Harmony & Unity

July, 2003

Every evening before we meditate, we have that chant on goodwill, wishing happiness for ourselves, wishing happiness for everybody around us. That creates the context for what we’re doing right here. Our desire for happiness, our desire for happiness that doesn’t let us down, happiness that doesn’t change on us, doesn’t turn around and bite us. In other words, our happiness has to be found from within. Because you look at the happiness that can come from outside, and there’s nothing really solid or dependable about it at all. Where there’s gain, there’s also loss. Where there’s status, there’s loss of status. Where people praise you, they also criticize you. The way of the world is that these things are common pairs. Whatever happiness the world has to give to you, it also can give you pain, give you suffering. That’s if you spin around after the world. What we’re doing as we meditate is to learn to stop spinning around. Come look inside and see if there’s something really solid within us, something that can act as a basis for happiness that doesn’t disappoint us, doesn’t let us down. But to find that, we have to dig down inside, because there are lots of different layers in the mind that are in the way. It’s like digging down in the earth. Sometimes you know there’s gold down there, but you run into rocks, you run into all kinds of other things in the earth beforehand, before you get down to the gold. But if you’re convinced that there really is gold down there, then you keep on digging. You find ways to get around the rock. You find ways to get around the tree roots. You find ways to get around sudden underground springs, or whatever the problem is. So as you sit down to meditate, even though we’re here for the purpose of finding true happiness, remember the Buddha started his teachings with teachings on suffering and the causes of suffering, because we’re going to run into those. On the way down to that gold. In fact, they’re the things that lead us to the gold. So be prepared. There’s going to be pain in your legs. There’s going to be pain in your back. There’s going to be distracting thoughts. And the important lesson is not to get dissuaded by them, not to get discouraged by them. Learn how to work around them or work through them on your way to that gold that’s buried down inside. So we give you your tools to begin with. You don’t have to dig with your bare hands. You’ve got up-to-date, very efficient tools. You work with the breath. Focus on the breath coming in, the breath going out. Try to make the breath as comfortable as possible. That’s going to be one of your main tools in dealing with pain when it comes. And it’s also going to be an important tool in getting rid of distraction, because the breath is an element of the body. It’s a sensation we have within us that can change, and you can nudge it in different directions. You can make it longer, you can make it shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. You can think of the breath going throughout the whole body, out through every pore, from your head on down to your toes, from your toes on up to your head. In other words, there are lots of ways of playing with the breath, lots of ways of adjusting the breath so that it feels more and more comfortable. It’s more and more absorbing. If you’re told just to sit here and watch the breath come in, go out, come in, go out, and don’t do anything else, you get bored very fast. But here you’re talking about an element or a level of energy in the body that has lots of things to explore, lots of aspects that have an impact on your health, that have an impact on your general sense of well-being right here in the present moment. So you can explore them. This serves several purposes at once. On the one hand, it gives you a pleasant place to be in the present moment. It gets easier to stay in the present moment when things are more pleasant. So when distraction comes in, you don’t feel so inclined to follow it. And when you work with the breath of the whole body like this, you really fully inhabit the present moment. We spend most of our time not really living in the present, not fully inhabiting the present. We’re only partway here. The rest of us is off someplace else. But you work with the breath and you get fully into your body. Your hands, your feet, your legs, all parts of your body are involved in the breathing process. And that can help keep you riveted here, so you don’t easily float away. The sense of comfort also gives you a sense of confidence when pain does come up in different parts of the body. You don’t have to go running off with the pain. You can stay here with the breath. You feel less threatened by the pain. You have a better place to stay. You don’t have to go dwelling in the pain. You can stay with a good comfortable sensation of the breathing. So the breath gives you a means for settling down. It also gives you the first tools you need in dealing with pain. You can learn how to look at pain not as your pain or as something that’s happening to you, but as something that’s simply there in, say, the leg or there in the back. But it’s just an event. It’s just a sensation. You don’t have to even label it as pain. It’s just a sensation. And you don’t have to get involved in the stories. Why am I sitting here floating off with all this pain? Am I going to harm myself? I could be off someplace else. Just put those aside. You’re here to get to know the present moment. And it’s an important place to be. All the decisions in your life are being made