Five Recollections, The

March, 2003

Buddha recommends five topics of recollection that everyone, man, woman, child, ordained or not, should reflect on every day. The chant we had just now. I’m subject to aging. I haven’t gotten yet past beyond aging. I’m subject to illness. I haven’t gotten past illness. I’m subject to death. I haven’t gone beyond death. I’ll be separated from all that’s dear and appealing to me. These first four topics are meant to give rise to a sense of samvega, make you stop and reflect on the happiness of ordinary, everyday life, and realize that it doesn’t last. It’s fleeting. When you think of all the effort that goes into that happiness, you suddenly feel trapped. You spend all that time working for happiness, and what happens? It leaves you. A quick kiss, and then it’s gone. Sometimes not even that. It just passes right by you. There’s nothing that you can hold on to except a memory. Oftentimes, the memory of that kind of happiness is not always a good memory. When it’s gone, you think back on it and think of all the things you did, some of which were not all that honorable, to get that happiness, and it burns inside you. Even if there was nothing dishonorable about it, the fact that it’s gone often burns as well. So that’s what you’ve got. All that effort going into happiness and then it leaves you with a burning memory. Because the things in which you try to find happiness, they’re subject to aging, illness, and death as well. If you really stop to think and reflect on this, it gives rise to a sense of samvega, a sense of urgency, a sense of dismay. There must be a strong sense that there must be something better in life. If the reflection stopped just there, it would be pretty depressing. But there is the fifth reflection, the principle of karma, the principle of your actions. You focus on that. Try to look into the potential of action. This is what the Buddha himself did when he was still a prince. He was still a young layman, reflecting on the pointlessness of all the different pleasures he’d had. He realized that if he was going to find any truer happiness, he’d have to look into the principle of action itself. But in order to do that, he had to leave home. If you’re tied up in work and family life, there’s not much time, there’s not much energy. So the Buddha really developed these skills, the skills that he needed to look inside to understand, “What does it mean to act? What are the potentials of action?” He went off into the forest and practiced for six long years and finally discovered that there was a type of action that led beyond ordinary happiness. As he later taught, there are four kinds of action. There’s action that leads to happiness within the realm of rebirth. There’s action that leads to pain. There are actions that lead to mixed pleasure and pain. But then there’s a fourth kind of action that leads to the end of action. It opens to a happiness that’s not dependent on conditions. It itself is not the cause of that happiness, because after all, if it’s unconditioned, it can’t have a cause. But it’s the path that leads there. So that’s what he came back to teach. He found that his sense of conviction in the principle of karma did lead him to the end of suffering. It led him to an unconditioned happiness, the foremost happiness. So that was the path that he taught. In fact, it was the first thing he taught when he taught the Five Brethren, the Eightfold Path. That, as he said, avoided two extremes, the extremes of sensual indulgence and the extreme of self-affliction, what some people call the radical middle, right down between the two. In other words, the issues of indulgence and affliction were not the real issues. The real issue was what was right in terms of your thoughts, words, and deeds, right in the sense of being just right for putting an end to suffering, for bringing the mind to that point where action opens up to a point of non-intention, non-fashioning. That, in turn, opens up to the Deathless. That’s the path we follow. So this is why he had us reflect on those five things. It’s because it recreates the movement of his own mind, the movement of his own practice, starting with a sense of samvigna through basara, a sense of conviction, that if there’s a way out, it has to be found through your own actions. You can’t depend on anyone else. You can’t just leave things to chance. There’s a path of action you have to follow, a path of training that you have to master. As Ajaan Sawat always emphasized the point that when we’re on the path, there has to be a sense of conviction, a sense of confidence. When you sit down and meditate, no matter what mood you’re in, try to give rise to that sense of confidence in what you’re doing. Remind yourself that if there’s any way out of suffering, this is the way. Then if you have any doubt about the suffering that there’s all around you, stop and reflect. It’s not only you who age, grow ill, and die and get separated. Everybody is subject to these things. So there’s no place outside that you can go to escape this. You have to go inside and explore within the mind to see exactly what the mind is doing. Understand what it means when we say that the mind is acting all the time, when the mind is making choices all the time. How does that happen? What are the