A Sustaining Happiness

May 12, 2008

Every evening before the meditation, we repeat that chant on the Brahma Paharas, the sublime attitudes, because they remind us of why we’re here, why we’re meditating. May I be happy. May all living beings be happy. Those thoughts taken together imply that there is a happiness where you can be happy, other people can be happy, and your happiness doesn’t impinge on their happiness, doesn’t harm their happiness. If we think simply in terms of the world of material things, this is impossible. If you gain something, someone else loses it. They gain it; you lose it. The fact that our bodies have to eat in order to stay alive means that the basic factor of our existence places burdens on others. Even if you eat a vegan diet, all the farmers and food workers and everybody else, all those other people, have to work very hard. In the food industry, the work is a thankless job. The clothing industry, the construction industry, the pharmaceutical industry, the people who do the work do an awful lot of hard work. That’s what keeps us going. Our happiness, in that case, depends on the hardships of other people. This means that we have to look for a different kind of happiness, a happiness that comes from within, that comes from your own inner resources. This is why we meditate. We turn inward to look at the mind, to train the mind. You realize that if you are able to gain a true happiness inside, then your happiness is independent. It doesn’t need to depend on other people doing this, that, or the other thing, doing things in a certain way. The world can change and you can still be happy. That way, your true happiness doesn’t conflict with anyone else’s. At the same time, if you can find true happiness inside, you actually place less of a burden on other people. If they find true happiness inside, they’re less likely to harm you. So it’s a good thing, this wish for happiness, as long as you keep emphasizing the word “true.” True happiness, genuine happiness, a happiness that lasts, a happiness that has no drawbacks. When you contemplate this and realize that this is the only happiness that really is worth fighting for, worth struggling for, worth putting out a lot of effort, then you see the value of training all the good qualities of the mind, qualities like mindfulness, alertness. The ones we’re practicing right here, right now. As you’re mindful of the breath, keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath, and then be alert to see how the breath is actually felt. Where do you feel the breathing? Which part of the body? What are the sensations that let you know now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out? Be alert to those. Notice when they’re comfortable. If they’re not comfortable, what can you do to change them? In this way, your mindfulness and alertness turn into other factors that are called directed thought and evaluation, vittaka and vittjana in Pali. You direct your ideas, you direct your attention to seeing where you can make the breath more comfortable, how you can make the breath more comfortable, and then you evaluate it. For instance, you try breathing in longer, more deeply. See how that feels. If it doesn’t feel right, you can allow the breath to grow shorter or more shallow, faster, slower, heavier, or lighter. You can experiment. And when you stay with the breath like this, asking questions and then experimenting, evaluating the results, as you get more and more obsessed with the breath and see that you’re beginning to get results, it leads to a sense of ease, fullness, and you’re beginning to get in the range of right concentration. This gives you, even though it’s not the ultimate happiness, at least it gives you happiness in a new direction, a happiness that doesn’t require that you take anything from anyone else, that you have to harm anyone in any way. You simply sit here and breathe and can be filled with a sense of rapture, fullness, refreshment, ease. The greater the sense of well-being you can find inside in this way, the less you need to feed off of things outside, both in the material and in the emotional sense. In this way, you’re training the mind and the skill of learning how to fabricate happiness in a way that’s harmless. And as you learn how to do this skill in a quiet place, when you’re sitting still like this, you realize there is this possibility. The next step lies in learning how to take this same sense of inner well-being and learn how to carry it through the day, how to protect it. This means seeing the importance of having this inner sense of well-being, both for your own sake and for the sake of the people around you. As you can have this sense of inner well-being, then when people say harsh things, hurtful things, you’re not feeding off of what they say. So it means that it’s going to affect you less. If you don’t have this inner sense of well-being, then you find yourself going around the day looking for praise from other people, kind words from other people. It’s like being a dog by a table watching people eat, hoping they’ll throw you a little scrap every now and then. But if you’ve got your own food, you don’t have to wait for people to throw scraps your way. That way, when they throw garbage at you, you’re not going to eat it. When you’re really hungry, you’ll eat anything. Then you complain that people have thrown bad things at you. Well, the real problem is that you haven’t learned how to feed yourself, how to provide your own nourishment. So the skills you learn here, as you’re sitting here meditating, are