A Walking Ad for the Dhamma

March 22, 2008

First, get your body in position. Sit with your hands on your left, your right hand on top of your left. Keep your back straight, face forward, and close your eyes. That’s it. The body’s in position. The trick, of course, is to get it to stay in position comfortably. And for it to be comfortable, you have to get the mind in position as well. Focus on the breath. You can focus at any one spot in the body where the sensation of the breathing is really clear. That could be the tip of the nose, the palate, the throat. That could be the rising and falling of the chest, the rising and falling of the abdomen, wherever you notice the sensations. I tell you that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. That’s the mind in position. Now, to keep the mind in position, you want to make it comfortable. Because if you’re sitting here for a whole hour and it’s unpleasant, the mind is not going to stay. And when the mind doesn’t stay, the body starts getting uncomfortable, too. You’ve got to notice, how does your breathing feel? Does it feel comfortable when the breath comes in? Does it feel satisfying? Does it feel tight? Does it feel tense? If it feels tight or tense, you can change it. If it feels satisfying, keep it up. Keep watch over the breath to see what the body needs right now. Because as the mind settles in, the needs of the body are going to change, which means the breath is going to change, too. Ideally. Sometimes, if you’re getting mechanical in the way you breathe, the needs of the body will have changed, but the breath is still pumping in and out the same old way it was before. That’s not going to feel good. Try to keep careful attention with each breath. You’re not here to get through the breaths as fast as possible to the end of the hour. You’ve got all this time, so you can look at each breath carefully. It’s like having a whole pile of flowers in front of you. You pick up one flower and you look at it. If it’s a good-looking flower, you keep it. If it’s not, you put it off to the other side. It’s like last November when we were sorting out persimmons. Take each persimmon one by one and decide whether it’s the sort of persimmon you’d like to send to the king or not. If you’re not paying attention, you start sending blemished persimmons. You don’t want that. So pay attention to each breath as it comes in, as it goes out, and ask yourself, “What would the body really like to have right now? What would feel satisfying?” Then just keep that up. Once there’s a sense of ease and comfort, think of it spreading from the spot where you’re focused, just radiating out in all directions. But you don’t have to go checking it out. Just stay at your spot and just radiate out. Comfort can go in every direction, along the nerves, along the blood vessels, wherever it flows easily. Just let it go. This helps keep you from clamping down. The breath is clamping down on your one spot, so you don’t put too much pressure on it. What you’re trying to do is develop a sense of ease and well-being that comes from within. If your breath feels good, the body will feel good, the mind will feel good. And not only can you stay for the hour, but if you learn how to carry this skill into your other activities, whatever you do, will come from a position of comfort, a position of strength. It’s a lot easier to do the skillful thing when you’re feeling comfortable and strong. If you’re feeling harassed, tired, overburdened, the mind doesn’t usually feel like doing what’s skillful. It just feels like doing whatever’s easiest. Not only that, sometimes it actually starts acting out of resentment. “Are the people more comfortable than you are? Why should they be comfortable?” You start saying things and doing things that you later regret. So try to develop this sense of ease and learn how to maintain this sense of ease, not only while you’re sitting here, but as you get up and move through the day. This is one of the reasons why we do walking meditation, so that you get used to having this sense of a comfortable, still center, even as the body moves around. So, even though you may have to deal with other people, deal with other situations, you still have a sense of standing in your center, maintaining your center. When you listen to other people, you’re listening as you sit at your center. When you speak and you act, you speak out of that center. That way you benefit and the people around you benefit as well. We had that chant just now, “May I be happy, may all living beings be happy.” This is one of the really nice things about the Buddhist teachings. It shows that your true happiness doesn’t have to conflict with other people’s. When you act in a way that’s really good for you, it’s going to be good for other people as well. This is how the practice of the Dhamma is also an advertisement for the Dhamma. The issue came up today about helping other people understand the Dhamma, and the Buddha said that that’s one of the best ways of showing real goodwill for other people. In other words, he says you have a practice that benefits yourself and benefits others. You try to be generous, and you encourage other people to be generous as well. You observe the precepts. You encourage them to observe the precepts, to be virtuous. You have conviction that your actions really matter. You teach other people. You encourage other people to have the same sort of conviction that their actions really matter. And as you develop discernment, you want to help other people develop discernment too. The best way to do this, of course, is to start out with your own activity, your own practice. In other words, if you don’t practice these good things, but you try to tell other people to do it, they’re not going to be interested. And there are many cases where you can’t tell other people, like your