True to the Practice

September 12, 2005

The two chants that we chanted in translation just now very neatly sum up a dilemma that we all face. On the one hand, we want happiness. On the other hand, we’re subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. These are normal parts of our lives. Most people try to resolve the dilemma by forgetting about it. Forget about the second fact, pretending that it doesn’t happen, or only rarely happens, or it’s unusual. But what that does is it sets people up for a real fall. They base their happiness on things that are going to age, grow ill, die, and get separated. Then where are they? This is why we meditate, to find a happiness that can be based on something else. That’s what that fifth of the contemplations is about, to remind us that it’s through our own actions that we can find that something else. There’s nobody out there that’s going to come and help solve the problem for us. And it’s not solved simply by luck. We hear stories about people suddenly gaining awakening or enlightenment experiences without having any idea what they were doing. But they don’t ring true. Any kind of experience like that without understanding doesn’t really offer much hope. And you scratch a little deeper and find that it’s usually someone who went through a really bad neurotic episode and then came out feeling relieved after they’d gotten out from under that cloud. Relief was so great that it seemed like an awakening. Awakening is something else. It comes through our efforts to understand what the mind is doing. So the first order of business is to settle down and look at the mind, see what it’s doing right now. This is why we give the mind a place to stay, because if it doesn’t stay in the present moment, you can’t watch it. It’s like trying to watch a movie. Your purpose is to understand how the director created the movie, but all too quickly you get caught up in the storyline. You’re totally immersed in the story and you can’t really observe how the movie is done. So what we’re doing right here, as we focus on the breath, is to bring the mind into the present moment. At first it seems like tying it down, and it’s going to struggle because the mind is used to traveling around. To make the task easier, we give the mind something pleasant to stay with in the present moment, the breath. In the beginning, the breath may not seem very pleasant, but you realize, after a while, that you can change it. You can make it more pleasant. You’ve been breathing all your life, but have you ever really looked to see what kind of breathing really feels good right now? What’s best for the body right now? What’s best for the mind right now? You can focus in any spot of the body and just watch how the breath feels there, or the breathing process. Try to make your focus comfortable. In other words, don’t tense up the area that you’re focusing on. Focus on keeping it open and relaxed. And if you slip off, come right back. If you slip off again, come back again. This is a practice that takes some determination. That’s why we have those reminders at the beginning of the sit. Because if you can’t find happiness here in the present moment, where are you going to find it? If your happiness depends on this, that, and the other thing, things going a certain way, your body going a certain way, your relationships going a certain way, the world going a certain way, it’s all very fragile. As with any skill, it’s the people who have a strong sense of the danger of failure. The danger is your face for not mastering the skill, and the advantages that come from mastering it. Those are the people who are really going to work hard at the skill and have a real chance of mastering it. As the Buddha said, there is a happiness that’s timeless. It doesn’t have to depend on anything else at all. It’s there, if you look carefully enough. If you can get the mind still and if you can gain some understanding about how the mind moves around, how it lays claim to things, identifies with them, and creates all sorts of stories and make-believe worlds out of them, you’ll see that these really get in the way. There’s something that lies behind all that processing. If you can learn how to see through that processing, you can see through to what it is that lies behind. When you reach that kind of happiness, the well-being that comes there, then you’re secure wherever you go because it doesn’t depend on anything. Then when aging, illness, and death come, that happiness is not shaken. When separation comes, that happiness is not shaken. Deep down inside, that’s the kind of happiness we all want. Many of us would like to think that it’s going to come on its own, willy-nilly, but it doesn’t work that way. So give this practice your full attention. The more fully you attend to it, the more you can see what its potentials are. The more you’re true in doing the practice, the more that it’s going to take you to that truth, the truth of that true you are in doing the practice, the more you see the truth of that happiness that the Buddha talked about. So you’ve got a whole hour here, and this is all you have to do. Try to take the most of it. you

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