Ten Recollections, The

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We spend most of our lives in our thoughts, these little worlds that the mind creates. And one of the purposes of meditation is to get us out of those thoughts. Because so much of the greed, anger, and delusion that lead to suffering come from the way we live in our thoughts. We’ve got to get out. So instead of getting into the thoughts, we can see them coming and going as events in the mind. They don’t get sucked in. This is one of the reasons why we have to stay with the body as our vocal point for meditation. It gives us a foundation. It gives us a vantage point that’s outside of the thoughts. And we use thinking to get there. This is something that tends to be downplayed a lot in meditation. But it’s really important. You first have to learn how to think before you can learn how to step out of your thoughts. Because there are certain kinds of thinking that pull you into these worlds of thinking. And there are other kinds of thinking that help pull you out. We’re talking this evening about the different tools you need in your meditation. And breath meditation, even though it is the basic technique, it’s our home base in meditation, requires other techniques to assist it. So that during the times when you find it really difficult to get with the breath, you can think yourself into the right frame of mind. That’ll deliver you back to the breath. There’s a series of topics called the Ten Recollections, and the first six of them are the ones that the Buddha would use to teach laypeople specifically. People who are committed to staying in the lay life would come to the Buddha and say, “Where should our minds dwell in the course of the day?” He said, “There are six topics you can refer to.” The first three are recollection of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. When you recollect the Buddha, it’s not just thinking Buddho in your mind, but you think about who the Buddha was, what he had to do in order to gain awakening, and what he awakened to. An essential principle in his awakening is the principle of karma. Our actions shape the pleasure and pain we experience. It was through his actions that he gained awakening, and he gained an understanding of the principle of action, realizing basically that there are four kinds of action. There’s action that leads to pleasant results in the round of rebirth. There’s action that leads to unpleasant results. There’s action that leads to mixed results. And then there’s the kind of action that takes you out. It is a possibility to escape from the round. We so often hear that the Buddha was basically just teaching us how to live comfortably, with a sense of fluidity and all the uncertainties of contingency. But that’s not the case. He said there’s a way out, and it can be found through our own actions. So the purpose of this recollection is to remind you that what you do is important. Things that tend to distract you from the meditation, saying, “That’s more important. This is more important. You’ve got to think about this. You’ve got to worry about that.” The recollection of the Buddha reminds you that what you’re doing right now is the most important thing in your life. So be very skillful, as skillful as you can, in what you do, what your choices are. So the mind’s tendency is to say, “What are you doing here? Just focusing on your breath. There’s lots of other more important work to be done.” The recollection of the Buddha cuts through that thought. The Buddha gained awakening right here at the tip of his nose, by paying careful attention to what he was doing. Those little choices that come popping up into the mind that we tend to treat so blithely, those are the most important things in our lives. The recollection of the Dhamma reinforces this, because it was the Dhamma that the Buddha taught. But you also think about what kind of person he was as a teacher. The Dhamma wasn’t for sale. And even though he was skillful in the way he presented the Dhamma to different people, from different walks of life, with different backgrounds, still the basic principles remained constant. He didn’t change the principles to please this person or please that person. Nowadays, it’s hard to find a teaching like that. It gives you a sense of the value of the Dhamma that we’re practicing here. It’s something that not only the Buddha found true, but all the noble disciples who follow the Dhamma have found that this is what’s led them away from suffering. It’s a truth that doesn’t depend on culture. It doesn’t depend on all the other factors that loom so large in our ordinary lives. It simply depends on your own truthfulness. As Ajaan Lee once said, “The Dhamma is an affair of the truth, and you can’t know the truth until you yourself are true.” So recollection of the Dhamma gives you confidence in the Dhamma and also reminds you of what you’ve got to do in order to understand the Dhamma, put it to use, and gain the results from it. So this, too, is a type of thinking that pulls you back into the present moment, because this is where the Dhamma is tested. Recollection of the Sangha reminds you that the people who followed the Buddhist teachings and gained results came from all kinds of backgrounds—rich, poor, all the different castes in India at the time, men, women, children, educated people, uneducated people. All that was asked of them was that they were honest and that they were true. You ask yourself, “Are you a true person?” Okay, well, you can prove it to yourself through the practice. They were human beings. You’re a human being. They could do it. You can do it. This