

## *Unentangled Compassion*

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Meditation doesn't require all that much.

In terms of the body, all you need is the breath. So as long as you're alive you've got that element.

And as for the mind, it requires three qualities. Mindfulness, which in this case means keeping the breath in mind. Alertness, which means watching what's actually happening both with the breath and with the mind. In other words, you know when the breath is coming in; you know when it's going out. You know whether it's comfortable or not. At the same time, you know if the mind is staying with the breath.

If you catch it wandering off, that's when you bring in the third quality, which is ardency. You have to put effort and energy into the practice. So if the mind wanders off, you bring it right back. While it's with the breath, you try to bring your full sensitivity to the breath. Make the breath as comfortable as possible. Take a couple of experimental in-and-out breaths—deep, long—and see how it feels. If long, deep breathing feels good—keep it up. If not, you can change.

Notice where you sense the breath or the process of breathing most clearly, and focus your attention there. Then allow the breath to find a rhythm and texture that feels good.

That's it. Those are the basic ingredients. The important thing is that you keep them together as continuously as possible. You're taking your raw materials here and you're trying to develop them. And they develop by staying together: being mindful of the breath as long as possible, being alert to the breath as long as possible, and learning to adjust the effort of your ardency so that it's just right: not too strong, not too weak, just enough to keep things going and going and going. In other words, it has to be strong enough to catch any wandering of the mind and bring it right back. But it has to be gentle enough so that you can maintain it.

Those are the basic building blocks, the basic resources. It doesn't sound like much. But that's the whole point: that you don't need all that much to find true happiness. And that's what we're here for.

In that chant, "May I be happy. May all beings be happy," we're talking about a true happiness. Not just nice things, nice friends, nice relationships. A sense of happiness that goes deep into the mind. It comes from developing these qualities within you. The fact that the qualities are in you rather than things you have to get from someone else outside means that this form of

happiness doesn't take anything away from anyone else.

But it does depend very much on you. The fact that it doesn't take anything away means that it's harmless. You're not imposing any difficulties on anybody by the fact that you're sitting here looking for happiness with your breath. But the fact that you have to work on it means that you have to be strong, learn how to develop these strengths.

You've got potentials in you that can be developed to true happiness. And these are potentials that we tend to overlook. How many of us on our own would come to the conclusion that you're going to find happiness by looking at your breath coming in and going out? It's not the most obvious place to look. Something so ordinary, something so common: It doesn't seem all that promising.

As for your mindfulness and alertness: They may not seem all that promising, either. Look at how long you can ordinarily keep something in mind. Many times you make up your mind that you're going to do something and a few minutes later you've totally forgotten what it was. The same goes with your alertness.

In the beginning, they don't seem all that promising. Which is why you need to have conviction that this really does work, that the Buddha knew what he was talking about when he said you can find true happiness by developing these qualities of the mind. That conviction right there is a form of strength because it keeps you on the path. It keeps you looking here rather than hoping to find happiness from other people or other things.

In some ways it's a scary prospect that you're not going to be able to depend on other people. You can depend on other people for guidance but you have to be very selective in whom you depend on. Because there are a lot of people out there who'll give you all kinds of wrong ideas about where happiness can be found.

But having conviction in the fact that the training of the mind is the source for true happiness: That's what allows you to develop your persistence, your energy in the practice. Again, it's a quality of ardency. Ardency just doesn't mean a quantity of effort. It means learning how to adjust your effort so that it's just right, appropriate to what's going on right now.

In other words, if unskillful qualities come up, if you find yourself distracted, forgetful, your mind is wandering around making plans for tomorrow or next week or whatever, the effort there is learning how to disentangle yourself from those thoughts and get back to work.

And you find it's pretty amazing. The mind is sitting here watching the breath and all of a sudden it decides, "Well, here's lots of free time. I can think about anything I want." And it goes straight to things that get you riled up in terms of anger, fear, greed, lust. And so the effort here means learning how to

drop those things, how to disentangle yourself from those thoughts. See them simply as events coming into the mind. And don't get hoodwinked into thinking that they're something really worth following through with.

Once you've disentangled yourself from those distractions, the proper effort is to try to re-establish your mindfulness, re-establish your alertness with the breath. Pick up the threads of the meditation. And do what you can to protect that mindfulness and protect that alertness.