parents. You’re not going to teach them. They don’t want to have their children teach them. So the best way to do this is to practice. The best advertisement for the Dhamma is the practice of the Dhamma. If you develop a sense of well-being inside, people will pick up on it after a while. They’ll notice that you’ve changed the way you act, the way you speak, the way you think, your general mood is better. And they may actually get to the point where they ask you, “There’s been a change. How did that happen?” And when you’ve got that open, then you can explain. You’ve been meditating. And then if they show an interest, you can encourage them to meditate too. You have to be very sensitive about this. You don’t want to go pushing the Dhamma on other people. But it’s always the case that your practice is the best advertisement. A couple years back, I was on a roundtable discussion where one of the questions came up, “What’s the best way to present the Buddha’s teachings? Do you package it as a religion? Do you package it as something else?” And I immediately objected to the question. It’s a typical American media kind of question. Packaging is everything. And you often hear, “Skillful” means in bringing the Dhamma to the West. It means presenting it in a way that Westerners will like it. So you cover up the teachings they may not like, and you try to decorate the teachings that they would like. You present it in a way that’s appealing to their ideas. Well, that may or may not be skillful. There are lots of ways that you could present the Dhamma that’s appealing to them, but it’s not really the Dhamma. And even then, it’s just the words. If your activities, if your state of mind, doesn’t embody the Dhamma, it’s just going to be one more passing thing. Some strange, strange ideas that come out of Asia. But if your whole demeanor reflects the good benefits that come from the practice of the Dhamma, that’s all the packaging you need. Because that kind of message goes from the heart to the heart. In other words, it comes from the heart that is making the decisions, deciding what to do, what to say, what to think. It’s coming out of a calm heart, a collected heart, a considerate and compassionate heart. And that can’t help but have an impact on the hearts of other people. So as you practice the Dhamma, you’re doing several things at once. As the Buddha said, the practice of the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma is a way of showing homage to him. This is how you show your gratitude to the Buddha for having found this path and having taught it. And at the same time, you benefit. You find true happiness. Or at the very least, you find a much more solid basis for your happiness than you had before. And then other people benefit as well. And maybe they start getting interested in the Dhamma. I’ve been working on a study guide, and I’m going to be teaching the topic of the Brahma-viharas in a couple of weeks. One of the questions that comes up is, not only do you feel goodwill for other people, but how do you act on that? How do you actually help bring about their happiness? And again and again and again, the Buddha said, it comes down to your practice. You learn how to overcome your greed. You encourage other people to overcome their greed. Again, it depends on the situation, whether you can talk about it or simply use your example. You try to overcome your anger. You try to overcome your delusion. And if you can encourage others to do that, that’s to their true benefit. When you’re wishing thoughts of goodwill, it’s not, “May you be happy as you already are acting.” Because many times people are doing precisely the things that cause suffering. The wish should be, “May you find the causes for true happiness.” And then if you’re in a position where you can help that person understand and act on those causes, fine. If not, that’s where you have to develop equanimity for the time being. But this is how you can be genuine. You can be genuinely of help. Do whatever you can, whatever seems appropriate, so that they start building up the causes for true happiness in their lives. But it all starts from here, how you relate to your breath. If you want goodwill for other people, show some goodwill for your breath. In other words, try to make it comfortable. If you want to develop compassion for others, be compassionate with your own breath. If it’s not comfortable, work with it. See what you can do to make it more comfortable. If you can’t figure it out, just sit and watch it for a while until you understand. When the breath is going well, don’t throw it away. Try to maintain it. That’s showing empathetic joy. And if there come to be areas where you can’t make any changes in the breath, develop some equanimity for them. Focus instead on the areas where you can make a change. As Ajahn Lee said, it’s like going into a house. You know that some of the boards on the floor are rotten. If you lie down on those spots, you’re going to fall through the floor. So choose the spots that are good. In other words, sometimes there are areas of the breath energy in the body that you can’t do anything about. So you look for the areas that you can make comfortable. As for the ones that you can’t, develop some equanimity for them. Focus instead on maximizing the pleasure in the areas that you can have some control over. Once you learn how to sense this with the breath, i.e., where you can make things better and where you can’t, it becomes a lot easier to sense it when you’re dealing with other people as well. So everything starts right here. It spreads out in all directions. It spreads out in lots of different directions from right here. So make sure that right here is good. And keep on making sure that right here is good. That’s how you develop the results that you want.

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