Source of Goodness, The

November 25, 2004

We chant before the meditation to put ourselves in the right frame of mind. We think of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and we remember what they stand for—wisdom, compassion, purity. We realize that these qualities are the refuges in our life. We have the passages on requisites, reflecting on our life. What kind of life do we have? We’ve got this body that, once it’s born into the world, is like a big gaping hole. It needs food, clothing, shelter, medicine. It can never have enough. There’s never a point where you have so much food, clothing, shelter, medicine that you don’t get sick, you don’t die. That’s the next recollection. We’re subject to aging, illness, death, separation. To remind us of why we need refuge. If we could depend on the body for happiness, we wouldn’t need any refuge in the mind. But because the body is so independent and because so many parts of our mind are independent, that’s why we need refuge. We need to develop the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha in our lives. That fifth recollection is there to remind us that this is something we can do. It’s through our own actions. We experience good and evil in the world. So, reminding ourselves of the power of our actions, then, are the four sublime attitudes. We want to act in such a way that leads to happiness. We wish for the happiness of all beings. If we see that they’re suffering, this includes ourselves. If beings are suffering, we wish for the happiness of all beings. We want to help put an end to that suffering if we can. When beings are happy, we’re happy with them. We’re not jealous and we’re not resentful of their happiness. Then, in areas where we can’t make a difference, where we can’t be of help, we develop equanimity. In other words, we don’t waste our time fretting over things that we can’t change. This allows us to focus our energies on the things that we can. What’s the most important thing you can change? You can change your mind. That’s why meditation is the heart of the path. As the Buddha once said, “Right concentration is the essence of the path.” The other factors are its requisites, the things that help it along to help make it right. These are a few things to keep in mind as you get ready to practice concentration. The topic here is the breath, the energy flow in the body. You try to be mindful of the breath and be alert to what is actually going on. In other words, keep the breath in mind and then watch it. Know that it’s coming in. Know when it’s going out. Know when it’s comfortable. Know when it’s not comfortable. When it’s not comfortable, you can change it. At the same time, be alert to what your mind is doing, whether it’s staying with the breath or not. You have to stand double guard, in other words, watching both the breath and the mind. If the mind slips away, as soon as you realize that it has slipped away, bring it right back. If it slips away again, bring it back again. Don’t get discouraged. After all, you’re training the mind in new habits and it’s going to take time. So these are the basic qualities we’re developing—mindfulness, alertness, and a quality of the Buddha called ardency. You’re really intent on what you’re doing because you realize that this lies at the basis of any potential you have for happiness. If you lack mindfulness, if you lack alertness, it’s hard to do anything with any skill. When your actions are unskillful, all kinds of mistakes can creep into whatever you’re doing, whether it’s physical work or mental work. If it lacks mindfulness, if it lacks alertness, if it lacks this quality of ardency, it’s not going to be work well done. It’s going to be shoddy. It’s going to be sloppy. So just by adding these qualities of mind—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—to whatever you do, it heightens the quality of your work. The results come in a form that you’d like them to come. And in that chant, “Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall in,” how does goodness come about except through mindfulness and alertness and being ardent and really wanting to do what’s skillful, wanting to do what’s right? What really will lead to happiness in line with your wish for well-being for yourself and for all the beings around you? This is why mindfulness, alertness, and ardency are acts of kindness to yourself and to other people. The qualities the Buddha used in order to develop wisdom, compassion, and purity lead us to the refuge that we want. As life passes and we find that we can rely on the body less and less, as it starts changing in ways without asking our permission at all, suddenly this gland starts acting up and that gland acts up, and this organ and that organ. The things you thought you could depend on, you find one by one they start getting undependable. This is when it’s good to have that refuge inside, that refuge you’ve built out of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Otherwise, if your happiness depends on the body, if it depends on a particular thought, if it depends on your mind being really sharp and your brain acting really well, that happiness is headed for a fall. Because the body and all of its organs and all of its functions are so dependable on the requisites it needs just to keep going, there’s no guarantee that you’ll get precisely the requisites you want. Even if you fed the body in the best way and clothed it and sheltered it and everything, it’s still going to find some way to get ill. That’s just its nature. Illness is unavoidable. So we’re working on an inner refuge, a refuge here in the mind, that depends on these qualities we develop through our practice. When we say that we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, it’s not that the Buddha is going to come down and help us. He’s not going to save us from anything. We take refuge in the Buddha as an example. He set forth the teaching for us, so we take the Dhamma as an example, as the pattern for our lives. We take the Sangha as an example. In other words, we try to develop within ourselves the same qualities that they developed within themselves. After all, they were human beings, we’re human beings. When you look at the noble Sangha, there are men, women, laymen, laywomen, monks, nuns, children, old people, all kinds of people. So remember that these are qualities that anybody can develop. As the Buddha himself once said, the qualities that led to his awakening were not something that only he had. Everyone