Safe Haven

August 7, 2009

That chant just now, “May I be happy, may all living beings be happy,” it’s good to think about that every time you meditate. That’s why we’re here. We want true happiness. We want happiness that doesn’t harm anybody, doesn’t harm ourselves, doesn’t harm anybody else in the world. That helps to create the right mood for the meditation, the right context. Some people have trouble wishing goodwill for themselves. Others have trouble wishing goodwill for others. So you have to unlearn both habits of ill-will, or at least an embarrassment about goodwill. The Buddha’s whole life was about goodwill—goodwill for himself, goodwill for everybody else. And it’s an example of the benefits that can come when you consciously try to develop that attitude. So you don’t feel embarrassed about feeling goodwill for yourself. You see that everything we do, one way or another, is for happiness. So we might as well learn how to do it skillfully. In a way, it really does lead to happiness for ourselves. It doesn’t interfere with anyone else’s happiness. So try those attitudes on for size. And remind yourself that it’s perfectly reasonable, perfectly honorable, to wish goodwill in this way. We have the example of all the noble disciples. And they are that—noble. People who, from whatever their background, whatever their original problems, were able to train their minds in this direction. They’re people we bow down to. So you should learn how to bow down to your own wish for true happiness. It’s something you should really respect. As we’re meditating here, it’s one way of showing goodwill for ourselves. Realizing that we have to train the mind if we’re going to find happiness. It needs some good basic qualities like mindfulness and alertness. And it needs a good safe place to do its work. It needs time out to do its work, because it’s very delicate work. And many of the issues in the mind are very delicate and very complicated. We have a lot of tender spots inside that need care and attention. And although it may sound brave and courageous to say we’re going to do this work in the midst of our everyday lives, it’s awfully hard. And even warriors know when they have to retreat, when they have to recover from their wounds. Not because they’re cowards, but because they’re intelligent, they’re wise. They know when they’re strong enough to fight, and they know when they have to retreat. Why he goes into the forest, he says, is because he has to learn from the forest animals how to avoid danger. He tells a story of some baby birds one time. The monks were walking through the forest on their alms round, and they came across this mother bird with lots of little baby chicks. And as soon as the mother bird saw the monks coming, she called out to the chicks, and they all went running into this pile of leaves and then just lay there very still. And John Lee had one of the novices go and take a stick and stir the pile of leaves to see if he could get the baby birds to come out. And they wouldn’t move. You see, he learned a good lesson from the baby birds that day. There are times when you really do have to just be very, very still to protect yourself, regardless of what other people may say. So we come here to find a safe place, not only in the physical surroundings, but also find a safe place inside. This is why we try to bring the mind to concentration. That’s our safe place inside. That’s our safe haven. You can focus on the breath. You can focus on the word bhutto, whatever you find calming and easeful and pleasant. The breath is good because it helps work with whatever sense of dis-ease you might have in the body. Ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel good right now?” And allow the body to breathe that way. If you’re thinking about other things, you tend to squeeze the breath, or limit the breath in the body, so you don’t get as much good out of the breathing as you normally could. Because the thinking and planning or whatever, taking up so much energy, taking up so much space in your body. So for the time being, you give the body over to the breath entirely. The whole body can breathe in, the whole body can breathe out. Think in that way and try to hold that idea in your mind. So each time you breathe in, everything is allowed to breathe. And allow the body to find whatever rhythm feels good. You might nudge it in this direction and nudge it in that direction. In other words, try longer breathing for a while or shorter breathing for a while. It’s good to start with a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths to kind of clear things out, to ventilate the body. And if that feels good, keep it up until it doesn’t feel good anymore. Then you can change and just pose that thought in the mind, “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” And give everything over to the breath. If you need a meditational word to help you stay with the breath, you can use bhutto, which means “awake.” Think bhutto, with the in-breath, and toho, with the out-breath. Now block out any other vagrant thoughts that may be coming in, because there will be these other thoughts. You’re working on a new habit here. You’re working on a new habit of being safe with yourself. Because this safe haven is not only safe from other people, but you want to make it safe from other voices in your mind, other opinions, other identities that you take on. As the Buddha pointed out, we create identities out of our cravings, and our cravings can be all over the place. Each different craving focuses on a different point, and our sense of who we are then develops from that craving. So it’s not just one self in here. There are many selves that you’ve made. Some of them are skillful, some of them are not. Right now, you want to develop a really solid sense of self that’s just aware