is feelings and perceptions. Feelings here are not emotions; they are more feeling tones: a tone of pleasure, a tone of pain, or a tone of neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions are the labels you apply to things. If you were to compare verbal fabrication with perceptions, verbal fabrication would be full sentences or questions; perceptions are individual words or images.

The way you identify things is through these three processes. We shape the raw material coming in from the past and turn it into our experience of the present moment. The problem is we tend to do this in ignorance. This is why instead of creating the happiness that we want, we end up



creating stress and suffering. The Buddha tells us to do these processes with knowledge, and they can turn into the path to the end of suffering.

Anger is a case in point. All three of these fabrications go into creating a sense of anger. You have witnessed a situation that you don't like, you'd like to see changed, and you're upset about it. The way you breathe is going to aggravate the anger. You tend to breathe in a tight, tense way. You can talk to yourself, both about the situation and about anger itself, in ways that aggravate it. You can focus more and more on how horrible the situation is and how quickly it needs to be changed. You can also talk to yourself about anger and think your anger is justified. It's your way of showing that you can influence the world and that you can get things done through your anger.

And then there are the perceptions and feelings. The feelings, in this case, would be feelings of discomfort because the breath is uncomfortable and the way you're talking to yourself is uncomfortable. And then there are the perceptions: your perceptions about the situation—the person who has done or said something horrible is either a monster or a pig—and your perception of anger as being your way of showing your power in the world and being a warrior in the world. Now, the problem is many times we act on our anger thinking that we're doing something skillful, something that's to our benefit or the benefit of those we love. We find out later that this is not the case and that we've actually created trouble for ourselves. This is where the Buddha says we have to bring knowledge to these processes.

First, we have to understand the anger in terms of these types of fabrication and take it apart and replace it with better fabrications. The techniques you learn as you do breath meditation help you right here so that you can reflect on what you're doing as you focus on the breath. Of course, you've got bodily fabrication in the breath itself. You've got verbal fabrication in the questions you're asking about how to breathe comfortably, how to let those comfortable breath sensations spread through the body, and how to keep the mind with the breath. Then there are mental fabrications, your perceptions you have of the breath as being a whole body process, the feelings



of ease that you can create by the way you breathe. You get hands-on experience in these types of fabrication. You see how they can be used to create a sense of well-being right here, right now. And then you can bring that knowledge to the rest of your life. The techniques we learn on the meditation cushion are not meant just for the cushion. After all, we're not creating suffering for ourselves only on the cushion. We go through life. So we're going to take those techniques and use them on a day-to-day basis.

The first thing to take is verbal fabrication. As you talk to yourself, remind yourself of all the stupid things you've done under the power of anger. It might be good to step back from the anger. See what you can do to take it apart. And then you focus on verbal fabrication.

How are you breathing? Can you breathe in a way that calms you down? Think of the breath going all the way down to the feet, nourishing every part of the body. That sense that you have to get it out of your system begins to dissolve away. For the most part, we think that we have only two choices: either we get it out of our system by acting on the anger or we bottle it up. Neither way is helpful. If we bottle it up, it becomes a thing that goes underground and shows its tentacles someplace else. If we act on it, we end up creating trouble for ourselves.

Here the Buddha is giving you an alternative to that sense of tightness. You have a body, and you can breathe through it. Dissolve it by good breath sensations. This may take time because that first burst of anger probably released some hormones into your bloodstream, and they're still having their effect. And sometimes we read those signs as signs that we still are angry even though the actual anger may have passed. We stir it up again. Just remind yourself that it may take some time, but you can breathe in a way that calms down the sense of tension, tightness, and irritability in the body and that allows you to look at the anger more objectively more calmly and to look at the situation more calmly and see what needs to be done.



This is where you bring in verbal fabrication. Ask yourself, Is that person or that situation as bad as you think it is? Is it as unbearable as you think it is? Here the Buddha gives you some ways of talking to yourself when someone has said something unpleasant or hurtful. He recommends two ways of depersonalizing the issue. One is just to tell yourself that the unpleasant sound has made contact with the ear. It's there because of the contact, and when the contact goes, that's the end of that unpleasant sound. How many times have you thought that when someone curses you or when someone says something harsh and vile? It's not the first thing that occurs to you. But it's useful because you realize that from that point on once the contract has ended, the fact that it's reverberating around in your mind is based on what you're doing now. The action of the other person is over and done with. Do you want to keep on stabbing yourself with those words? It's your choice.