has the same potential for those qualities in their minds. It’s simply a matter of whether you develop those qualities or not. So that’s what we’re working on here. We’re developing good qualities in the mind. That’s what the word bhavana, or meditation, means. It means to develop. You take what you’ve got and you make it stronger, you make it more reliable. You take it to a heightened level, a level to where you really can rely on it, where it really can be your refuge. So it’s just this simple process of watching the breath, working with the breath. When we say “working with the breath,” as you’ll notice, when the breath starts getting more and more comfortable, you can think of letting that comfortable sensation spread throughout the body. After all, the breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. There’s a whole energy flow that goes along with it, and you can use that energy flow to create a greater sense of ease in the body. For example, if the circulation is bad in your legs, you can start thinking of the energy as you breathe in going all the way down to your legs, right away all the way down to your toes. Working through any sense of blockage or obstruction there may be in your back, in your hips, in your legs, working through that obstruction so that the energy flows so your legs don’t get numb. This is one way of using the breath so it’s easier to sit here for long periods of time and you can keep at your work of developing mindfulness and alertness and ardency in the mind. Another sense of comfort is expanded like this. Your awareness can begin to spread out to fill the whole body. That’s when we’re really working on right concentration here. In other words, being mindful of the breath turns into one of the factors of absorption or jhana. It’s called directed thought. You keep all your thoughts directed on the breath. Then there’s evaluation. You notice when the breath is comfortable, you notice when it’s not. Then you make it more comfortable. In other words, if the breathing is too long, you can make it shorter. If it’s too short, you can make it longer. If it feels too deep, you can make it more shallow. If there’s any tension in the breathing process, either tension building up as you breathe in or you’re holding on to tension as you breathe out, you can allow it to relax and the breath will still come in and go out without any need for that tension. This way it gets easier to stay here with the breath for longer periods of time. Your mindfulness and alertness get a good foundation. There’s a sense of ease. Sometimes there’s a sense of fullness, a rapture that goes along with that, and it’s totally absorbing. This is when the mind finally settles down and is one with the breath. The whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, and it feels good. You can relax. You can rest in this. You can think of it as a medicine that’s soothing the whole body. It’s soothing all your frazzled nerves. When the body is soothed and refreshed in this way, then it has strength. The mind develops strength as well. When the mind has strength, then it can develop those qualities that you want. Often when the mind does unskillful things, it’s because the mind is weak. Physically you feel weak. Mentally you feel weak. You can’t manage to do what you know is right. It seems impossible. It seems too much of an effort. But when the mind gains strength, then it’s a lot easier to do what you know is the right thing to do. So again, developing strength in this way is an act of kindness, both to yourself and to the people around you. Some people say that meditation is a selfish pursuit, that you’re only doing it for your own well-being. But it’s not. When you develop good qualities in the mind, are you the only person who benefits? Everybody benefits around you. When you have the strength to do what you know is right, are you the only person who benefits? Everybody benefits around you. This is the kind of goodness, this is the kind of well-being that doesn’t have any clear boundaries. It spreads all around you. You focus inside because that’s the source of all the things that you can do to help yourself and help other people. You want to make sure this source is strong. So as you meditate, remind yourself that you’re doing this not only for yourself, but for every part of the world that’s affected by your actions, affected by your words, affected by your thoughts. If you develop these qualities to a heightened degree, there comes a day when someday you can be part of that Sangha refuge, part of the Noble Sangha, and that way you become a refuge not only to yourself but for people around you. They can take you as an example. So this is the nature of the Buddhist path. As you look for a refuge for yourself, you end up providing a refuge for others too. This is one of the best gifts you can give to yourself and to the world around you. So think about these things each time when you practice. When you start getting discouraged in the practice, remind yourself of why you’re doing it. Remember all those people in the past, all those people in that Sangha refuge who faced difficulties just like yours, sometimes worse than yours. And yet they were able to pull themselves together, apply themselves to the practice, developing the virtue and the concentration and the discernment that were needed finally to break through to awakening. Whatever the difficulties, whatever the discouragements in your practice, realize that they can be overcome if you have the right attitude. So the simple practice of focusing on the breath, bringing the mind back every time it wanders off, becoming more and more acquainted with the breath so it’s more comfortable, so the mind can settle down, has lots of benefits. And the benefits keep spreading out. And as they spread out, though, it doesn’t mean that you get deprived of the benefits. They keep welling up from within. So this is one of the few things in life that you can do that’s good for yourself and for everybody around you. It’s one of the few forms of happiness that has no drawbacks. And as Ajahn Mun once said, “The happiness that has no drawbacks, that’s the only really genuine happiness there is. The goodness that has no drawbacks is the only genuine goodness there is.” And it’s right here. Right where you keep it, this simple practice of keeping the mind mindful of the breath, alert to the breath. And ardently working at maintaining its concentration.

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