Refuge

February 5, 2007

For the rest of the hour, you have only one responsibility, and that’s to stay focused on the breath. Know when it’s coming in, know when it’s going out, and let it be comfortable. There’s no need to breathe in a way that doesn’t feel good. One way of focusing your attention on the breath, keeping it there, is to explore what kind of breathing feels good right now. You may have a standard way of breathing that you’re used to as you meditate, but be open to the idea that it may change. After all, your body changes all the time. Sometimes you’re tired, sometimes you’re tense, sometimes you’re relaxed. Sometimes you’re wired. Gain a sense of how the body feels right now and what kind of breathing would feel good for it. This, of course, requires that you do some thinking and evaluation, but that’s fine. These images of holding on to a post and running around the post, as long as you hold on to the post tight, then you can run around as much as you want and you don’t get dizzy. If you let go of the post and start spinning around, then you do get a bit dizzy and you fall down. So the breath is the post. Notice how your conception of the breath affects how you feel. It affects the way you breathe. Try thinking of the whole body breathing, every cell breathing in and breathing out, the breath coming in and out of every pore of the body from all directions. So it’s not that you’re sitting up here in your head watching the breath as it goes down in the lungs. You’re totally surrounded by breath energy. Try to let there be as few blind spots in your awareness as possible. And if your thoughts wander off someplace else, tell yourself, “Not right now.” No matter how important or pressing the issue may seem, the mind needs time to be on its own. If you’re thinking about things all the time, it’s like running a motor all the time. After a while, it begins to seize up, overheat. So the mind, like everything else, needs to rest. Then when it’s rested, when it leaves concentration and has other duties that it has to take on, it can do them with a lot more strength, a lot more precision, because you’re rested. The mind has had a chance to gather its strength. Or you can think of it as being like a knife. If you just leave the knife out where it’s exposed to the sun and the rain and whatever else, it’s going to get rusty. And if you keep using it all the time without sharpening, it’s going to get dull. So it needs time to get sharpened, to be put away in a safe place, so that when you really cut it, it’s sharp and it’s clean. Cut right through anything. So let all your other responsibilities and cares fall away. This is an important skill, the ability to focus precisely on the mind itself. It’s one aspect of taking refuge. It’s one aspect of training the mind. In the chants just now, we chanted about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. You can think of that on an external level—the Buddha, the prince who lived 2,600 years ago, the Dharma, his teaching, the Sangha, his enlightened disciples, all the way up to the present moment. That is one level of refuge. But there’s also an internal level where you take their qualities and you develop them in your own mind. This is where you really see the refuge at work. One of their qualities is mindfulness. Another is concentration. A third is discernment. If you have these qualities, you protect the mind. Because the mind has a lot of unskillful habits that cause a lot of suffering, unnecessarily so. This is why the mind needs to be trained. Otherwise, it’s going to be like getting a puppy and bringing it into the house. If the puppy isn’t house-trained, it’s going to create messes all over the place, eat up your plants, and cause all kinds of problems. But if it’s trained, it becomes a good companion. It can protect you. So the mind needs to be trained. Otherwise, the sufferings of the world are bad enough. We chanted just now that there’s aging, illness, death, separation. These are normal parts of life. When we signed on to human life, we didn’t look at the fine print. But this is what we’ve got. The Buddha pointed out that it’s not necessary to suffer from these things. It’s what the mind does in response to these things that creates suffering. It’s because it’s careless. It doesn’t really understand why it’s creating suffering and how it doesn’t have to. But to see that clearly first requires that the mind be rested. This is why we start off the meditation with concentration, trying to get the mind to settle down, developing your powers of mindfulness and alertness to watch out over the mind. As soon as it starts reaching out to other things, you say, “No, not now. Come right back.” You reach out again, “No, not now.” So give it something good to hold onto in the meantime, so it’s not reaching around to other places. Allow the breath to be comfortable. Again, think of the breath bathing the whole body. Ask yourself, “What kind of breathing right now would feel really gratifying deep down inside?” Allow the body to breathe in that way. Give your full attention just to this one process, because in this way you’re creating some protection for the mind. You can think of it as a home for the mind. That’s actually from the old standard Buddhist images. They call it viharadhamma, a home for the mind, where you take up your dwelling and you begin to find a source of happiness that comes from within. This, right in and of itself, helps a lot of the problems. When we’re looking for happiness in things outside, we’re looking for happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die. They’re destined for separation, which means that our happiness is going to get crushed. But if you have an inner resource, it helps you to live in the world without suffering so much from the world. Happiness becomes a gift not only to yourself but to the people around you. If you’re in difficult situations where you’re trying to find happiness in a relationship, say, whether it’s a family relationship or whatever, if your happiness depends on that relationship, it’s placing an awful weight on the relationship more than any human relationship can maintain. It makes it hard for you to see what is actually the best thing for you to do, both for the sake of the other person and for yourself. But