results and ramifications? When you sit and meditate, you’ve got the opportunity to do this. It’s not an opportunity that comes to everybody. Out in what they call the real world, people are too wound up in their work, too wound up in their families, and as if that weren’t enough, there’s war and there’s famine and there’s all kinds of other hardships that come along in human life. So now that we have this opportunity, we should make the most use of it. The Buddha said that this is what divides wise people from fools. It’s that the wise people see the necessity to train the mind. They see the importance of training the mind, and they devote themselves to it. And so this is why he has us reflect on these five things every day, because it’s through this reflection that we become wise. We keep the important issues of life to the fore. Don’t let the mind get tied up. Don’t get wound up in trivial affairs that are important only for a few moments and then pass away. Keep reminding yourself what the great matter is, as they call it in Zen, the big issue in life. The fact that if you don’t get your mind trained, you’re constantly subject to aging and illness and death, separation, over and over and over again. There’s only this way out. So keep reminding yourself of the importance of what you’re doing. Keep that sense of sanghvega strong. Keep that sense of passada, or confidence, strong. Because those are the things that give energy to the practice, give continuity to the practice. And when the practice has energy and has continuity, it gives results. The first factor on the path, right view, on the mundane level, grows out of this reflection. It’s belief in the principle of karma, and also belief that there are people who really know what’s going on in terms of the principle of karma, who understand the world, who understand the process of rebirth, who understand the importance of our actions, because they’ve directly known it through their own practice. This is a reflection that’s meant to give us confidence in what we’re doing. Based on that, there’s right resolve. Given the principle of karma, you wouldn’t want to harm anyone. You wouldn’t want to wish anyone ill. And you wouldn’t want the mind to get tied up in sensual passions, because those are the things that tie you down. So these are the three things you resolve on, resolve to. Resolve on renunciation. Resolve on non-ill-will. Resolve on no cruelty, no harming. Those are the resolves you want to hold to. Based on that, there’s right speech, right action, right livelihood. Speech that doesn’t harm. Action that doesn’t harm. Livelihood that doesn’t harm. You don’t lie. You don’t speak divisively. You don’t speak harshly. You don’t waste your time in idle chatter. You don’t kill. You don’t steal. You don’t get involved in sex. That’s for right livelihood. And as a layperson, you don’t sell things that are harmful. You don’t deal in any kind of business that’s harmful to other people. As a monk, you abide by the rules in terms of what you’re allowed to ask, what you’re not allowed to ask for. All of these are ways of carrying through on that resolve not to harm. Then the resolve goes deeper as you begin to look into the mind. Because realizing that the problem is not outside, it’s not so much with your actions and your words, it’s with the thoughts that inspire those actions and words. That’s why we have to meditate. This brings the factors of the concentration, what they call the concentration aggregate, in the path. Right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. The effort to do it. To go away with unskillful thoughts in the mind and to promote skillful ones. The primary skillful quality being mindfulness. You develop four frames of reference. You start out with a body in and of itself. Let’s say alert, ardent, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That’s the formula. In other words, you look at the body you’ve got right here, right now, on its own terms. Not in terms of whether it’s good-looking or not good-looking, whether it’s strong enough to work or not strong enough to work, or whatever issues may be related to the body in terms of the world. You look at the body just on its own terms. What is it like to have a body right here, right now? We’ve got the sensation of the body. We’ve got the breathing. It’s a good place to start as a way of developing more mindfulness, more alertness. The ardency means that you really stick with it. When you’re with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to the breathing. If you find that you slipped off from the breath, you try to come back as fast as possible. Develop good habits in the mind. Don’t waste your time wandering around, sniffing the flowers, looking at the birds and trees. Stay with the body in and of itself. Get to know this. We’ve been with the body all of our lives, but not really. We’re not really well-acquainted with it. It’s there, but we’ve spent most of our time paying attention to other things. So now’s the time to really get to know the body. What is it like to have a body right here, right now? When you can stay with the body on its own terms, it helps you put away all your thoughts about the household life, all your thoughts about things in the past, things in the future. It brings the mind to