Peace of Mind

February 22, 2005

We all want peace in our lives, but we keep running into obstacles. Some of the obstacles come from outside, things that people do or events that happen that shatter our peace of mind. Then there are obstacles that come from inside, usually one kind or another, worried about ourselves or worried about people we care about. The concern is, have we done enough to prevent bad things from happening to ourselves? Have we done enough to prevent bad things from happening to the people we love? This kind of worry can eat away at us because we’ll just look at human life. All kinds of things can happen, many things that we have no ability to prevent at all. Like the chant just now, we’re all subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. These things are going to happen to everybody. And there’s a certain extent to which you can fend them off for a while. But eventually they’re bound to come crashing into life. So the trick is finding out exactly how much you really can do as a human being, both to protect yourself and to protect the people you love, to honor the memory of people you love when they’ve passed, and then learn the wisdom to realize that there’s a certain point where that worry becomes counterproductive. Because, after all, the best thing you can do to help other people is to have your mind in good shape. Because then, when dangers do come, as they inevitably will, you’ll be in a good shape, in a good position to be of help. If you wear yourself out worrying, then when the time comes when you realize you can’t do it, you’ll need the powers of your mind. They won’t be there. You’ve frittered them away. This is why meditation is such an important principle in finding peace. To begin with, it helps develop all kinds of useful qualities of mind. Mindfulness, alertness. You stick with the breath. That requires mindfulness. And you watch the breath. You’re sensitive to the breath. That requires alertness. And these are the two qualities that you really need for any endeavor. So in this way, meditation is like exercising your mind in the same way you’d exercise your body to make it strong. You use the qualities that you need, and you find that with use they get stronger. Concentration develops. Discernment develops. And all these things get stronger with use. And even though it may seem like a simple thing, being focused on the breath, still, the qualities you develop around it are important. Just like going down to the gym. They ask you to lift some weights. Well, what is accomplished by lifting the weights? It doesn’t generate electricity. It doesn’t do anything. Just the weight goes up and down. But the strength of the body gets improved. Then you can take that strength and use it for something that really is useful. That’s one way meditation is helpful. The other way is it gives you a place to be at peace. When the breath feels comfortable coming in, it feels comfortable going out. And when you’re meditating, you really want to focus on this issue of what kind of breathing feels good, what kind of breathing is soothing to a tired body, what kind of breathing is energizing when you need energy. What kind of breathing is healing when the mind and the body need to be healed. The breath energy has lots of facets, lots of different ways that it can be of help. And if you pay attention to it, you’ll find what kind of breathing works best for what kind of situation. And with time you find that you begin to shift your center of gravity. The happiness and fulfillment that you might ordinarily want to look for outside, you begin to find inside. And it’s much more reliable this way. Years back I was visiting my father in Williamsburg. When I’d been a teenager, we’d built a house in Charlottesville. So we decided one day, let’s go see the house. My dad drove up. My brother went along. We got out to look at the house and discovered that the current owners were not taking care of it at all. Parts of the eaves were rotting out. Generally looking pretty shabby. On the way back to Williamsburg, Dad was quiet for quite a while. Then he made a comment, saying, “I have nothing to show for my life.” He went down the list, being a farmer on Long Island, and how many times he’d work all year long to grow potatoes, and then the government would come in and give them money to dump the potatoes, just to keep the price up for the market. Then they had to sell the farm. He got a job in the government, and from all outside appearances, did quite well. He ended up on the Water Resources Council. But the job of the Water Resources Council was to make proposals about where dams should be built, and canals should be dug, and where they would serve the most use. Of course, these things would get to Congress, and Congress would pork-barrel them beyond recognition. Very few of the proposals actually got passed. Then Reagan became president, didn’t like the Water Resources Council, and disbanded it. That was it. So he looked back on his life as a farmer. There was nothing to show for it. He looked at his life as a government bureaucrat. There was nothing to show for that either. Even the house he had built, there was not much to show. Listening to him talk gave me a strong