Safe at Home

October 18, 2005

We’re going to be sitting for an hour, so try to get comfortable. Try to sit comfortably straight. You don’t have to sit with your back straight like a soldier, but comfortable enough so that you’re not putting any undue weight on the different organs in your body. Face straight ahead and close your eyes. Then think comfortable thoughts for the mind. A very comfortable thought is goodwill. Goodwill is a desire for happiness, for your own happiness and the happiness of everybody around you. So just tell yourself, “May I find true happiness.” And think a little bit about what that means. It’s going to have to be something that comes from within, because things that come from outside—sights, sounds, smells, taste, tactile sensations—they don’t last. They come and they go. True happiness has to be something that doesn’t depend on them. It has to come from within the mind, from training what resources you have in the mind. The good thing about true happiness is that it doesn’t take anything away from you. It doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. It’s not like happiness and pleasure in the world, where if you gain something, somebody else has to lose it. So you realize that your true happiness doesn’t conflict with anybody else’s true happiness. So spread thoughts of goodwill to other people, too. Start with people who are close to your heart, your family, your friends. May they find true happiness. Then spread that thought out in ever-widening circles. People you know well and like, people you don’t know so well, people you’re totally neutral about, and people you don’t like. Don’t let there be any limitations on your goodwill. Spread it for a minute. If everybody in the world could find true happiness within, no one would be cruel, no one would be abusive of other people. They wouldn’t have any need to. And so all the people who do things that you don’t like, they probably wouldn’t do those things. So you don’t gain anything from anybody else’s suffering. The world would be a better place if people didn’t cause themselves suffering and could find true happiness within. So be very generous with your goodwill. Spread thoughts of goodwill even to people you don’t even know about. And not just people, but all living beings of all kinds, east, west, north, south, above and below, out to infinity. May we all find true happiness. Now bring your attention back to the present moment. What have you got right here? What are these resources you’re going to develop? You’ve got the body sitting here breathing, and you’ve got the mind that’s thinking and aware. So put all those things together. It’s by putting them together that they develop. Think about your breath and be alert. Be alert to how the breathing is going. When it comes in, know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know it’s going out. And be alert to how it feels. Try a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. And then let the breath settle into a rhythm that feels comfortable. Not too long, not too short, not too deep, not too shallow. It feels just right coming in, just right going out. It’s something we don’t pay too much attention to, but it’s something that’s very useful. It stands to reason that if your breathing feels comfortable, things in the body, throughout the body, are going to feel a lot more comfortable as well. This is one very immediate, very visceral way of showing goodwill for yourself right here, right now. If you breathe in a way that’s tense, it’s going to block off the circulation of different parts of the body. And you’re going to get numb after a while. So think of the breath coming in and out the whole body, every pore of the skin. Wherever you notice any tension in the body, think of relaxing it. You might want to survey through the different parts of the body to see which parts you tend to tense up as you breathe in or where you’re holding on to tension as you breathe out. And if you notice that, allow those spots to relax. So there’s no tension building up as you breathe in and there’s no holding on as you breathe out. Any thoughts come in, just let them go. You don’t have to get involved. This is time for the mind right now to get to know itself, to get to know what are these resources you’ve got here in the present moment, because this is a very important place to be. Everything that really happens to you in life happens in the present moment, yet for the most part we’re not here, off someplace else. So we don’t really see what’s happening. Thoughts come, thoughts go, and you latch on to something and you don’t really know where it’s going to take you because you’re not paying careful attention. So for the time being, make it a rule inside your mind. You’re not going to go with any thought. If you catch yourself slipping off, just come right back to the breath. The breath is very forgiving. It keeps on coming in and going out no matter what you do. So just come back and get comfortable with the breath again. And don’t get upset by the fact that you’ve wandered off. It’s typical. Everybody does it. What makes a difference in meditation is how you realize that you don’t give in. You just keep coming back, coming back, coming back, until it feels more and more natural to be here with the breath than to go wandering off. This way you give the mind a home. Because you can’t really live in your thoughts. They’re like bubbles floating out, and then they pop. Then you find yourself coming back here and looking for another bubble. You ride in that bubble and then it pops too. Sometimes they can carry you pretty far away before they pop and find yourself landing over there on a hillside or in a forest or in a river. Places that are really hard to get back from. In other words, they don’t just float around. They leave traces. They can make you angry. They can make you upset. They can make you sad. They can give rise to lust, fear, greed—all kinds of things that are really harmful to the mind. So one of the purposes of meditation is to be able to sit here in the present moment and see a thought form and be able to decide very clearly whether it’s worth going with or not. Because some thoughts really are useful. They can help give rise to discernment, give rise to concentration, give rise to understanding. They can be very useful. Others are not so useful. But you have to learn how to figure out which is which so that you can really be in control of your mind. The best place to see them is right here on the present moment. They tend to point out a way. But they actually happen in the present moment. The little world they create may be in another place, another time. But you don’t want to get sucked into that world quite yet. You want to be able to put yourself in a solid position so you can see them form but without having to go with them. It’s like driving past an outdoor movie theater. You can see the colors flashing up on the screen—yellow, red, green. If you stop and you get involved, you begin to see the colors as actually being people up there on the screen. There’s a story going on. Suddenly you find yourself sucked into the movie screen. But if you can learn how to stay very conscious of yourself standing right there and the colors just as colors flashing, you’re in a much better position. You can decide whether to go with that story or not and pull yourself out if you see it’s a horror story or something really cheap and trashy. You say, “No, I don’t want to go there.” Just stay on the level of the colors flashing and you’ll be okay. What you’re doing is you’re giving yourself a new relationship to your thoughts. You see that they’re constructed. Some impetus comes from your past intentions, but you also have your present intentions as to whether to get involved with them or not. So often that choice is made without you really being aware of it. The more stable you’re home here in the present moment, the more clearly you’ll see this happening. You’ll be in a better position to make wise choices about which thoughts you want to go with and which thoughts you just want to leave up there on the movie screen without getting involved. Because most of us are like people on the side of the road. Somebody comes driving up and says, “Hey, come on.” You jump in and you go. Then you ask, “Who are you? Where are we going?” That’s kind of late. When you have a strong sense of feeling at home here in the present moment, it’s more like someone knocking at your door and inviting you out. You’re in a much better position because you don’t feel that you have to jump in. There has to be a good reason to go out. You’re nice and comfortable in your home and somebody’s inviting you out into a rainstorm. You say, “No, thanks.” You’re more comfortable here. As a result, you’re more in control. You’re not operating out of a hunger or a sense of discomfort in the present moment. You’re coming from a position of comfort and strength, and that changes the balance of power. So you’ve got a whole hour to sit here. Don’t think of it as being torture or an ordeal. It’s an opportunity to get to know the present moment. You’ve got a whole hour of present moments, a whole hour of breaths that you can watch. The more you learn how to get on good terms with the breath in the present moment, the better off you’ll be.

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