Light Merit

November 1, 2009

Today was a day of heavy merit, the kind of merit that takes a lot out of you physically and, in some cases, emotionally, in dealing with lots of people. So now’s the time for some light merit. All you have to do is watch your breath. But before you do that, you have to dedicate today’s merit to everybody. It’s a way of spreading goodwill. Because what is merit? It’s happiness, the kind of happiness that comes from doing good. When you do that, you’re not thinking, “Well, maybe only this person or maybe only that person benefits from it.” You want everybody to benefit. You just have that thought. That thought in mind, “May all beings benefit from today’s merit.” That right there is some light merit. All you have to do is think. And now you can think even less. Whatever thinking, just think about the breath. How it feels as it comes in, how it feels as it goes out. Ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel really good right now. There’s a pleasure that comes from breathing in this way. That’s light merit. In the realization, you have no other responsibilities at this moment. That doesn’t mean you’re being irresponsible. It means you’re looking after the important part of what you need in order to be responsible. Strength of mind, well-being in the mind. Because we wouldn’t have been able to handle today’s crowd if we hadn’t some sense of well-being already. Of course, today’s crowd was nothing compared to a lot of the issues that we’re going to face in life down the road. Aging is going to creep up on us, illness, death, separation, all those things we don’t like to think about. But not thinking about them doesn’t make them go away. So you prepare, knowing there is that part of the mind that doesn’t have to suffer from these things, and you’re going to dig around inside to find it. But first, to dig around, you have to stay in the present moment. And to stay in the present moment, you need an anchor. Otherwise, the mind drifts off into the past, drifts off into the future, and it drifts very quickly. So you needed something to keep yourself continually anchored right here. So you stay with the breath and get interested in the breath. See in what ways the breath can create a sense of well-being in the body, a sense of well-being in the mind. And for the time being, that’s all you have to worry about, just the present moment. This is really good practice, cutting off thoughts of the past, cutting off thoughts of the future. Because there will come times when thoughts of the past and thoughts of the future really cause a lot of suffering. You may notice when someone is getting really old and they know that if they think about the future, there’s just death. They don’t want to think about it, so they turn around and think a lot about the past. And that might stir up who knows what incidents in the past, things they did that they feel ashamed of, that they regret. So one, if you’re going to think about the future and the past, think about the present in a way that’s actually useful. Remind yourself that you can prepare for aging, illness, and death. And at the same time, as you do good things in life, you have good things to look back on. When you have that kind of confidence with regard to the past and with regard to the future, then when you’re settling down in the present moment, it’s a different kind of settling down. You’re not trying to run away from these things. You know simply that it’s actually better to be here. It’s okay to think about the future, it’s okay to think about the past, but it’s even better to sit here. So instead of putting blinders on yourself, you’re simply settling in, in the area where the real work has to be done, in understanding what it is your mind is doing when it’s shaping its experience. In what ways is it shaping it in a skillful way? In what ways is it doing it in an unskillful way? And you can tackle that right here, realizing that you do have the choice. Even though you may have some past bad karma that’s ripening right now, you don’t have to suffer from it. What kind of past bad karma might you have? Well, there’s pains in your body. The body, as the Buddha said, is old karma. You’re carrying a lot of old karma around with you right here. So there are probably some aches and pains from today’s work, or other aches and pains that go deeper than that. But you don’t have to suffer from it. You can stay with the breath. Each breath coming in and going out is a new breath. Maybe your last breath was uncomfortable, but the next one doesn’t have to be. Think of the breath going throughout the body, surrounding the body. There’s a breath energy that surrounds the body. Sometimes you can sense it. When you get really still, the mind gets really sensitive. And that kind of breath energy can get tensed up, too, even though it doesn’t have anything directly to do with the muscles. It can be tense, it can be tight. There can be major gaps here and there. And so you work with them. You get a sense of energy that surrounds the body, that suffuses the body. It feels good, it feels comforting, it feels soothing. And you can focus on that. You don’t have to focus on the pains. This is an important lesson that whatever’s coming up in the present moment, you don’t have to suffer from it. If you have the right attitude, if you have the right perceptions, if you have the right insight into what’s going on, you can release yourself from that suffering. Even if it’s just a temporary release, it’s an important lesson, it’s an important skill, so that whatever comes up, you’re not weighing yourself down unnecessarily. And you get to be like a good cook. Good cooks can take even slightly spoiled food and make something good out of it. It’s the unskillful cooks that can make good food only with really best ingredients. The really clever ones can take, for example, cheese. What is cheese? Moldy milk. Fish sauce. The liquid that comes out of decomposing fish. People can make really good food out of it. It’s the same with your old past karma that you’re carrying around sometimes. The body’s tired, sometimes it’s pained, but you don’t have to suffer from that. The mind can be light, the mind can be fresh. You work with the breath. You find that each new breath is a new breath. There’s a possibility for good energy coming into the body, bad energy flowing out. And that’s a good symbol for what the mind can do, because the mind does not have to be a slave to what’s there in the past. It doesn’t have to carry around past burdens. It can let them go. And as you’re not weighing yourself down, the mind begins to rise up. It’s light, free, and happy. So try to bring this sense of lightness to the meditation. Lightness in the breath, lightness in your attention, a light touch in your skill in shaping a sense of well-being in the present moment. And you’ll find that even though heavy merit is the necessary part of life, the light merit is where it really gets good.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2009/091101%20Light%20Merit.mp3>