helps pull you back to the practice. The other three recollections serve to reinforce that message. Recollection of virtue, recollection of generosity, and not just in the abstract, but recollection of your own virtue, recollection of your own generosity, remind you that you do have good to you. You have done good in your life. It’s through these practices that the Noble Sangha became the Noble Sangha. That was the foundation. You’ve got your foundation. This recollection, however, also reminds you that you just can’t live on good things you did. Ten, fifteen, twenty years ago, virtue and generosity have to be live principles in your life from day to day to day so you have fresh material to reflect on, to give you genuine encouragement. Recollection of the devas is probably the most strange-sounding out of the bunch. But again, it operates on the same principle. Think of the qualities that made people into devas. Conviction, generosity, virtue, discernment, a sense of shame and concern for the results of their actions. Shame here doesn’t mean being ashamed of themselves, but actually having a strong sense of their own self-worth. The thought of doing something shoddy or dishonest seems to them shameful. They would be ashamed to do that. That’s the kind of shame the Buddha’s talking about. And you reflect on yourself and you find these qualities and it gives you encouragement on the practice. Then there are four more recollections that are given in some of the texts. Mindfulness immersed in the body. That’s to counteract lust, like that chant of the thirty-two parts of the body we do so often. You realize that the object of your lust is just like you. It’s got these thirty-two parts in the body. So you first take your own body apart and see, well, what is in there that’s really worth getting all worked up about? And as you take it apart, piece by piece by piece, you begin to realize there’s nothing there. Then you turn the same analysis on the object of your lust and you realize, well, there’s nothing there either that’s worth getting all worked up about. Then you look at the state of lust in your mind. What’s good there? Well, there’s nothing really good there. If lust were a good thing, why is it that so many murders in the world are based on lust? A lot of the abuse that people do to each other is based on lust. Is it something you want to get involved in? Is it something you want to encourage in your mind? That kind of thing. That kind of thinking helps pull you out. Recollection of death is to deal with times when you’re feeling complacent and lazy, to remind you that death could come at any time. As the Buddha recommends, every evening, as the sun goes down, you should reflect on the fact, “I could die tonight. Am I ready to go? If not, okay, what needs to be done in the mind so that it will be ready to go, so it can let go of the things it’s going to have to let go of, and so it’ll have the positive qualities it can hold on to, so it doesn’t get knocked off balance through the process of dying?” Every morning when the sun rises, you should reflect again, “Okay, I could die today. Am I ready to go?” And again, it’s the same process. Then there’s breath meditation and recollection of calm. Recollection of calm here means to recollect your mind of where all this practice leads to. The total freedom from suffering. Is there any other practice in the world that offers that as a possibility that you can test for yourself? And where does that possibility lie? Well, right here, focusing on your breath. All of these ways of thinking are designed to get you back into the present moment, to get you with the body. Because the breath is the point where the mind and the body meet, where they come together. And as you focus on the body, this gives you the foundation you need in order to turn around and look at these thoughts that go through your head. Then you can look at them from another angle. You can see how they form. You can step out of them. As I’ve said many times, it’s like going to a play. Instead of sitting in the audience and getting taken in by the play, you go backstage and you see how it’s produced. And a lot of the illusion that the theater experience depends on gets totally stripped away. It’s fascinating in and of itself, but you realize that the illusion that there are really people out there really experiencing that story, that they’re trying to create, that illusion that they’re trying to create, you see right through it. And it no longer deceives you. So when lust comes, fear comes, you can take them apart from the outside. Realize what they’re based on, how they come, how the mind gets sucked in, how it may suffer by getting sucked in, and how it can find its way out. That’s the kind of insight that’s needed. So that you see through this, the illusion creating faculty of the mind, the way it tends to deceive itself, and you’re freed from it. You no longer have to be taken in. So, as with so many other aspects of the path, you first have to learn how to think skillfully before you can get beyond thinking. The skillful thinking is what brings you in the mind to the position where it can take a stance, stand on a solid foundation, and then turn around and take the process of thinking apart. So as you go through the practice, be very clear on where you are when thinking is skillful, when thinking is not skillful. And then when you get to the point where you get beyond skillful and not skillful thinking, when you’re clear on where you are, then the different teachings that the Buddha has on this topic become very clear.

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