if you can find happiness within, then you can look at your relationships with a lot more clarity and see what really needs to be done. What would be helpful for yourself? What would be helpful for other people? And then what you want out of the relationship, you see what’s the most skillful thing to do right now in that relationship. This is the beginning of discernment, which is also another aspect of refuge. The more clearly you see the way the mind creates unnecessary suffering and see that there are alternatives, the less suffering you create. You’re protecting yourself from your old habits. The more deeply you get to know the mind through the meditation, ultimately you come to something inside that, as the Buddha said, “You touch the deathless.” The phrase is interesting. It says, “You touch the deathless with your body.” You see the deathless with your body. In other words, your whole awareness touches that aspect, that depth. That totally changes your relationship to things in space and time. You realize that other people can touch that dimension as well. One of the best ways of helping them is then to turn their gaze in that direction. If you can. When we spread thoughts of goodwill, compassion, sympathetic joy, it’s not just, “May people be happy.” It’s, “May people know what they should do to be happy.” The “should” here being simply what works. And if you see an opportunity to help them in that direction, fine. That’s the best help you can give them. But then there’s also that attitude of equanimity. There are cases where you can only do so much. If you allow yourself to get upset about those things, then it’s harder to be helpful in other areas where you could be of help. This is why equanimity is included as one of the sublime attitudes or the sublime abidings. It reminds you that you’ve got to look inside for your happiness, one. And then two, you want to focus your efforts on areas where you really can make a difference, where you can be of help. So it’s a combination of giving the mind a sense of inner ease, a sense of inner well-being, and also training the mind to understand exactly why we suffer and why we don’t have to. And what we can do to learn not to suffer. This is the real refuge for the mind, because it turns out that our biggest danger in life is the unnecessary suffering we pile on ourselves. And when we pile it on ourselves, it can’t help but affect other people as well. This is why meditation is not a selfish thing. The ability to develop attitudes of goodwill and equanimity when they’re needed is not a selfish thing. The more strength you can find inside, the more strength you can offer to other people. That’s one of the Buddha’s great discoveries, that there is a form of happiness that’s not selfish. So much of the things, so much of the ways we look for happiness in life depend on things that are limited. There’s only so much. There are only so many jobs to go around, only so much money, only so many things. And it’s a question of either you get it or somebody else gets it. If you’re looking for happiness in that area, it’s bound to be conflict. There’s always the question of either/or. Whereas the happiness that comes from training the mind, from gaining refuge inside, it’s a both/and. You gain, the people around you gain. Less weight is placed on the relationship, less weight is placed on other people, because you move your center of gravity inside where you can maintain your balance. So whatever the situation, always try to maintain this sense of inner refuge, of being centered inside. It’s an important skill. It’s a skill that the whole world would develop. But where do you start? You have to start with yourself. And as you learn how to maintain your balance, it helps other people maintain theirs as well, or to recover their balance when they lose it. If you’re out of balance, it’s hard for you to help other people. You just pull them in the direction where you tend to be falling. So the time that you spend here, centering the mind inside, getting to know the breath, learning how to gain strength from the breath, even though it may seem irresponsible, it’s not. As John Sweat used to say, each of us has one person we’re responsible for. That’s ourselves. If each person were to really be responsible for him or herself, the world would be a much better place. And the best way you can move the world in that direction is to start right here. This way, when you’re trying to help other people, it’s not just words. You’re helping through example. That’s the most effective way of teaching. And even if people can’t follow your example all the way, it gives them a sense of solidity to know that it is possible. You offer them something they can lean on when they have to lean. It’s even better when you can touch that dimension of the deathless inside. When you can see that dimension of the deathless. Because that’s really solid unwavering. That’s your true refuge. And it’s best when you can find it. It’s like knowing there’s gold under your house. The knowledge that there’s gold there is good. It’s reassuring, but you really get the most use out of it when you dig down and find it. And as for other people, if they can’t dig down and find it, at least let them know that there is gold there. They don’t have to identify with the body, with aging, illness, and death. We each have something of much more value. So try to stay centered here. This is centered for the whole rest of the hour. You have no other responsibilities. It’s gaining a refuge inside to be your number one priority. If you really give it your all, you’ll find that it can protect you from all kinds of dangers. The dangers that come from having a lack of understanding, a lack of a center, piling suffering on where it doesn’t need to be done, doesn’t need to be. This is why the Buddha’s last instructions were to be heedful. We tend to forget. Our old habits pull us out, pull us out. You’ve got to keep reminding yourself that the important things lie in here, in here. And again, it’s not running away, it’s not being irresponsible. It’s a gift to yourself and to other people. You’re offering refuge to yourself and to other people as well. It’s a both/and, not an either/or. Always keep that in mind.

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