Pure Action

October 10, 2005

We have the chant on goodwill every evening to remind us of why we’re sitting here meditating. We’re trying to develop goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for everyone around us, which means that we’re aiming at a true happiness. A happiness that lasts, a happiness that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. Everyone on earth is looking for happiness, and for most of us it’s a very frustrating experience because we don’t get the true happiness we want. At the same time, we seem to be causing a lot of trouble for ourselves and for everyone around us. But the Buddha found a way to search for happiness that actually develops qualities we don’t usually equate with that search—a search that develops compassion for other people, a search that develops wisdom, a search that develops purity. Purity comes from realizing that our actions are important, and whether we’re going to be happy or not. The ideal actions are ones that harm neither ourselves nor other people. In the Buddha’s instructions to Rahula, he starts out by saying, “Look at what you’re going to do, look at what you’re going to say, look at what you’re going to think, and ask yourself, ‘What are the results going to be?’” “This action that you’re planning, is it going to harm anyone?” If you can see that it’s going to cause harm, then don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any harm, then go ahead and do it. But while you’re doing it, check to see if what you foresaw was actually right. If it was not, if it looks like you’re actually doing harm while you’re doing the action—and sometimes your actions give immediate results—then stop. If you don’t see any harm, then continue. When you’ve finished, look back on the long-term results of your actions. If you realize that what you did actually did cause harm to yourself or other people, then make up your mind you’re not going to do it again, and go talk it over with someone else who’s on the path. See what advice they have. It’s through this process, the Buddha says, that the people develop purity—purity in their thoughts, in their words, and in their deeds. As for compassion, you realize that you want happiness, everyone else wants happiness. We all have that same basic desire in common. In very practical terms, what it means is that if your happiness is based on somebody else’s misery, they’re going to be doing whatever they can to overturn that happiness. So you realize that your happiness is going to have to depend on making sure that other people’s happiness is a part of your happiness, that they go together. That means you have to look inside. This is why we’re meditating. Because every other happiness depends on taking resources. If you get those resources, other people can’t get to them. But the happiness that comes from meditation, that’s something that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. And as you develop, you find that you begin to have more than enough. It’s like farming your acres. You have four acres here—properties of earth, water, wind, fire, and the body. You till them, you plant plants, you cultivate them, and they grow. Then they produce more than enough for you to eat. That means you have the energy to help other people in whatever way you can. All this is based on developing another quality, which the Buddha said leads to wisdom, which is asking the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The emphasis is on the long-term. As you look at the quest for happiness in light of these three qualities—wisdom, compassion, and purity—and work on the happiness that goes along with those qualities of mind, you find that you really do get a long-term happiness that really is good for yourself. It is good for the people around you. And there’s nothing blameworthy in your actions. This is why the Buddha’s way of searching for happiness is special. It’s not selfish. It’s not destructive, the way most people’s search for happiness is. Ultimately, you can lead the mind of the deathless, which is a happiness that doesn’t have to depend on conditions at all. But even before you get there, the path itself is a blameless path. It’s all a matter of training the mind and realizing that that’s the true source of happiness—a trained mind. So we’re sitting here training the mind. In what way? We’re training it in mindfulness. We’re training it in the ability to keep something in mind. And we’re training it in alertness—the ability to be sensitive to what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. And we start with something really, really basic, which is the breath. The breath is the basis for all other actions. It’s connected with the most primitive part of the mind. If you’re going to start any program of training, you have to start way back at the basics. So how do you relate to the breath? Are you on good terms with your breath? This is important. Any ability to stay in the present moment with any amount of steadiness or stability has to mean that you’re on good terms with the present. And the breath is essentially your present experience of the body. So you have to be friends with the breath. Listen to it. Watch it. Be sensitive to when it feels good coming in, when it feels good going out. And John Lee recommends playing with it for a while, asking yourself, “Would longer breathing feel good?” Just pose that question to the mind, and you’ll find the body will breathe a little bit longer, and then you can see whether it feels right or not. How about shorter breathing? We’re in short and out long. We’re in long and out short. Or, can you breathe comfortably no matter what the rhythm is? That requires that you think of the whole body as one large energy field. And wherever you see any sense of blockage or tension or tightness in the field, allow it to relax. Keep it relaxed. Relaxed as you breathe in, as you breathe out, and as you breathe in again. So often we tense up, say, around the in-breath, or we pinch off the end of the out-breath. That makes it uncomfortable to be in the present. So think of everything wide open. All the pores of your skin are wide open. The breath can