Present Moment, The

August, 2002

Tonight marks the middle of the rains retreat. We’ve reached the halfway point. In Thailand there are a lot of old traditions surrounding this night, but this is a special night. Nagas make appearances. Supernatural things happen. And the basic message is it’s an important night to stop and think about your vows from the beginning of the rains retreat. Ask yourself how well you’ve been able to maintain them. You’re already halfway through. Have you reached at least halfway the goals you set for yourself? If you haven’t, there’s still time. But the time keeps growing shorter and shorter, just like our lives. The difference with our lives, of course, is we don’t know where the halfway point is, how much time we have left. So the only solution is to make the most of the present moment, each present moment as it comes. This is called making use of conventions, making use of your powers of thinking, to focus yourself in the present moment. People are sometimes amazed that the Buddha’s teaching, which places so much importance on the present moment, refers so much to past lives, future lives, or even so does it deal with whole cycles of the cosmos. But if you look at the stories and the different references to these things, you find that they all end up pointing back to the present moment. In fact, they’re a way of thinking that emphasizes the importance of the present moment. Even the cycles of the cosmos come down to karma. Where is karma made? It’s made right here. So as we’re meditating, a large part of the meditation is learning how to use your thinking profitably, training on how to start thinking in terms of the Four Noble Truths. This means two things. One, the contents of your thoughts should relate to the Four Noble Truths. Secondly, the way you manage the process of thinking should also relate to the Four Noble Truths. In terms of the content, what kind of thinking helps center you on the present moment? What kind of thinking helps you to focus in a way that really is comfortable right here, right now? This afternoon, we’re talking about thoughts of goodwill. That’s an important topic for getting the mind in the right mood to meditate and giving it a sense of direction in its meditation, realizing the importance of strengthening that with goodwill for yourself, wishing yourself well. There’s so much in our culture that teaches self-hatred. Even as we’re indulging every little desire, we learn to hate ourselves for it. You realize that kind of compassion for yourself is not really all that compassion at all. You have to step back and ask yourself, “What really is your true well-being, and what can be done for that well-being?” Then you realize that true well-being is not a selfish thing. It’s a gift to yourself and to others. If you’ve got a sense of your own inner worth, you have a sense of well-being inside, you find that you do less and less to hurt other people. Most of the harm that people do comes from a lack of inner well-being. The idea being, “If I’m going to be miserable, why don’t we have everybody be miserable?” It’s a sort of attitude that can’t stand to see other people being happy, can’t stand to see other people thrive. But if you learn how to develop your own inner sense of well-being, you see other people happy, and it doesn’t take anything away from you. You just hope that they’re happy for the right reasons. When you see other people thriving in the sense of the Dharma, it makes you happy too. In order to feel goodwill for other people, you have to learn how to feel it for yourself, and also learn how to act on that desire, which is why we’re meditating. This is one example of how the contents of our thinking should be in line with the Noble Truths. In other words, seeing what kind of thinking is actually harmful creates suffering, and learn how to stop it and start thinking in ways that are more conducive to putting an end to suffering, and particularly more conducive to focusing in on the present moment. If there’s a sense of basic illness in the present moment, it’s hard to stay here. The mind keeps slipping off to other things. But if you can come into the present moment with a sense of well-being, it’s easier to stay here. Then you can start looking at your thoughts not in terms of their content, but just as the process of thinking. When is thinking useful? When is it skillful? When is it not? If you really want to see the process of thinking, that’s why you have to stay in the present moment. Any thoughts that help focus you here? Those are going to be useful thoughts. So you focus on the breath, because the breath is a good anchor for the present. If you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present moment. If you’re off the breath, you can’t be sure. But if you focus on the breath, there is no such thing as a past breath or a future breath. It means you’re right here, right now. Then you start noticing the intentions around your breath. Thoughts aren’t idle events. They’re part of a process. Sometimes the process pulls away, and sometimes the process brings us back to the present moment. So you’ve got to learn how to watch those processes. What kind of thinking helps you stay here? Encourage that kind of thinking. Thinking that keeps you reminded about the breath. Ways of thinking about the breath that make it easier to stay here right now. Start questioning your assumptions about the breath. If you find the breath is uncomfortable, what’s wrong? How are you conceiving the breath? Are you forcing it to act in ways in the body that go against the body’s nature? Do you have funny ideas about the breath being in one part of the body and not being in the other? If it were throughout the whole body, you wouldn’t have any feeling in the parts where the breath didn’t already exist. So there’s always already some breath throughout the body. Keeping that in mind, it makes it easier to sort of breathe through or breathe around the barriers that you set up. So you learn how to encourage the kind of thinking and questioning that pulls you into the present moment. If you find that there’s thinking that pulls you away, you learn how to discourage it. Sometimes simply through checking it, pulling yourself back. When you catch yourself wandering off, just say, “Okay, I don’t have to go there.” You don’t have to complete the thought. So many times a thought arises in the mind and it’s kind of in a vague form and we feel compelled to look into it until we’ve figured out what kind of thought it is. But you can take for granted. Many times you know immediately when a thought arises if it’s going to pull you away or bring you back. As soon as you sense that it’s there, don’t try to figure it out. Just let it dissolve. Come back to the present moment. As for the thinking that keeps you here in the present moment, you have to learn to learn how to encourage it, how to keep it going. Someone once said that that’s the essential act of the will, is extending your attention on a particular object. When you have other things to choose from, you choose this one. And you keep choosing it because this is where you want to be. Learning how to strengthen your attention in this way, this is an extremely valuable skill. Learning how to take control of thought processes. Once you’re more in control, then the mind becomes a real tool for gaining insight. In other words, questions come up. Is the breath as comfortable as possible? Are the activities of the mind a burden to the mind? Have you reached the point where it’s time to let go of something in the way you relate to the breath? You can try it out. Experiment. See what happens. Sometimes you find that your thinking just doesn’t help at all. It’s a sign that your powers of concentration are not ready yet. Go back to the breath. As you work in trial and error this way, you find that you get more and more sensitive to when is the time to think things through, when is the time not to think. When questions come up in the mind, you begin to get answers for them. Sometimes there’s no answer at all. It’s time just to be still. If you do get an answer, again, you have to check that answer against the principles of the Noble Truths. Does this actually help put an end to suffering, or is it another kind of suffering generated by this kind of thinking? This is what it means to practice and learn how to think in terms of the Four Noble Truths. Making sure the contents of your thoughts are helpful in understanding suffering, developing the factors that can bring suffering to an end, and then looking at the actual process of thinking. What is there in the thinking process that’s either going to be helpful or form an obstruction to gaining deeper and deeper insights? This is what we’re working on. If you find in the process of trying to get your mind to be still things aren’t working, then try to think. But try to think in ways that help get you past that obstacle so you can finally settle down. When you settle down, learn to think in ways that will keep you there until the mind is ready to deal with more subtle issues. This is why meditation is called bhavana in Pali. It means to develop. You develop your mindfulness, you develop your concentration, you develop your discernment, all of which are factors of the path. If it requires thinking, you learn to develop the kind of thinking that’s helpful. If it requires stillness, you learn how to develop the kind of thinking that brings you to stillness and then helps keep you there. This is why your mind, instead of being an enemy to itself, becomes its friend.

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