Wish for Happiness, The

April 16, 2004

The chant on what’s called the four Brahma-viharas, the four sublime attitudes, is something we chant every evening before we meditate to put our minds in the right attitude to do the meditation. They say that the Brahmas live in a mental state of at least the first jhana. And so in order to develop that mental state within ourselves, it’s good to have the same attitudes they have, starting with goodwill, wishing for happiness, our happiness, the happiness of others, making that wish unlimited. We’d like to see all the people in the world be happy, all the living beings in the universe be happy. In other words, we don’t set up boundaries of us versus them. We don’t let our likes and dislikes get in the way. Same with compassion. When we see there’s suffering in ourselves and other people, we want to alleviate that suffering, see it alleviated. As for the happiness we find in ourselves and other beings, we’d like to see it continued. As for the fourth contemplation, the contemplation on equanimity, notice it doesn’t say equanimity or not caring. It’s a simple statement of fact. The first three are aspirations, the third is a simple statement of fact. Whatever happiness or pain we experience, ourselves, whatever happiness and pain is experienced by others, all depends on the karma of each individual. So if we wish for happiness, alleviation of suffering, continuation of happiness is already there. It depends on our actions. What our actions come from? They come from our mind. This is why so much of the emphasis of the Buddha’s teachings are on the training of the mind, particularly the training of our intentions, because our intentions lie at the heart of our actions. So that’s what we’re doing here, working on our intentions, our intention for true happiness. The Buddha once said that wisdom begins with a question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” So we want a happiness that doesn’t change quickly, that doesn’t turn into something else. Because when happiness turns into something else, it doesn’t turn into something better, usually. It turns back into pain, disappointment, regret, anguish. So we have to be very careful with our intentions, because sometimes they lead to a short-term happiness, sometimes they lead straight to pain. And if we’re not careful, our lives are totally out of control. So we come and focus on our intention. Our intention right now is to bring the mind to stillness, to bring it to oneness, to drop all unskillful thoughts, greed, anger, and delusion, and to drop thoughts about the past and the future, trying to stay right here in the present moment. Keep your intention focused on one thing, in this case, the breath. When the breath comes in, watch it coming in. When it goes out, watch it going out. Be mindful, which means to keep the breath in mind, and alert, to watch how the breath is doing. See when it’s coming in how it feels. See how it feels when it’s going out. Just watch for a while to see exactly what sensations you have in the body that tell you, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” Then focus on any one of those sensations that seems most prominent. Take that as your focal point for the time being. Then notice if it feels comfortable there. Pay close attention. How do you know when enough breath has come in? How do you know when enough breath has gone out? What’s the quality of the sensation that says, “Okay, now is enough”? Anything more would be uncomfortable, both with the in-breath and with the out-breath. Adjust your breathing accordingly. If your mind wanders off, bring it back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Try to make your intention more and more firm each time it comes back. Reestablish that intention to stay right here. Keep reminding yourself this is where you want to stay with the breath. Be on good terms with the breathing. Regard the breath as your friend, because actually it is. If it weren’t for the breath, you wouldn’t be alive. It stands to reason this basic force that keeps life going. If it feels good, it’s going to be better for the body and for the mind than if it feels tense or tight or restricted. Think of the breathing as an all-body process. Survey through the body to see where it feels comfortable and where it feels uncomfortable. Once you’ve got that one point established where it feels good, you have a sense of what good breathing feels like right now. Move your awareness through the body. You can start at any one point. Some people like to start at the navel, because that’s an easy point to watch. Other people start at the back of the neck. Because there’s so much tension in the back of the neck, that’s a good place to deal with tension directly. Once that tension is relaxed, it tends to relax a lot of other tension down the shoulders, down the back. But choose your spot and begin there. Move through the body systematically. Each section of the body, however you want to divide it up. See what kind of breathing feels good for that section. See if there’s any sense of tension or tightness there. If there is, think of the breath dissolving it away. So you breathe in without tension building up. Breathe out without holding onto tension or forcing the breath out too much. Pay careful attention to how each breath feels, because sometimes a rhythm that feels good for one part of the body or feels good for a certain while doesn’t feel so good. So allow it to change with what feels best. This requires that you use your own sensitivity. This is an important part of the meditation. We know that Buddhist insight has specific insights that it aims at. But the insight