seclusion. Now, based on seclusion, that’s when right concentration can start. Seclusion here means secluded from unskillful thoughts, secluded from sensual passions, just being right here with the breath in and of itself. And as you stick with it, that gives rise to a sense of ease and rapture. This brings you into the first jhana. The word jhana comes from the verb jayati, which means to burn steadily, like the flame of an oil lamp. It’s a continuing process, but it looks like it’s still. That’s the kind of focus you want to get in the mind. Because if you want to see anything clearly, you have to sit still and watch it for long periods of time. And as you do this, it brings the mind to deeper and deeper levels of concentration. It’s when the mind is concentrated like this that the path ratchets up to a higher level, from the ordinary mundane level to a nobler level, where right view turns into insight into the four noble truths. You see that there is stress and suffering, and you understand exactly what it is. As the Buddha said, the task with regard to the first noble truth is to comprehend it, to use your powers of concentration to try to understand what it means to have pain, stress, suffering—anything that’s burdensome on the mind. What’s going on here with it? As you try to comprehend it, you begin to see the origin of suffering, which is craving. Every time there’s suffering in the mind, there’s going to be craving. You try to understand that craving to the point where you can let it go. And as you let it go with awareness, that becomes the third noble truth. The cessation of suffering. And it’s through the path that we’re working on here, the development of that path, that’s what allows this to happen. Those are the tasks with regard to the four noble truths. The Buddha never set out the four noble truths simply as abstract topics. There are tasks with regard to each. And we fulfill those tasks by developing the path. To the point where we really do witness for ourselves what it means for suffering to cease. And we’ve completed the tasks with regard to all four noble truths. That’s when awakening comes. And that’s the fourth kind of karma that the Buddha talked about, the karma that leads to the end of karma, brings the mind to a point of total equilibrium, total non-fashioning. It opens up to the deathless, free from aging, free from illness, free from death, free from separation. The one happiness that more than repays the effort that goes into it. As the Buddha once said, if you could make a deal with someone that for a hundred years you would be stuck by a hundred spears every morning and then another hundred spears every day at noon and then another hundred spears every day in the evening for a hundred years, but there would be a guarantee that you would gain awakening at the end of a hundred years, he said it would be a good deal to make. And then when the awakening comes, you wouldn’t feel that it had been gained with hardship, more than repaid the effort, more than repaid the suffering that went into it. It’s that good. It’s that outstanding. So this is all that’s asked of us as we stay here, is that we follow this path. The Buddha not only set out the path, but he also set out a social arrangement whereby people would have the time and the energy and the opportunity to follow this path. With as few encumbrances and as few extraneous duties as possible. That was his gift to the world. That’s why he called his teaching not only Dharma, but also Dharma-vinaya, the rules of this organization that he set up, this social pattern that we follow here. He not only gave a teaching, but he also gave the arrangement whereby people would have the time and the energy to follow his teaching. We talk about the compassion of the Buddha, and it’s expressed in the Dharma and it’s expressed in the Vinaya, because it’s the two of them together that allow people to practice. And for what purpose? For the sake of their ability to put an end to suffering. As the Buddha said, the highest form of Dharma that you can pay to them, the highest way you can show gratitude to them, is to practice the Dharma in line with the Dharma. A number of people who stayed with the Chan Mun said that that was the theme that he talked about more than anything else, practicing the Dharma in line with the Dharma. In other words, not in line with your own preconceived notions, not in line with your defilements, not in line with what you say, “Well, because we live in this culture or this society, we have to follow this custom or that custom.” You put the Dharma first. Whatever is in line with the Dharma, that’s your duty. That’s what you give your life to. And as a result, you put an end to suffering. So here we’re not being asked to be stuck with spears every day. All we’re asked to do is practice the Dharma in line with the Dharma and not place our preferences ahead of the Dharma. We’re not to get entangled in extraneous things. It’s the best kind of life there is. Unlike ordinary ways of living outside, which people put a lot of effort into gaining, what? Things that age, grow ill, and die. This is a life that’s dedicated to what doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die. And it really gives results.

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