The second way of depersonalizing words is to remind yourself that human speech has all kinds. The nature of human speech is that there's kind speech and unkind speech, true speech and untrue speech, where it's said with an attitude that means well to you and where it's said with an attitude that doesn't mean well to you. This is the nature of human speech everywhere. The fact that you're subjected to that kind of unkind or untrue or ill-intentioned speech is nothing out of the ordinary.

All too often we find a situation horrible or totally unbearable. Everything is so extraordinary that we have extraordinary rights to react in a way. It's not all that skillful. But when you realize this is the nature of the human world, this is the nature of human speech, you back off. You realize that the action was not extraordinary, so your rights are not extraordinary either. These are some ways of helping you pull yourself out of the unskillful verbal fabrication that finds the situation unbearable.

As for mental fabrication, there are two types of issues around perception. One is your perception of the situation. One is your perception of yourself as passing judgment on the



situation. You can see the situation is horrible. And the Buddha recommends that just ask yourself, is it that bad? Because it reflects on your position as the person passing judgment. He says when you see somebody who has done something wrong, think of yourself as a person in the desert. You're hot, tired, trembling with thirst. You come across a cow print in the sand. There's a little bit of water in the cow print. Now, you know that if you were to scoop it up with your hand, you would muddy the water and you'd make it undrinkable. So what do you do? You get down on all fours and you slurp it up. Now, you wouldn't want someone to come along with a camera right then at that point and take a picture to put on Instagram. But the Buddha says even though it seems undignified, that's what you got to do in a case like that. What he's saying basically is that you need the other person's goodness for the sake of your goodness. That is your nourishment.

Otherwise, if you say that the entire human race is full of horrible people, you feel entitled to react horribly. So as you're passing judgment, it's not as if you're way up high in the judge's seat and the other person is way down on the floor. You're in a position where you need another person's goodness so that you can maintain your goodness in the world. Otherwise, you're like that *New Yorker* cartoon with two female poodles sitting at a bar, never a mean look on their face. One of them is saying, "They're all sons of bitches." If everybody is a son of a bitch, what are you? You will behave horribly too, so you've got to think of ways to see the goodness of other people.

If it turns out you can't think of anything good about that other person, then the Buddha gives you another way of thinking, another perception to hold in mind. You're coming across a person that's sick, lying by the side of the road out in the middle of a desert. No matter how strange that person may be or how unconnected that person may be to you, you've got to feel compassion. In other words, if a person has no goodness at all, they're really digging themselves into a hole, so the proper reaction is to have compassion for them. These are some ways of digging yourself out of the anger.



Then you ask yourself further. You may have seen the drawbacks of anger. There's always the problem that it keeps coming back. From the Buddha's analysis, simply seeing the drawbacks is not enough. You also have to see the allure, why you like it. This is something many of us don't like to look into. Sometimes there's a sense of power. You're a warrior for goodness. Sometimes you sense yourself as being oppressed, and this is your way of overcoming the oppression. But what exactly is the allure of anger? When you see the allure, you think about why you went for the rage. and you see that it's not worth it when you compare the allure with the drawbacks. That's when you let it go. This requires a lot of honesty.

One more perception that the Buddha has you keep in mind if you find the idea of having goodwill for other people, especially when they've done something wrong, is really hard. Think about the fact that when you act on anger, you tend to do stupid things, things that are not in your own best interest, even though you think they are. And that's going to give satisfaction to the other person. Would you like to satisfy that person? Now, this may not be the most skillful attitude here. The Buddha is having you use spite to get rid of anger. But it's using a lesser defilement to block a greater defilement. And then when you calm down a little bit, you might be willing to think thoughts of goodwill for yourself, and acting on anger is not in your own best interest.

If you want to make a change in the world, you have to have goodwill for other people because the only true change that comes in the world is when people voluntarily act skillfully. And to get someone else to voluntarily act skillfully, you have to have goodwill for them. So the basic lesson in all of this is that what we experience in the present moment is not given. It's shaped to some extent by past actions but also largely by our present actions. So when there's a really bad situation, we're not told that we simply have to accept it, or when anger comes up, we're not told that we simply have to accept that. Instead, we have to realize that anger is what clouds our vision. We can step back from it and deconstruct it in terms of those three fabrications and

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reconstruct a better attitude with more skillful fabrications. We can put ourselves in a better position to read the situation to see what positive things can be done so that we're not a victim of circumstances. We're not passive. We use our proactive abilities for the sake of true happiness. No matter how bad the world can be, we can always act skillfully.