Goodness Comes from Heedfulness

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One of the first lessons you learn as you meditate is how tricky and disobedient your mind can be. You make up the mind you’re going to stay with the breath, and five minutes later you find yourself someplace else, thinking about the past, thinking about the future, anything but the breath. If you try to trace it back, it’s hard to remember the point where the mind left the breath and got involved in something else. The mind does have this tendency to blank out when it’s switching from one thought world to the next, and it’s almost as if the blanking out is intentional. It’s intentional to forget the old world and be in the new one. So when you realize that this has happened, you bring the mind back to the breath, and you make up your mind you’re going to have to be very observant and very wary. What usually happens is the mind is with the breath, but part of it gets bored, part of it wants something new to think about, wants a little entertainment. And even while you’re with the breath, it starts feeling around for someplace else to go. So you’ve got to watch for that. This quality of watchfulness is probably one of the most important skills you’re going to have to develop as you meditate. Realizing that just because you’ve made up your mind you’re going to do something good and go along with the decision. It’s like you’ve got a committee in there, more like the Chicago City Council. Some of the people will go along for a little while and then do what they can to subvert your decisions. So you’ve got to watch out for this. The Pali word for this is appamatta. It means heedfulness. Realizing that there are dangers, not only outside but also in your own mind. And this is why we suffer. It’s from our own lack of skill, from our own lack of discernment as to what we do that will lead to happiness. We have other ideas that will lead to happiness. They’ll pull us away someplace else. And so we can’t be complacent. The Buddha’s last instructions were to practice to bring completion, he said, to the practice through heedfulness. In other words, sensing that there’s danger, but also trusting that there’s something you can do about it. You’re not totally helpless in the face of danger, but you must have a very strong and very alive sense of where the dangers lie. The primary ones lie inside. This is important. Sometimes you hear the Buddha say that we’re essentially good, that we have a very trustworthy, good nature, and that somehow it’s gotten distorted. But if we can trust in our good intentions and trust in our basic goodness, then the Buddha never taught that. We’ve got all kinds of potentials in the mind. There are good ones and there are bad ones, skillful ones and unskillful ones. And you can’t just trust that the good ones will always pull you through. You’ve got to be alert. You’ve got to be mindful. And simply being alert and mindful will not make you do the right thing. You have to keep in mind the fact that what you really want is a lasting happiness and not just a short-lived one. This means you have to learn how to look for cause and effect, because this is the ignorance that keeps us suffering. We don’t see the connection between what we’re doing and the suffering that we meet up with in life. So we need to develop our discernment so we can see these connections. It’s only when we really see these connections in action that the lessons go to the heart in a way that we don’t forget. We can hear about them. We can read about dependent-core rising and how ignorance gives rise to all these forms of suffering. But unless we actually see it happening, it’s going to be just words. So you have to learn how to watch and be wary. Remember, Buddhism was found in the wilderness. The Buddha went out and practiced in the wilderness. That’s an area where people learn to be wary, because there are dangers all around, and you can’t let yourself be complacent. You can’t. Just trust in things. You’ve got to watch. See what you’re doing. See what the connections are between your actions and your happiness, your actions and your suffering. And do your best in this way to chip away at your ignorance. In the course of doing this, you have to develop four qualities—goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. In other words, you realize that if you do anything unskillful, if you harm anybody, it’s going to cause trouble down the line. You want to develop the attitudes that will help protect you from being careless in your actions, heedless of other people’s needs, heedless of their well-being, and heedless of your own needs and well-being. These attitudes don’t come naturally. I was reading today someone saying that all you have to do is make your mind clear and your natural good nature will come out and make you benevolent and compassionate and appreciative. But it doesn’t always work that way. Some people can be very clear-sided and still very narrow-minded. Clear-sided in a narrow way. These are attitudes you have to consciously develop. You have to work on them so they get more and more dependable, so they can inform your actions, based on the realization that goodwill is in your own best interest. If your happiness depends on oppressing other people, they’re not going to stand for it. They’re going to do their best to end your happiness. So if you want to be happy, you have to take their well-being into consideration. You have to keep that in mind and then develop the qualities of the heart that will make it easier to act on it. There are actually three elements in the qualities of the heart that we develop. There are three different kinds of what they call fabrication. There’s bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath. This plays a huge role in our emotions, the way you breathe. And if you breathe in ignorance, it can be a cause for suffering. So this is one of the reasons why we focus on the breath as a primary form of meditation. If you can breathe with a sense of ease and well-being, it’s a lot easier to think good thoughts about other people’s happiness. It’s other people’s well-being as well. If the way you breathe is causing you to suffer, it’s going to put pressure on the mind. It’s going to squeeze the mind into an uncomfortable corner. When the mind feels ill at ease in the present moment, you start getting cynical about other people’s well-being as well. So, when we focus on the breath, making the breath comfortable, it’s not just for our own good. It helps lead us to have an attitude in the mind that’s a lot more conducive to other people’s well-being as well. That’s bodily fabrication. Then there’s what’s called verbal fabrication. It’s the way you direct your thoughts and the way you evaluate things. On the one hand, this applies to the breath. You evaluate the breath and try to make it more comfortable. You also learn how to evaluate the situation around you, when you’re going to act in ways that affect not only yourself but other people too. Keep in mind the principle of karma, that if you harm someone else, if you act on unskillful intentions, it’s going to come back to you. So you have to learn how to think in that way. And start looking at all your actions in that way as well. Then there’s mental fabrication—feelings and perceptions. Again, this applies both to the breath and to situations outside. Apply to the breath. It means looking at the way you breathe, understanding the breath in a way that enables the breath to be nourishing throughout the whole body. So you can give rise to feelings of ease, rapture, serenity throughout the whole body as well. Think of the breath as a whole-body process. It’s the energy that comes in and out the body, or moves throughout the body, through all the nerves, through all the blood vessels. When you take this into consideration, you have that perception in mind, you look at your sensation in the body. You begin to see that there are areas of the body that you thought were simply blocked because they were solid, and so they have to feel blocked. But they don’t have to. Think of them as breath. You can open them up, release the blockage, and the body becomes a much more comfortable place to be. Then you take that same principle and you apply it to other people, other beings. You learn how to perceive them as your companions in birth, aging, illness, and death. They’re suffering, too. Why would you want to add to their suffering? What do you get out of their suffering? You learn to perceive that other people’s suffering is not helpful to you at all, even when they’ve been bad to you, nasty to you. The idea of wanting to see them get theirs doesn’t accomplish anything for you. If they suffer, the more they suffer, the more they’re going to be acting in unskillful ways. This can give rise to empathetic feelings. You sense that when they’re suffering pain, you have compassion for them. When they’re happy, you learn not to be resentful of their happiness. When you realize that their pain is something you can’t help, that’s when you learn how to develop equanimity. You develop that perception in mind that you want to focus on areas where you can be of help, where you can make a difference. And if you waste your time fretting over areas where you can’t, you’re missing some important opportunities. You’re draining your strength, and you become less effective in the areas where you could have been of help. So in this way, you learn to develop the fabrications that give rise to attitudes of goodwill. It’s not natural. It’s not part of your nature. But you can, through being heedful, through being mindful and alert, through gaining discernment about cause and effect and understanding about how true happiness comes about. You can start developing the physical fabrications or bodily fabrications, the verbal fabrications, and the mental fabrications that lead to greater compassion, that lead to greater happiness, that enable you to feel unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity when these things are appropriate. These are just a few of the ways in which heedfulness helps. It helps you develop the right attitudes, not only in the meditation but also in your dealings with other people. You have to realize you can’t just fall back on what you think may be good intentions or your good nature, because sometimes your good intentions are blinded by delusion. What you think is a good intention may not be so. What you think may be a good action may not be so. You’ve got to watch, learn from your mistakes, see connections. Always keep in mind the fact that if you don’t see these things, you’re going to cause yourself trouble. You’re going to cause trouble for other people. You’ve got to be heedful. You’ve got to be alert. The more you see these connections, the more this community of the mind begins to work together. All the impulses of the mind are aimed at happiness. It’s just that some of them are more blind than others. So you develop heedfulness in order to work through that blindness, the carelessness, sloppiness, and laziness that make up the mind. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha boiled everything down in his last instructions to that word “heedfulness.” Always keep that in mind and think about its implications, because they permeate everything on the path. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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