has to come from your own sensitivity to what’s going on, first in the body, then in the mind. Without that sensitivity, you simply can’t clone what you hear of abstract terms. You have to see into impermanence or inconstancy, see into stress or suffering, see into not-selfness. The nature of mind is such that it can try to clone itself to these abstract notions. But there’s no guarantee that the notions are going to give you insight, unless you’re really sensitive about what’s important in seeing the impermanence of things, the inconstancy of things. You look at the impermanence of some things, you look at the impermanence of trees or flowers or mountains, and it doesn’t have that much of an impact. But when you turn those insights into areas where you’ve really placed your happiness, your hopes for happiness, you begin to realize that either the things you’re doing are not conducive to happiness, or else the happiness when it comes is not all that dependable. That’s when the insight can really make changes in your life. So in other words, a lot of that insight has to be applied to your own intentions. But in order to get to know your intentions well, you have to learn how to stick with one intention for a long period of time, which is why we practice staying with the breath. Being sensitive to the breath is a way of being on more and more friendly terms with it, because the more friendly you are with your breath, the easier it is to stay with it. You listen to it and it starts providing you a good place to stay. It’s like any friend. If you don’t listen to the friend, don’t pay attention, but constantly insistent on your way of doing things and your way of looking at things, that’s not going to be a very good friendship. But if you listen to the friend, make adjustments, make adjustments in how heavily you focus on the breath, where you focus on the breath, realizing that since the breathing is both a voluntary and involuntary process, you want to be careful that your voluntary contribution is skillful and sensitive. In that way, the breathing becomes a lot more pleasant to be with, because you listen to it and pay attention to it. Over time, you come to appreciate more and more what the breath can do, both for the body and for the mind. In terms of the body, it loosens up a lot of the tightness, a lot of diseases that are related to stress. They can actually be cured by the breathing, and if not cured, they can be certainly alleviated a great deal. As for the mind, when it has a good, comfortable place to stay in the present moment, it begins to infiltrate the whole body. Its awareness grows, so it’s a 360-degree awareness all around, not with the narrow focus that it normally has. The mind is used to jumping around from one thing to another, because it realizes that it keeps landing on things that are impermanent or undependable. So as soon as it lands, it tenses up, ready to jump again. Often, when we bring the mind to the meditation, that’s the attitude we bring. As soon as we light on the breath, we tense up, and that tenses up the breath as well. It becomes uncomfortable, so you want to jump. In this case, you want to work through that tension, which, on the one hand, makes the breath a much more comfortable place to stay in. At the same time, it opens up the mind as well. The dividing line between your awareness and the breath begins to dissolve. So the awareness is there throughout the body, together with the breath. They seem to be, if not one and the same thing, very closely united, very closely related. This is important. Ultimately, you find there are certain dividing lines between the awareness and the object of the awareness. But you can’t really see those lines unless you erase first the lines you bring into the meditation, a lot of your preconceived notions. So allow the awareness and the breath to be together, coming in and going out. The more you work through the tension in the breath, the more the mind itself begins to soften up, not in the sense of being weak or watery, but in the sense of being more and more sensitive, more and more willing to permeate throughout the whole body, not tensing itself already up to jump off again to some other place. This way you establish a good, firm foundation in the present moment where you need it. Because if you’re going to see your intentions, you have to see them as they operate in the present moment and surround your intentions. Specifically, keep looking at what your mind keeps intending. Why does it keep willing? It keeps looking for happiness, happiness, happiness, a sense of well-being. Learn to look at how it goes about that. Where its quest for happiness is effective and where it’s ineffective, and what kind of happiness is really worth the effort that goes into it. Those are the questions the Buddha has you ask. That’s where the insights and the three characteristics do their important work. But until you can penetrate the breath, penetrate the body here in the present moment this way, you can’t see things clearly. The teachings are abstractions, they’re words. But as your awareness gets more and more sensitive to the present moment, more willing to penetrate it, to get all around here in the present moment, then you start dealing directly with the realities that the Buddhist teaching was talking about, and the important ones specifically about intention, the results of intentions. So try to give this process of settling in with the breath as much attention, as much care as you can, because it’s the foundation for everything else that we’re going to discover here in the present moment.

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