Island in the Flood, An

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Always start your meditation with thoughts of goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people around you, goodwill out in all directions. The image they give in the Canon is someone blowing a conchshell trumpet. As soon as he blows the trumpet, the sound goes everywhere. Without selecting that it’s going to go north or south, or for this person or that person, it goes to everybody, the trumpet player included. We do this for several reasons. One, because goodwill is a good thought to think. It feels good to think. It has a good impact on the mind. And to the extent that your thoughts are energy, it has a good impact on the people around you as well. It’s our basic motivation. For meditation, we do really wish happiness for ourselves. Because other people wish happiness for themselves as well. If our happiness depends on causing them suffering, that happiness is not going to last very long. So you want the kind of happiness that comes from within. Because that’s a happiness that’s not restricted by things outside. If you look outside, things are changing, changing, changing all the time. You yourself are changing. Your body’s changing. Your mind’s changing. That’s the word “outside” here. Even the thoughts of your mind count as “outside.” You try to pin your happiness on these things, and you’re setting yourself up for trouble. Not only because things change, but because they’re limited. There’s only so much to go around in terms of things and in terms of relationships. The Buddha himself once said, “Even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn’t have enough to fulfill our desires.” But if you look for happiness in a particular place, starting with your intentions—because your intentions shape the present moment as they shape the future—you realize you have an inexhaustible supply. There are always intentions going on, and you can choose to make them skillful. That source for happiness never runs out. And you find that if you make your intentions really skillful, it opens you up to something even further, the dimension they call the deathless, the happiness that doesn’t change, doesn’t depend on conditions. So this is why we meditate, and it’s important we reflect on this over and over again. It’s not just for us; it’s also for the impact we have on those around us. And it’s because we realize where the true source of happiness lies. We’re a lot more patient with things outside, realizing that our happiness can’t depend on things outside, so there’s no reason that they have to be a certain way in order for us to be satisfied with them. You learn to live with conditions outside that are less than ideal because you realize that’s not where your happiness depends. It depends on something inside, which is what you work on as you meditate. You’re training your intentions. For instance, you try to develop the intention to stay with the breath. It’s an easy intention to have. The difficulty lies in maintaining it. But there are techniques, there are strategies. One is to make the breath comfortable. The second is to start exploring the breath, realizing that it’s not just the air coming in and out of the nostrils; it’s the whole energy flow in the body. And there are many levels to this energy flow. The in-and-out breath, the energy flow that flows around the nerves and the blood vessels, a very subtle energy level around the body as a whole, kind of inner encasing the body. And then there’s a very still level of energy that you can reach through the meditation as well, a still kind of breath. So there’s a lot to explore here. If you think there’s simply the in-and-out, in-and-out, in-and-out, it gets very boring very quickly and your mind is going to look someplace else for satisfaction. But if you make up your mind you’re going to explore things here. There’s a lot to explore. There’s a lot to learn. And the fact that there is so much to learn can keep you interested and get you absorbed. So try to be as sensitive as possible to the breathing. The more sensitive you get to the breathing, you also become more sensitive to your own mind, the movements of the mind, how they affect the energy level in the body, and how the breath can have an impact on the mind. And sometimes it gives you a good foundation for taking a good look at what’s going on in your mind. As you stay with the sensation, the breathing helps pull you out of your thought worlds. Because we can build little worlds for our thoughts and get totally out of perspective. Everything gets warped because we lose our perspective. By staying with the breath, you can watch the thoughts come, you can watch them go, and not get sucked in. That way you can see them more clearly. You see this process of how the way you think can either lead to less suffering or to more suffering. The Buddha once said that he got on the right track in his practice when he simply divided his thoughts into two types, those that were skillful and those that were unskillful. The skillful ones did not bring about harm or suffering. The unskillful ones did. Simply that ability to step back and look at your thoughts, that’s what puts you on the path. And then to see them as part of a cause and effect chain. This is something that we miss so many times. The thought seems to be a whole