Luxury of Meditation, The

November 26, 2004

It’s a real luxury to have this opportunity to meditate, to give the mind some time to focus on itself, to straighten itself out, to develop the good qualities it needs in order to make the right choices in life. This is an opportunity that most people don’t have. Their choices are circumscribed by their beliefs, by their responsibilities. All the things that limit us always work so much to limit the amount of time you actually have to focus on your mind. So when you do have this opportunity, try to make the most of it. Spread thoughts of goodwill to yourself, to the people around you, and then actually show some goodwill for yourself by focusing on the breath. Allow the breath to be comfortable when it comes in. Let it come in in any way that feels comfortable at all. Realize you have a lot of choices for how you view the breath. Think of it as the breath as the air coming in and out of the nose, but you can also think of it as the energy flow in the body. And that opens up all kinds of possibilities. You can breathe in from the back of your neck, down from the top of your head, your eyes, the base of your throat, the middle of the chest. You can breathe in and out through the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet. Just changing the way you conceive of the breath process opens all kinds of possibilities. But for the time being, that’s all you want to explore, is the breathing. If the breathing is not comfortable, you can change it. But now is not the time to figure out how you’re going to rearrange the furniture in your house. Or any of the other issues that can come up in work or family life. Keep those out for the time being. Of course, immediately, once you’re told that there are things you can’t think about, the mind is going to rebel. This is a lot of why people rebel against concentration practice. It seems to limit their choices. Here you are, all you’re allowed to think about is the breath. But if you think of it that way, of course, it’s going to be confusing and confining. But remember, as you work with the breath, developing powers of concentration, mindfulness, alertness, and discernment, all the things that will eventually broaden the range of choices you have in life. In other words, when your powers of mindfulness and alertness are clear, you begin to realize that there are a lot more choices available to you. And as you develop your discernment, you begin to see that you are more wise in how you make your choices. So as you’re working on concentration, think of this as like going to school. When you’re in school, your choices are limited. You’ve got so many responsibilities. You’ve got to study this, you’ve got to study that. You don’t have time to just go off and play, because you’ve got responsibilities. But once you graduate from school, you have a lot more possibilities open to you. The job market is a lot wider for a person who’s gone to college than it is for someone who hasn’t gone to college. And if you’ve gone to a good college, you can make good choices in what kind of job you want, what kind of career you want for your life. It’s the same way with doing concentration practice. You keep your mind in a particular mold for a while. You limit your choices. You’re going to stay here with the breath. Outside of that, you don’t want to get involved. But as you stay with the breath, you begin to understand the breath a lot more. And as you understand the breath a lot more, the mind begins to develop as well. You understand the present moment as a whole a lot better. And you begin to see there’s a lot more choices available to you in the present moment than you might have imagined. This is where the Buddha’s teachings on self and not-self come in. The Buddha teaches self as a strategy. He teaches not-self as a strategy. In other words, when thoughts come up in the mind, you have a choice. Is this a thought that you want to identify with? Is it something you want to follow through with? You’re not compelled to latch onto it as yours. For the time being, if you’re focusing on the breath, you say no to any thoughts except for the thoughts connected with the breathing. But as your mind gets more established, you can entertain other choices. Say, when you leave meditation and issues of your daily life come up, or just simply thoughts come up in the mind, you don’t have to burden yourself with a lot of unnecessary thinking, a lot of unnecessary attitudes. If you’re mindful enough to catch a thought as it forms, you can begin to see how artificial the whole process of thinking is. And you have the choice to follow through with thoughts or not as you like. This is where discernment comes in, seeing what’s worth following through and what’s not, what you want to identify with for the time being and what you don’t. This is why the Buddha’s teachings on self and not-self are so important. The philosophy of the Self is basically this. You want to work for a long-term happiness for yourself, realizing that your actions determine whether you’re going to be happy or not, and whether the happiness you latch onto is going to be long-term or short-term. A person with a healthy sense of self would always choose the long-term happiness. He would also choose a happiness that doesn’t oppress other people. Because you have to realize that you want happiness, other people want happiness. If your happiness depends on their unhappiness, they’re going to be struggling against your happiness. So it doesn’t make any sense to base your happiness on other people’s oppression. So a healthy sense of self would look for a happiness that’s not oppressive to anyone and a happiness that’s long-term. Aside from that, other desires that come up in the mind, you can look at them and realize that these desires go against my true best interests, so I don’t have to identify with them. Often we think that when a strong feeling comes, that’s the true you. When a strong desire comes, that’s your true desire. The teaching on not-self reminds us that we don’t have to be subject to these things. Just because they’re strong doesn’t mean they’re really us. When the waves come in on the ocean, it doesn’t