Freedom

September 1, 2006

You’ve got a whole hour now to focus totally on the breath. There’s nothing else you have to think about, no other responsibilities. Just be with the breath. Notice how it feels when it comes in. Notice how it feels when you go out, when it goes out. Notice which parts of the body are involved in the breathing process and which ones aren’t, and see if it feels comfortable. If it doesn’t feel comfortable, you can change. You can make the breath longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. If you’re feeling sleepy, you might want to try a good long in-breath and shorter out-breath. If it doesn’t feel comfortable, it’ll wake you up. Or if you’re feeling tense, you might want to try short in-breaths and long out-breaths. Think of the tension in your body dissolving away as you breathe out. In other words, you can give your full attention to the breath right now. Nothing else is asked of you. You can look at this hour as an hour of freedom or as an hour of restriction. It depends on your point of view. The freedom in that you have no other responsibilities. All the thoughts and cares about your job, about your family, about all the things that the mind weighs itself down with, you don’t have to think about those things at all. That’s the freedom. The restriction is that you’re asked to stay with the breath. But when you compare the two, the freedom you see is more important. And in the course of making the most of that freedom, you develop a lot of skill. Any area of your life where you can devote your full attention to it is an area that becomes skillful. This is a pattern you see throughout the Buddha’s teachings. As he once said, the essence or the core of his teaching is freedom, or release. And the goal is nirvana, abiding in total happiness. So freedom and happiness are the big themes here. And yet, you look around, what do you see? You see monks having to abide by a very strict code. You’re sitting here and there may be pains in your legs, pains in your back, pains in your stomach. You come from sitting in one single position for an hour. You say, “Okay, where is the freedom? Where is the happiness?” Again, it depends on how you look at it. As the Buddha noticed, most of our happiness has its downside as well. Sometimes the things we do in order to gain happiness make us suffer further down the line. Sometimes they make us suffer right here in the present moment. But we’ve learned to block that out of our awareness, so we miss it. And then a lot of times our happiness places a burden on other people as well. Look at the fact that you’ve got a body that has to eat. It needs clothing, shelter, medicine. And all of these things involve suffering of some sort or another for other people, other beings. And that’s just basic survival. And you think of all the kinds of happiness that people pursue that can create all kinds of suffering. You’ve got people who want to wage war. It makes them happy to wage war. It’s really strange, the human mind, the places it can look for happiness. So what the Buddha was looking for was a higher standard of happiness, a happiness that causes no suffering to anybody. “Is this possible?” he said. And he set out to see if it was possible. Then he found a way, and he brought that out to teach us. Now, the way is a narrow way. There are a lot of things you can’t do as you follow his teachings. You can’t steal. You can’t kill. You can’t have illicit sex. You can’t lie. You can’t take intoxicants. And that’s just on the outside level. When you practice meditation, you’ve got to learn how to be very, very precise with the mind, very attentive, very heedful about what you’re doing. Now, this may seem like a restriction, but the Buddha is focusing your attention in an area where you can find happiness that doesn’t cause any suffering to anybody. He’s setting a high standard for happiness. It’s like the sort of teacher you had in high school. There were teachers who would just let you get away with anything, and you liked them at the time, but afterwards you realized you didn’t learn anything. And there were the teachers who forced you to do a lot of work, but you didn’t learn much anything, aside from the fact that you could do a lot of work. But then there were the teachers who got you to do better work than you’d ever done before. They were demanding. You may not have liked them at the time, but then you look back at it, and those were the teachers you learned the most from, because they got the best work out of you. That’s the kind of teacher the Buddha was. He raised the standard for his students. He said, “If you work harder, but not only harder, but with more precision and more skill, focus your attention on areas that really are conducive to true happiness. There will someday come that point where you reach the happiness he talked about, a happiness that causes no suffering to anybody, because it’s not dependent on any conditions at all. It’s a happiness that doesn’t require any activity. Now, to get there requires the activity, but there’s no activity needed to maintain it. It’s outside of space and time.” So that’s the kind of freedom the Buddha was talking about. It’s a freedom to find this very precise path that leads to true happiness. It may not be all that spontaneous. It may not offer wide leeway for all kinds of action. But then there’s the question, “Well, what is true freedom?” John Suwat was commenting one time on one of the monasteries here in Los Angeles, where the monks had figured out all kinds of clever ways to bring more people in and to get more money out of the people. Some of the laypeople here have been complaining that we weren’t getting the crowds that they were. He made the comment, “It’s not that we couldn’t think about ways of pulling people in or getting more money out of them, but just the thought of doing that, I’d feel ashamed.” So it’s not that his mind couldn’t think in those ways or didn’t have the ability to think in those ways, but he didn’t see that it was useful or worthwhile. So you might say that he was not free to act in shameful ways. But is that what we want with our freedom? We want the kind of freedom that shows us a way to happiness that really is reliable. Notice how he used the word “shame” there. It wasn’t that he was ashamed of himself, that he was a bad person. He was ashamed of the idea of doing certain things, because they were beneath him. He knew better. The Buddha makes a lot of use of this emotion. It’s a healthy kind of shame. It’s a shame that comes not from a low opinion of yourself, but from a high opinion. You’re not going to be content with just any old happiness or any old pleasure. You’re going to be content yourself only with a pleasure that doesn’t cause any harm. A pleasure or happiness that doesn’t require constant maintenance, constant upkeep. So as you tread the path, keep reminding yourself of where true freedom lies. You’re free to find the way toward a really special happiness. That kind of freedom is worth more than anything else in the world. You may give up other freedoms, but when you look at them, you realize those other freedoms really weren’t free at all. You could be free to do something harmful, but then it was going to get you involved in a long cycle of retribution. You’re free to stick your hand into a trap. You’re free to get stuck in a machine that’s going to pull you in and pull you in and pull you in. But is that what you want to do with your freedom? It’s much better. A way of understanding freedom is that you’re free to find true happiness. A lot of the world doesn’t feel that it has that freedom. In fact, there’s a lot of the world that wouldn’t want you to look for that kind of freedom. They’d say, “Don’t set your sights on that. It’s impossible. Buy our things.” Help keep the economy going, as if that were the highest thing that you could aspire to. The Buddha said, “No, you’re free to aspire to something higher.” That’s the kind of freedom that’s really worthwhile, that really deserves to be called free. So do your best to explore the freedom that you’ve got for this hour. See what you can do with this opportunity.

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