world in and of itself. The pleasure and pain that come from our thinking, from our ideas, from our emotions, those seem to be ends in and of themselves. But if you learn to look at this all as a causal process, you can see where a particular thought leads to, where the clinging to the thought leads. If you cling to a particular pleasure, you can see where that leads. You can cling to a particular pain. You can see where that leads. And you realize that your pursuit of pleasure and pain, happiness—pursuit of pleasure, you’re running away from pain—the way you try to find happiness in life, that has its consequences. You do it skillfully and you can find a true happiness. Your pursuit of happiness doesn’t end up causing pain. If you do it unskillfully, your pursuit of happiness in and of itself is a major cause of pain. It’s a major cause of suffering, a major cause of harm. So you have to be careful about that motivation we have for meditation, looking for true happiness. It’s not an idle or selfish or totally subjective thing. It has a long-term impact, both on ourselves and on others. So we owe it to ourselves and to others to really get to know how the mind moves, where it’s going when it’s looking for thoughts, where it’s going when it’s looking for entertainment, when it wants to leave the breath and get involved in the thought process, rather than simply watching the process as a pattern of cause and effect happening in the mind. What trouble is it looking for? What trouble does it cause inadvertently? It’s a simple process of getting to know the breath. If you do it sensitively, with your powers of observation around you, all around, you find you learn an awful lot, both about the body and about the mind. And you can step out a lot of the unskillful processes in the mind. You don’t have to go along with them. You see them simply as a flow through the mind, and let them flow on without your getting involved in the flow. If you flow after them, you get yourself in trouble. So you want to stand still. Many times the image for a meditator is someone who’s found an island in a flood. You look at the world outside, and it’s just flooding all the time. And many times we internalize that flood, so we get stirred up inside as well. Come out to a quiet place like this, it takes a while for those floods to die down. But if you give them time, if you’re patient enough and persistent enough in trying to maintain this island, you find that the floods do finally recede, and you’re on an island. You’re secure. The island is being aware of the body in and of itself right now, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves. It’s the in and of themselves that’s important. All too often we’re aware of our body, our feelings, our thoughts, as they relate to the world around us. We very rarely look at them as processes in and of themselves. As a result, they seem to be all part of that flow. But if we get to the in and of itself, we find that we can establish an island here. This is our frame of reference. It’s not the body in the world, it’s the body in and of itself, right here, right now, as it’s directly experienced. Same for the feelings, thoughts, mind states, mental qualities. You’re with the breath, you’re with the body in and of itself. The feelings caused by the breath are feelings in and of themselves. See them as a causal pattern here. Try not to get involved in the storylines that you can build around them. You find that you do develop that island, and it’s an island that you can then take with you wherever you go. Wherever there’s a flood, you’ve got your island. It’s in this island that you find true peace, true happiness. The Buddha once said, “There is no happiness other than peace.” That means not getting stirred up by the floods, either outside floods or not stirring up floods inside yourself. Wherever there is a flood, just let it go through. You stand here, right at the breath. In this way, you develop both stillness and insight. It takes a lot of insight not to get swept along by things. Many people think that you practice concentration and then you practice insight, but you’ve got to do the two of them together. There is no really strong concentration without a good understanding about what’s going on in the mind. There’s no good understanding without being still. So the two have to come together. They strengthen one another, they help one another along. So as we stay here practicing, we’re going to stay with the breath, developing the qualities of mindfulness and alertness. We need to stay with the breath. We’re showing goodwill for ourselves, a happiness that is pure, a happiness that is wise, a happiness that’s compassionate. That becomes a happiness in which we can take our refuge, because those qualities—purity, wisdom, compassion—are the qualities of the Buddha. When they talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, this is what they mean, developing these qualities in the mind. You can learn to take your pursuit of happiness and turn them into those qualities. The breath is a good place to start. It’s a good foundation. Not only do you start here, you stay here and build on this spot. It sinks its pilings deeper and deeper into the present moment until you finally reach the bedrock, what’s really of solid worth inside.

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