come in any part of the body at all, and go out any part of the body at all. There’s nothing to interfere. This way you can breathe quickly, comfortably. You can breathe slowly, comfortably, deep or shallow, heavy or light. The breath will start finding its own proper rhythm without you having to interfere too much. You simply allow it. Allow it to flow in any way it wants to in the body. All you have to do is check to make sure that you’re not tensing up or tightening up. Because you’ll find that we do this either instinctively in the way we hold the body, or when there’s an emotion coming into the mind. Because it doesn’t just come into the mind, it comes into the body as well. We talked a little about this this evening. Emotions involve all of the aggregates, and one way of getting a handle on them is to take them apart into aggregates. As you’re working with the breath, that takes apart the physical side. When you hear something or think something that would normally get you to tense up, just don’t tense up. Maintain that same sense of being open. Then you find that sense of tightness that would grow, say, when there’s anger or fear. It doesn’t have a place to latch on to in the body. And when it doesn’t have a place to latch on to in the body, it’s not as firmly established in the mind either. So often an emotion gets its reality because it has all those physical symptoms in the body, and you say, “See? See? See? I’m angry. I’m afraid.” And you’ve got all the symptoms to prove it. But if you don’t let the symptoms take hold, then you realize, “Okay, I don’t have to be a slave to that feeling.” It’s not quite as imposing. It’s not quite as threatening. It’s not as overwhelming. Because you’ve taken part of it. And stripped it away. So the breath, when you get to know it, really does have a lot to offer. This is why it’s so important to be on friendly terms with the breath. If you’re good friends with the breath, it’ll show you its secrets. It can do a lot for you. And simply working on this basic process, allowing the breath to take hold, to be comfortable at all times, begins to loosen up a lot of other old habitual patterns in the mind and the body. So the mind really does become ready to train. Because you begin to see viscerally the results that come from the training. There’s so much in the mind that resists any kind of change. This is the way I’ve thought in the past. This is the way I’ve breathed in the past. This is the way I’ve moved and everything. I’m not about to change. That’s its attitude. But if you can show it in a very immediate and physical way, it’s good to train the mind. It’s good to change your habits. That loosens up a lot of other resistance in the mind. So that can be trained. It does develop new skills. That’s what the Buddhist teachings are all about. They’re about skills. We’re all looking for happiness, but we end up causing suffering and pain. It’s because we don’t act in a skillful way. We don’t think or speak in skillful ways. And you can read the teachings and think about them and even teach other people. But if it doesn’t become a part of you, if it doesn’t become part of your toolkit of skills and strategies, it’s just that. It’s just words. It doesn’t have any impact. No matter how lovely or intriguing or inspiring the teachings may be, if they don’t get into your toolkit as ways that you actually approach your actions and your words and your thoughts, then they’ll never make a real change. It’s when you can see that you can breathe and act in a different way, speak in a different way, think in a different way. Then you suffer a lot less. The people around you suffer a lot less. That’s when the teachings will have their impact. That’s when they really can make a difference. You’ll get more intrigued and more interested in seeing how much further this difference can go. So open up to the breath, what it feels like as you’re breathing in, what it feels like as you’re breathing out, and how the body would like to feel as you’re breathing in, how it would like to feel as you’re breathing out. Be on good terms with it. And as you open up to it, it will open up to you and tell you all about it. It will tell you all kinds of things you didn’t know before. This is a basic pattern in the Buddha’s teachings, taking things that are really close to you, very near at hand, and showing you the possibilities that you may never have imagined. Even when his teachings talk about things that are far away, past lifetimes, future lifetimes, other levels of being, the discussion always comes back to, “Well, where do these things come from?” They come from actions. And where are the actions happening right now? They’re happening in your mind. It’s the intentions in your mind that make all the difference. Things that are very close to us, and yet things that seem to be mysterious, because we don’t pay careful enough attention to them. That’s why the Buddha’s first instructions to his son were on intention. His last instructions to all the monks were about sankharas, which basically are intentional acts of the mind. Our intentions with regard to the body, in terms of the breathing. Our intentions with regard to our words, in terms of how we frame issues and think about them. Our intentions with regard to the mind. Our perceptions and feelings. These things are really close to us, and they have lots of potential, and yet we abuse that potential or let it go undeveloped. So, as we’re working with the breath, we’ve got the opportunity to develop all of those things. The breath is here. Directed thought and evaluation, that’s verbal fabrication. That’s right here as we’re thinking about the breath and watching and evaluating the breath. And the feelings and perceptions. These are mental fabrications. They’re right here as well. Everything you need to make a radical change in your life is right here. It’s simply a matter of looking, probing, asking questions, listening to the answers. So that’s some of what you can learn. Adopt the attitude that you want to be on good terms with your breathing and see how far that friendship will go.

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