sense of dismay over the human condition. If you look for fulfillment outside, things outside are so dependent on factors that can be beyond your control, that if you make that the sole focus of your attention, you’re bound to end up with disappointment. This is why fulfillment is so important. Fulfillment in life has to come from within, developing good qualities in the mind. Because these things stick with you even after death. And they don’t have to depend on anyone else. You know when you’ve improved the mind in terms of its virtue, in terms of its kindness, when equanimity is needed, discernment, powers of endurance. Patience, peace. These are things we can develop within. And in doing this, it’s not a selfish project. We’re not just sitting here gazing at our navels. When you develop good qualities in the mind, you find that you can use them when the time comes to help the people around you, to learn to recognize how much help you can give. And then how much the circumstances are beyond your control, when to let go, to honor the people that you’re grateful for, the people who’ve helped you in life. And then when they’re gone, realize at what point, after honoring them, you find that the regret you feel, the grief you feel, is becoming self-indulgent. That’s a skill, seeing that point, realizing that you’ve done what you can, you’ve honored that person, you’ve got other responsibilities in life. You have to work on your own mind in order to fulfill those responsibilities. Or for the people you love. As we chant in the evening, you develop goodwill, compassion, sympathetic joy or appreciation. But in every case, there’s going to come a point where you’ve done all you can, or all that can be expected of a human being. And beyond that, that’s up to the other person’s karma. That’s where equanimity is called for. And the different points where one quality is called for as opposed to another one. It’s a lot easier to see those points when the mind has developed a lot of strength inside, when it’s developed its own inner stillness. As we go looking for peace outside, you look at the world. It’s not offering anybody much peace at all. Peace is something that has to be found within. In the same way, we can’t wait around for other people to be good to us before we’re good in our actions. The goodness has to start with us, the peace has to start with us. Unfortunately, their skills for developing were not left adrift. Learning to find this center within, that’s an important skill right there. It provides a sense of stability, strength, resilience inside. You focus on the breath. The breath is always there. Learn to have a good relationship with the breath, and you’ve got a good relationship to this inner center, one you can tap into any time you need it. And it provides a strength. To deal with whatever situations you can change, where you can make a difference, and also to learn how to accept the situations where you can’t. And it puts you in a position where you have the wisdom to tell which is which. You don’t have to wait for someone else to grant you that wisdom. You can develop it on your own. These are the skills. This is how it’s done. Developing this inner center, learning how to stay in touch with it as much as you can throughout the day. Recharging it day after day after day. Making time in your life for the quality of your mind. As I said this morning, you can brush your teeth every day. It makes sense that you should focus on the quality of your mind every day as well. Because that’s a gift not only to yourself, but to the people around you. Because when you have this inner peace, the people around you will pick up on some of that as well. So don’t feel that this is a selfish project or that you’re abandoning other people. You need this inner strength in order to fulfill your responsibilities both to yourself and to the people around you. Life makes lots of demands. It requires a lot of effort to keep going as a human being. So it’s important that we learn how to draw on this inner strength to develop it, to have it there when we need it. So that our efforts in life are good efforts, things that we can look back on and be proud of. Because they come out of this sense of peace that you work on inside, thoughts, words, and deeds that come from this peaceful center are bound to be a good force in life. So when you’re looking for what makes life worthwhile, what makes life a good life, you have to look within. And you need skills. It’s not just simply looking haphazardly. There are skills for relating inside. Skills for developing the qualities of the mind that are good, noble qualities of mind. This is what brings dignity to human life. This is what brings goodness to human life. The purpose of the meditation is to tap into those qualities and bring them to fulfillment. Because when they reach fulfillment, that’s when there is true peace. The mind becomes totally independent, becomes released from all the bondages and limitations. That living in space and time plays on us. There’s an aspect of the mind that transcends space and time, and the meditation is here to find that. That’s when the true peace totally pervades your life.

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