mean the strong waves are the true waves of the ocean and the weak waves are the false ones. It’s the same with feelings and thoughts that come flowing through the mind. Whether something is strong or not doesn’t indicate its truth or its genuineness. When you have a good foundation in your concentration, you can stay with the breath and watch the thoughts come and go. You’re in a much better position to judge whether they’re worth following through with or not. So it’s important that you develop this foundation. However much work it requires, however many times you have to keep restricting your thoughts, you say, “I can’t go there right now. I’ve got to stay with the breath. I can’t go there right now. I’ve got to stay with the breath.” Even though it seems restricting for the time being, ultimately it puts you in a position where there are a lot fewer restrictions on you. Because you notice, as you choose more and more skillfully throughout life, more and more possibilities open up. Your own capabilities grow broader. That’s the kind of life we want, a life that really has a lot of choices. The people who suffer are the ones who have no choice at all. They’re forced into positions where there’s nothing but suffering to the left, suffering to the right, suffering to the middle. Or they don’t even have the choice of right and left. They’re pulled in one direction. That’s because their choices have been unskillful. It doesn’t leave much room for whittling. But as your choices grow more and more skillful in how you act and how you speak and how you think, more and more opportunities open up. Then, as through meditation you develop the alertness to see that you have these choices and the wisdom to choose rightly, then you’re in a much better position. In particular, you see that no matter what comes, even though there may be bad karma coming from the past, unwise choices you made in the past that do push you in directions you may not want to go, you don’t have to go in those directions. This is one of the Buddha’s most important discoveries, that your life is not totally determined by past actions. Part of the present moment is shaped by decisions you’re making right now. Because, after all, aging, illness, and death are going to come to all of us. And if our happiness were totally dependent on good actions from the past, we’d be miserable. But once you realize that you have more choices in the present, when illness comes to the body, you have the choice to identify with it or not. You have the choice to let the pain overcome the mind or not. The same with aging, the same with death. You can choose to identify with all the things that die at death or you don’t have to. You can choose to follow along with craving or not. These are all choices that we have. This is the good news of the Buddha’s teachings, that no matter what karma we have in the past, we always can deal with it skillfully now, if you develop the right amount of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment to see what your choices are and to be able to make the right choices. So this is why we spend all this time making one choice for the outcome. To stay with the breath and then try to stick with that one choice and not go following along with any other lines of thinking, any other lines of intention that may come up in the course of the hour. It’s a restriction for the time being, but it’s the kind of restriction that opens up new possibilities as you stick with it, just like getting an education. The student sitting at the desk may look out the window and see people playing around, having a good time, and may envy them. But the time comes when you graduate and the student who’s been studying is the one who’s going to have more possibilities, more opportunities than the people just goofing off all the time. So even though it may seem like a restriction for the time being, ultimately it’s not. It’s the kind of discipline that opens up all kinds of possibilities, understanding how you create suffering, how you don’t have to create it. And what happens as you take the decisions of the mind, the choices of the mind, and make them more and more refined, all the time, to the point where the mind is totally devoid of intention? What happens then? If you’ve been practicing, you get the opportunity to see. If you don’t practice, you don’t. It’s as simple as that. So this is one of those cases where you put up with a short-term restriction for the sake of a long-term freedom, but the restriction is not always onerous. As you stay with the breath, it grows more and more comfortable. As you get more sensitive to the breathing, you realize the different ways you can adjust the breath. All the way throughout the body. And as you allow that sense of comfort to expand, your sense of awareness expands as well. Sometimes it seems the comfort goes first and the awareness follows. Other times the awareness spreads first and the comfort follows from that. But either way, you develop a sense of spaciousness here in the present moment. So even though you are focused on one object and you’re not going to go anywhere else, it’s not a sense of being tied down. It’s more a sense of being absorbed at one with the object, happy to be there. So if you learn to work within the restrictions, you’ll find that not all the rewards come at the end. They come as you’re practicing. If you really appreciate the opportunity that you’ve been given, you’ve got to develop the foundation you’re going to need. That leads to even greater freedom. Ultimately, you would reach the type of freedom they describe in the texts. The path of the Arhats can’t be traced like that of birds in space. You look up and the bird flies through space. You can’t track where it’s been. It doesn’t leave any footprints behind. It’s totally free to go in any direction at once. That’s the freedom towards which we’re practicing. So whatever difficulties there may be involved in staying with the path, in resisting the temptation to wander off to the left or the right, remember that ultimately the path takes you to a spot where no path can be traced. It’s that free. (bees buzzing)

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