here. And if you can’t fully inhabit the present moment, who knows who’s making the decisions in there? If you’re not consciously making the decisions, then who is making them? All sorts of subterranean beasts in your mind are pulling the levers. Is that what you want? Of course it’s not. So you want to really be here, have practice staying here. This is time well spent, even though there may be pain involved, there may be distraction. But you don’t let yourself get dissuaded by those things, because you really want to inhabit the body right here, right now. And we really want to inhabit the present moment right here, right now. So you can be fully aware of what’s going on, the forces that are shaping your life, all the decisions. The mind is making lots of decisions all the time. Neuroscientists talk about the many different impulses that come into the brain from all parts of the nervous system. Now the mind is constantly shutting off this nerve, turning on that nerve, in other words, shutting off the impulse from this nerve, turning it, allowing the impulse from another nerve to come in. And there are many, many decisions going on all the time, most of them subconscious. And some of them are very important, because they have an impact on your life more than just in the present moment, but on into the future. And if all these things are turned over to the subterranean beasts, who knows what kind of agenda they have. So the more fully you inhabit the body here in the present moment, the more you get acquainted with what’s going on down there, and you push out the beasts. You inhabit the body, you inhabit, you start pulling the levers. And you find as you’re more in control of your life, things start clearing up, the various layers in your mind begin to open up to one another. So what was hidden before becomes open and clear. Where were there divisions in the mind? A lack of harmony in the mind? Part of you wanting to do this, part of you wanting to do that. That lack of harmony can be cleared up. As you more fully inhabit the body and your sense of your breath energy gets more unified, the mind begins to feel more unified as well. It’s not fighting with itself all the time. So as you allow the breath to have a greater wholeness in the present moment, you find that other aspects of your body, other aspects of your mind, develop a greater wholeness, a greater harmony as well. You’re put in a position where you can really see what’s going on, and you get a better idea of what’s important in life, what decisions really are worth making, which ones are best not made, what questions are worth pursuing, which ones are not. Because not only do you inhabit the present more fully, there’s a greater continuity through time. As you stay here, stay here, stay here in the present moment, you begin to see how cause and effect really operate in your life, that all of your actions bear results, they have an impact on the shape of your life. And your decisions as to what to do are based less and less on simple likes, likes, and dislikes, and more on a sense of where those decisions are going to take you. You’re operating more from knowledge and less from guesswork. There’s a greater openness, a greater transparency in the mind, so that your life becomes a whole, a peace. And not just lots of little fragments. And the decisions start becoming more and more consistent with one another, so that you really can make something out of your life instead of just frittering it away. We’re so fortunate to have this human life, but what do we do with it? If different parts of the mind keep pulling us in different directions, what do you end up with? You end up with a shredded life. It’s pulled apart. But if you can get the different parts of your mind to work together, your mind itself becomes a more complete life, a more consistent life, a life that actually accomplishes something in terms of bringing about understanding into the mind, bringing out greater well-being, a much more solid sense of well-being and happiness that affects not only you but also the people around you. So do your best to get this sense of wholeness in the body, the wholeness of the breath. The breath is a coordinated, harmonious energy flow throughout the body. And your awareness being in harmony with the breath, seeping throughout the whole body as well. And then try to make that wholeness continuous, so that it’s a whole not only in the present, but also in the future. So that over time, with the breath as a central focus, a central foundation for this harmony. When the breath feels harmonious in the body, it enables the mind to feel more at home with the body. They get along together better. And when everybody’s getting along together, then they can work together on major projects. It’s like looking at countries throughout history. They have a good project to work on together, and it hangs together. If they can’t find a good common project, they pretty soon split up and they’re working at cross-purposes and everything falls apart. So you want to find a good way of unifying the body and the mind and the breath. And then the breath is the main factor right here, right now. The qualities of mindfulness and alertness, you apply to the breath. That’s the medium through which everything in the body and the mind gets harmonized. So work on making these qualities as continuous and as harmonious as you can. This is what will bring you to that well-being that we all hope for, a well-being that is solid and secure.

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