of the breath. And whatever narratives come up about people in your life or things in your life, just things you’ve done in the past, things you’re planning in the future, change the narrative. Say, “Whoever that person was who did those things in the past is now meditating. Whoever’s going to be doing those things in the future is going to be better off if he or she has been meditating now.” That’s this extra range of skills, adding this new identity to your representation. Ultimately, you will have to deal with your stuff, but you need a good, safe place to do it. So this is what the breath meditation provides. It’s a place where your awareness can pull out of your old conversations and your old controversies, and just kind of step outside of them. As you’re just staying here, there is a certain amount of conversation going on to keep you with the breath. But otherwise, you’re mainly with the physical sensation of the body. It gets you out of the back and forth. You’re aware of your hands. You’re aware of your feet. Be aware of relaxing your hands, relaxing your feet. Be aware of your arms, your legs. Start with whatever parts of the body are easier to relax, and then allow that relaxation to spread from there to go into other areas that you tend to hold more tightly. And be patient. This work takes time. One of our worst problems is that not only do we have problems in the mind, but we’re impatient. We want to get rid of them fast. And it just piles more issues on. As you develop this sense of ease, sitting right here, wherever you may feel it, be confident that this is going to become your safe place. It may not be very large right now. To use another image, it’s like starting a fire on a windy day. As soon as you light the kindling, you’ve got to protect it. And once the fire starts going, you try to put too much fuel on it all at once. You may actually put it out. So you’ve got to be very careful. Protect it. In Thai, there’s the word prakong. It’s when you’ve got a child who’s learning to walk, and you’re walking behind it. You hold your hands out on either side. You allow the child the freedom to walk, but you’re there. You’re close enough so that if the child is about to stumble, you’re ready to catch it. You’re protective. But you don’t clamp down on it. The child needs its freedom. It needs to learn how to walk and gain some confidence. So you have to find just the right amount of attentiveness. And this takes time. Everything in meditation is trial and error. If you’re afraid of making mistakes, you’ll never get anywhere. You want to learn the ability to see if you’re ready to fall down. You can catch yourself even if you do fall down. Before you can catch yourself, you can pick yourself back up. Step back up and start all over again. And then start over again. Start over again. Don’t get discouraged. Many people in the past have had a difficult time getting started. That doesn’t mean that they’re not going to do well. If we only do the things that we’re already good at, we don’t get much done. We don’t expand our range of abilities. So as you stay with the breath, try to protect this space you have, where the awareness meets the sensation of the breath, and see what you can do to get them on good terms. Because this is a very direct way of showing goodwill for yourself, a very immediate way of giving rise to a sense of physical ease, gratification. The breath feels really good coming in. Try to see which areas of the body are really hungry for the breathing, and then allow them to have their share. Because once you learn how to show goodwill for yourself in this way, it’s a lot easier to feel goodwill for others. Because here you are with a much greater sense of well-being, a much greater sense of ease. You don’t feel so put upon by the rest of the world. It’s easier to look at other people and see them as being like you. They struggle. They have their sufferings, too. Now, when you’re suffering, sometimes you say, “I don’t care.” But as you’re able to give rise to a greater sense of well-being inside, then it’s a lot easier to sympathize with other people. So it’s important to have this sense of a safe haven, a place where you can go to get away from other people, where you can get away from your other selves, and learn these very basic skills of learning how to be good with yourself, sensitive to what the body needs in the present moment, sensitive to what the mind needs in the present moment. You show goodwill to yourself by wanting to breathe in a way that feels good. You show compassion for yourself by trying to figure out when the breath is not feeling good what you can do to make it feel better. When it is going well, you maintain it. That’s sympathetic joy. And as for the parts of the body, you can’t get the way you like them yet. You develop equanimity. As you develop these attitudes around your own breath, you gain practice. And now you can develop them in other areas of your life as well. So as we meditate, we’re not simply just running away from the world. We’re taking some time out. We’re taking some time to develop the skills that we need to use to deal with both the problems that come from outside and the problems that come from within. Because wherever you go, you’ve got the breath. And as long as you’ve got the breath as your friend, that means wherever you go, you’ve got a friend with you. So take this time to develop this friendship inside, this sense of a safe friendship, a safe haven, because it provides the space, provides the environment where you really can work on those problems with a greater sense of competence, a greater sense of patience. And a greater sense of fairness that allows you to learn to develop your relationship to yourself and to other people with a lot more skill.

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