Wisdom & Compassion

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Meditation is medicine for the mind, medicine for the heart. It’s an opportunity to put down all your thoughts, concerns, and let the mind be treated in a healing way. One good way of getting out of the mind’s concerns is to focus on how the body feels right now. Before you focus on the breath, you might want to go through the body and relax it. Start with the tips of your fingers. Relax them, then move up the fingers, joint by joint, through the palms of the hands, your wrists, your forearms, your elbows, up the arm to the shoulders, relaxing any tension you may feel there. Then you start with your toes. Move on up through the feet, the legs, the pelvis, up the back, the neck, the head. Go through the body very slowly and let things relax. When the body relaxes, let it go. Like this, it’s easier to settle into the present moment. If there’s not a sense of ease, it’s hard to stay here. When the mind is feeling burdened, when it’s feeling assaulted by all the events of the world, this is one way of giving a chance to find someplace else to focus. Because right here, all you have is the functioning of the body. And allow the breath to be comfortable, because the breath is the main function of the body that has an influence over the other ones. It’s basically the point where the mind and the body meet. And you want to breathe in a way that’s good for the body, good for the mind. Think of the breath surrounding you on all sides. It’s not just the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the whole energy circulation around the head, around the body, down through the head, through the body, all around. Open up to that flow and it’s a kind of meditation. It’s a combination of opening up and allowing it to be comfortable. The two help each other along. The more comfortable it is, the easier it is to open up. The more you can open up. And then just give yourself to that comfortable sensation, because it is healing. It takes time. It’s like a cream that you rub on a rash. It’s not the case that as soon as the cream gets on the rash, the rash will disappear. You can’t just rub the cream on and then rub it off and hope that the rash will go away. You have to let the cream stay there with the rash for quite a while. Bit by bit, it’ll do its healing work. It’s the same with the breath. Allow the mind to stay with the sensation of the breath. And don’t be too impatient to see results. When you allow the mind to stay here this way, it strengthens the mind. And it also gives the mind new habits. Because the suffering that we encounter in the course of our lives is not just things coming from outside. It’s how the mind processes these things, how it reacts to them. The worlds of suffering, it builds inside. And it turns out that those are the most oppressive, the most burdensome. And that’s both one of the major difficulties of being a human being, but also it points out that there’s hope. If suffering were simply a matter of the things that come in at us, we’d have no control. There’d be no escape. Suffering is based on things that we do, the way we react, the way we shape our inner worlds. It means that we can change. We can change our intentions. We can change our understanding of what we’re doing. And in that way, alleviate our suffering. Even though the world may still have a lot of harsh events. We don’t have to add to the harshness. We don’t have to add to the suffering, the misery. The mind can learn how to heal itself. That’s where freedom lies, as the Buddha said, the ultimate freedom from disease. This is what wisdom is all about. Sometimes when we think of Buddhist wisdom, we have to think of something that’s very abstract and intellectual. But it’s in its original form. That’s not the case at all. It was devoted specifically to this problem, the fact that everybody’s suffering, and we don’t have to. The question is how to put an end to that suffering, even though we live in a human world that’s full of all kinds of ups and downs. Brightness and darkness, coming together and going apart. It’s still possible for the mind to live in this world in a way that doesn’t have to suffer, doesn’t have to be burdened. And the work we do, which is both work of the heart and the mind in this direction, is the most important work there is. It’s interesting, in the Buddhist teachings and in the different Buddhist cultures, they don’t make a clear distinction between heart and mind. They use the words interchangeably. It’s important to think about this. We tend to think of the mind as the calculating side and the heart as the emotional side, and they seem to be going in different directions. If they do go in different directions, we’re in trouble. But if you can learn how to bring them together, develop the qualities of wisdom and compassion, and discernment on the one hand, and goodwill and compassion on the other, and develop them together, that’s when you begin to see the power of the mind in being able to put an end to suffering, doing the most important thing that it can do. Buddhist wisdom begins with goodwill, the desire for happiness. If this weren’t the case, the Buddha wouldn’t have focused on the Four Noble Truths as his main teaching. The Truths are an understanding of suffering, how to let go of its cause, the path you have to develop in order to let go of that cause, and then the results that come, and the end of suffering. If he weren’t concerned about the issue of happiness—that’s what goodwill is, it’s a wish for happiness—then he wouldn’t have focused on this issue. He would have focused on something else. So the wisdom is based on goodwill and compassion. And goodwill and compassion are based on wisdom when you begin to realize that if you want happiness, the best kind of happiness to want is a happiness that lasts, that’s not subject to all the ups and downs of the world—aging, illness, death, separation—and the realization that there has to be something you can do about that. That, the Buddha said, is the beginning of wisdom. So the two go together. Wisdom depends on goodwill and compassion. Goodwill and compassion depend on wisdom, and not just in the beginning stages. Because you can have lots of compassion, and if there’s no wisdom, it’s not necessarily a cause for an end of suffering. It actually can pull you in the other direction. So you have to learn how to train your compassion, train your desire for happiness, both for yourself and for other people, by being observant. This is why we work on meditation to make the mind more alert, more mindful, and more observant, seeing what works and what doesn’t work, seeing clearly what cause and effect do. Which actions you do really do lead to an alleviation of suffering, and which ones that you thought might do that, but they don’t. And at the same time, you need a way to embody your wisdom. This is what the breath is for—learning to get on good terms with the breath, learning how to be immersed in the breath. It gives an immediate sense of well-being. Once there’s that sense of well-being, at least on this level, then it’s a lot easier to do the hard work of being observant, learning to abandon unskillful habits that we have, how to develop skillful ones. That takes energy. But if you can come from this sense of being at ease with the breath, allowing the breath to soothe and fill the body, you’re coming from a much stronger place. So you can do and say and think the things that you know are right. All too often we know what the right and skillful thing might be. But we just don’t have the energy. That seems beyond us. But you can strengthen yourself through the breath this way, through developing concentration, mindfulness, and alertness. You’re in a much better position. So wisdom and compassion, discernment and goodwill, go together like this. They help each other along. You need wise strategies to develop this sense of well-being in the mind. It doesn’t just come on its own. Sometimes we hear that the Buddha talks about human beings being basically good or basically wise, and he never says anything in those terms. He doesn’t say that we’re basically anything at all. But he says we can develop skillful actions, or, if we want, we can act in unskillful ways. It’s our choice. Simply, it makes a lot more sense to act in a skillful way, to try to develop all the good qualities of the mind, for the sake of this purpose of healing the suffering that is so unnecessary but is so prevalent all over. That’s why it requires strategies, like the meditation. It’s a simple thing, focusing on the breath. It may not be easy, but it’s basically a simple process. The question is simply putting in enough time and using your powers of observation to get the most out of it. That’s what requires effort. But the effort is well spent. The breath is the most basic force that keeps the mind and the body together. There’s one point where the Buddha shows that if you breathe in ignorance, it contributes to more suffering. So here’s something very simple you can do to help alleviate that suffering. Learn to breathe with awareness. Breathe with knowledge. Be fully aware all around, breath coming in through all the body. Breath going out through all the body, allowing yourself to be bathed in it, soothed by it. Let it be a healing breath, a medicinal breath. That’s both the wise and the compassionate thing to do.

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