One way is to get yourself as interested in the breath as you can. Ajaan Lee talks about the various types of breath energy that flow through the body. Can you detect them? When he talks about the breath going down the spine, what would that be? What is he talking about? It's happening right there, right now. He's just speaking in a language we're not used to.

Or how about the breath sensations in your hands: In other words, just the basic sense of feeling that you've got a hand there. There's a kind of energy buzz in the hands, in the arms, in all the parts of your body.

Start exploring this and begin to gain a sense of when the energy is good, when it's not so good, and what ways of breathing give rise to a sense of fullness in the different parts of your body—full even as you're breathing out. You're not squeezing things out. Allow the breath to go out and maintain that fullness in the different parts of the body.

Then you find it easier and easier to maintain your mindfulness and alertness because it gets more interesting. It seems more rewarding.

And almost without thinking about it, you find yourself developing concentration. Discernment comes with figuring out what's the appropriate effort to apply in any one particular situation. What do you need right now for the mind to be willing to settle down? And once it's settled down, how do you keep it there? And what do you learn about the mind as you do this?

These are ways in which you take the basic qualities you have in the mind and you learn how to strengthen them so that they really do become a foundation for an inner sense of well-being.

They talk about the Buddha as being compassionate, and this is the form of his compassion: teaching us how we can find happiness for ourselves. He knew he couldn't do it for us. He's not a savior. Some people complain about the teachings, that they seem emotionally cold this way. But the Buddha was just very realistic. He was teaching us each how to be independent.

To think in terms of parenting, he was the ideal parent: teaching you how to stand on your own two feet, and being very clear about the fact that on the one hand we do depend on someone like him to point out the way and to give us the encouragement both of his words and of his example that this really does work, and on the other hand that we have to do this ourselves. You can't depend on anyone else to do it for you.

If you don't do it now, when are you going to do it? Is it going to get easier as you get older? Well, no. This is why he said that all the skillful qualities of the mind depend on a sense of heedfulness, a strong sense that what you do really does make a difference and so you have to be careful about what you do. Because the mind does have this tendency to wander off into areas that are detrimental for itself and for people around you.

So the mind needs to be trained. It can train itself, though. It doesn't need somebody else to come along and do the work. In fact, nobody else *can* do the work for you.

It's the same as when you learn how to ride a bicycle. No one else can make you balanced. You have to develop a sense for yourself of how to maintain your balance on the bike. People can give you advice, they can give you encouragement. But if you're falling down, it's from your own lack of balance, your own lack of observation.

So that's what you've got to correct. Be more observant. And you can learn, you can teach yourself.

The Buddha never taught that we're either innately good or innately bad. We have lots of different qualities and lots of different identities. It's as if there's a committee in the head. And the different committee members can either be really detrimental for one another or they can learn how to work together and help one another. One member can see the drawbacks or the weaknesses of another member and can provide the strengths that are needed.

This is why there's no one-fold path. There's an eightfold path. There are eight qualities you have to develop. But they all develop right here, out of these very basic qualities of being alert, mindful, ardent as you stay with the breath so that more and more your sense of happiness, your sense of well-being inside, does become independent of other people.

This is why the Buddha talks about non-entanglement as an important principle in the practice. The more entangled you are with other people, the more you get used to depending on them, or hoping you can depend on them. And you don't do the work that you could be doing inside yourself.

Because the problem with other people—even if they are, as they say in Thailand, one hundred thousand good—is that no relationship can last forever. And the better the relationship, the harder it is when it ends.

So it's wiser to learn how to develop the qualities inside the mind. Because wherever the mind goes, the mind has those qualities right there, right at hand. You can learn how to depend on them if you train the mind properly. And you find that they provide a happiness that goes a lot deeper.

So like any good parent, the Buddha trains you to the point where you don't need him to train you anymore. You depend on the teachings for a while, you depend on guidance for a while, but the purpose of this is to make you

independent, self-reliant.

The teaching that does that is probably the greatest expression of compassion of all. And as you practice, it's your own expression of compassion and goodwill for yourself and for the people around you. You don't need to lean on them as much. They're not going to be subject to your greed, aversion, and delusion as they have been in the past.

So the meditation is not just a gift to yourself. It's a gift to everybody you encounter.

And it's a very independent kind of compassion.

So try to keep these points in mind as you practice, until you reach the point where you really can depend on yourself.