not meant simply to be used while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. It’s about being sensitive to the breath energy in the body, knowing how to adjust the breath, being sensitive to how the results are going. Do you get a sense of ease that it’s worth spreading around through the body? It’s good to be able to take those skills into your daily life as well. You get less likely to be wounded by other people’s words in the course of the day. When you’re less wounded, you’re less likely to turn around and wound other people. Because when you speak, you’re speaking from a sense of well-being. When you act, you act from a sense of well-being. When you think, you think from a sense of well-being. It’s much more likely that your thoughts and your words and your deeds are going to be harmless. Because when you’re feeling good, why would you want to have anyone else feel unhappy? It’s when you’re feeling oppressed and put upon that you turn on other people. It’s going to spread the problems around, spread the suffering around. When you can maintain a sense of well-being inside them, you’re more likely to spread that sense of ease and happiness around. So you’re not the only one who benefits from mastering this skill. The people around you benefit as well. It drives home the lesson that true happiness has to come from within. It doesn’t have to depend on things outside. It doesn’t have to be affected by things outside. So those thoughts, “May I be happy. May I be free from stress and pain. May all living beings be happy.” Those are the thoughts that underlie the practice. Those are the motivation that underlies our practice. So you always want to keep those in mind. They say that Ajahn Mun, every morning when he woke up, the first thing he would do was spread thoughts of goodwill to all living beings in all directions. After his midday nap, again, he would spread thoughts of goodwill to all living beings in all directions. Before he’d go to sleep at night, one more time, he’d spread thoughts of goodwill to all living beings in all directions, providing the context of his activities and his thoughts throughout the day. This is an example we can all follow. It’s not some sort of pie-in-the-sky ideal that’s impossible, because you’re wishing for people’s well-being. Even though they may have past karma that’s unfortunate, that leads to difficult circumstances, the Buddhist teachings on karma point out that your state of mind does not have to depend totally on past karma. Your present karma has a role in shaping your present moment as well. So when you wish for all beings to be happy, you’re also wishing that they would create causes for well-being in the present moment. Then you start thinking about what you might be able to do to influence them in that direction. Sometimes you can actually teach people. Most people, however, don’t like to be taught. But you can act a way, you can speak in a way that can incline their minds in that direction, even without it being explicit. So these thoughts of goodwill are not just a context for you to shape your own inner state, but it’s also to get you to think about how you interact with other people, to think about what the impact of your thoughts, words, and deeds are on other people as well. So goodwill provides the context of how you interact for the meditation, also for acts of generosity, for observing the precepts. This is why the principle of heedfulness makes it imperative that we keep thoughts of goodwill always in mind, because we can’t maintain these thoughts of goodwill. It’s very easy to act in careless ways, harmful ways. Of course, when you act in harmful ways to other people, it’s going to come back and harm you. If all you can think about are the bad things that other people have done, it’s going to be difficult for you to do good things in life. When you think about the good side of other people, that makes it a lot easier. The Buddha compares that to water. You’re coming across a desert. You’re hot, you’re trembling, you’re thirsty. You need water. If you find some people who are very good people, try to enjoy their goodness. It’s like jumping into a lake, drinking the water, and the lake swims away. If people have only a little bit of goodness, it’s like coming across the water in a cow’s footprint. You can’t scoop it up because you’d make it muddy. So you get down on all fours and very carefully slurp up the water. You need water that much. In other words, you need to think of the goodness of other people that much. Even if they have only a little bit, learn to value it. That makes it easier for you to act on goodwill throughout the day. Keeping these thoughts in mind, that’s called mental fabrication, verbal fabrication. As for keeping the sense of well-being with the breath, that’s called physical fabrication. You learn how to fabricate thoughts of goodwill, a state of well-being inside. It underlies and gives energy, a sustaining energy, to your practice throughout the day, throughout the week, throughout the month, throughout the year, throughout your life. So regardless of how things are outside in your life, whether the circumstances are peaceful and quiet like they are right now, or more tumultuous, that’s all right. Try to keep this sense of well-being, this sense of goodwill, as steady as possible. That way your practice becomes steady, the results will become steady, and the happiness you hope for, the happiness that’s solid and sure, that’s totally harmless, will be yours. you

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