Kind & Happy

October 23, 2005

We’re going to sit for an hour or so. Get your body in a comfortable position. Your back comfortably straight, facing forward. Close your eyes. Put your hands on your lap. And get your mind in a comfortable position as well. One way is to think thoughts of goodwill, like we chanted just now. Tell yourself, “May I be happy. May I find true happiness,” with the emphasis on the true. There’s lots of other kinds of happiness out there, and they turn into other things. You want a happiness that stays with you, a happiness that you can depend on. Unfortunately, that kind of happiness can come from within. In fact, it can’t come from without. It comes from developing resources you have inside, which means that it doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. This is why everybody’s true happiness is not a contradiction in terms. Nobody’s true happiness takes anything away from anybody else’s true happiness. That’s a comfortable thought. You don’t need to harm anybody. You don’t need to abuse anybody else or harm their hopes for true happiness by finding true happiness yourself. So you think thoughts of goodwill for other people as well. This is something we all have in common, the desire for true happiness and the ability to find true happiness without having to abuse anybody else. That’s a good thing to think about. But then the next step is thinking about how you’re going to develop these resources inside. What are these resources inside? You’ve got qualities of the mind. You’ve got the body sitting right here. In terms of the body, you’ve got the breath moving in and out. So let’s focus on the breath. How does it feel when it comes in? Keep watch on the breath and keep the breath in mind. Otherwise, don’t forget the breath. It’s so easy. You focus on the breath once or twice and then you go wandering off about tomorrow and then wandering back into the past and picking your nose and scratching yourself. All kinds of things happen in the mind. Then you remember, “Oh, the breath. It came back.” That doesn’t develop anything. To develop the qualities of the mind, you have to really stick with one thing. Keep something in mind and then watch it carefully. So keep the breath in mind each time it comes in. If you catch yourself wandering off, then bring the mind right back. Then pay careful attention to how the breathing feels. Where in the body do you notice a sensation of breathing? In other words, we’re not just talking here about the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the whole feeling of the body breathing. There’s an energy flow that goes through the body that brings the air in and then allows it to go out. Where do you feel that energy? Where does it feel good? If the breath doesn’t feel particularly good, if you can’t see where it feels good, try stopping your breathing for a while and then notice which parts of the body feel really refreshed when you finally do breathe in again. Focus on those parts and allow them to stay comfortable. In other words, breathe in deeply enough so they feel refreshed, but not so deeply that they start feeling strained. This requires that you be very sensitive. That’s another quality. It’s called alertness. Be really alert to what you’re doing. The more alert you are, the more you see, the more you learn. And the more comfortable the breath will get, you can begin to adjust it. As with any skill, the more you pay attention to what you’re doing, the better you’ll do it, the better results you’ll get. What you’re doing here is developing a little island of well-being inside. Nurturing it, nourishing it, allowing it to grow. This is one of the basic principles in the Buddhist practice. If you’re going to practice this teaching, you have to start with some sense of well-being. Otherwise, it’s hard to make the sacrifices that are needed. You see this even on the most simple level, in terms of generosity. When people went to the Buddha, that was the first thing he taught, the happiness that comes from being generous. If you’re feeling poor or nasty in a foul mood, it’s very hard to be generous. If you don’t feel you have anything to give and you don’t want to give anything to anybody else, what kind of mindstate is that? It’s a very narrow, confined, miserable state of mind. But if you can reflect on whatever happiness you have as dependent on the generosity of others and there’s no reason to resent their happiness, you can begin to be generous. But there has to be at least some sense of well-being inside. In fact, the cruelties of the world come from people who feel threatened and don’t have a sense of enough. This is why it’s so important to develop this sense of inner well-being. You can sense that in some areas at least you have more than enough. You can share. And as the mind begins to open up, as you get more generous and broader in your generosity, the mind itself feels more spacious. It’s a more comfortable mind in which to live. You’re not always concerned about not having enough tomorrow or not having enough this or that. You begin to connect to this network of generosity and you begin to realize there’s always more than enough out there someplace. The more open your mind in this way, the greater sense of well-being you feel. Same with virtue, another one of the basic teachings. You realize there are certain things that, when you do them, they’re going to harm other people. When you begin to have an inner sense of well-being, why would you want to harm anybody else? Killing, stealing, lying, illicit sex, taking intoxicants, these things are harmful. People engage in them usually because they have no inner sense of well-being or what little well-being they have feels threatened. If you can nurture your sense of well-being and realize that you’ve got something inward here that can’t be threatened from outside, then it’s a lot easier to act in ways that are kind to other people in ways that don’t harm anyone. Again, there’s a sense of real inner worth that comes as a result of that. You reflect on your generosity, you reflect on your virtue. That creates a sense of well-being as well. These are ways of making yourself happy in which the memory of the happiness is a happy thing. Many times the happiness of the world is happy only when it’s, as John Lee used to say, “fresh and hot like a pancake.” Pancakes taste good when they’re fresh and hot, and when they’re cold, they’re miserable. Let them go for a couple days and they get moldy and you can’t eat them at all. It’s the same with a lot of pleasures in the world. The pleasure itself doesn’t last very long. Many times, in order to gain that pleasure, you have to do very unskillful things, things you don’t like to think about afterwards. Yet, oftentimes, that’s what the main memory is—what you did, what you said. So the memory of that happiness burns. But the memory of the happiness that comes from your generosity, that comes from your virtue, that’s a happy memory. It gives you a sense of goodwill. This is why the Buddha recommends that when you’re meditating, if you’re coming through dry periods in your meditation, reflect on these things. It’s the greatest sense of goodwill that enables you to continue the meditation and not get discouraged, not get frustrated. It gives you the energy to keep on going because you’ve got that sense of goodwill, and then you can invest that sense of goodwill by sticking with the breath. Developing these qualities of mindfulness and alertness. As the Buddha put it, as you apply mindfulness and alertness in a consistent way, it turns into concentration, when you really are firmly centered in an object, firmly centered on the breath. You get more and more absorbed in the breathing because it feels good. And the more absorbed you get in it, the better it’s going to feel. People sometimes complain that the Buddha’s teachings on suffering, his Four Noble Truths, the very first teaching he presented, are pessimistic because they focus on the issue of suffering. “Where is happiness?” they say. We poke around in the Four Noble Truths and you find that they’re in the fourth truth, which is the path to the end of suffering, which is an optimistic thing when you think about it. There’s happiness as one of the factors of concentration, a sense of happiness, even a sense of rapture and refreshment. If you allow yourself to stay really continually with the breath, it starts feeling really, really good. The more centered you are, the better it feels. This is the happiness that keeps you going on the path, as the Buddha said. Concentration is like food for the path. A sense of refreshment and rapture is food for the path. It’s what keeps you going. It’s a very immediate and very visceral way of showing goodwill for yourself. Those thoughts of goodwill that we started with, they’re nice to think, but they’re even better when you act on them. You show goodwill to yourself in this way. It’s in a way that’s not harming anyone. And when you have the strength that comes, or the sense of refreshment that comes from fostering your own inner goodwill, your own inner happiness, it’s a lot easier to show kindness to other people. So, be kind to your breath. Be gentle with your breath. Get to be good friends with your breath. As you develop that quality of inner goodwill, as you learn how to relate to the breath with goodwill, it’s a lot easier to relate to other people with goodwill, because you’re coming from a sense of well-being. you

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