Peace on Earth

December 24, 2009

Peace on earth has to begin right here, right where the body and the mind meet at the breath. Try to develop a sense of harmony here as you’re focusing on the breath. Don’t push it too much, but don’t wander away. Give it your undivided attention and see how it responds. If it responds well, stick with it. If not, you can change. Either change the breath or change the way you focus. The important thing is having this sense of harmony, because that’s an essential part of peace. You learn about harmony by experimenting inside, when you learn the quality of mind that is attentive and sensitive, observant, unwavering. And you can apply that inside. It’s a lot easier to apply it outside as well. We like to think of the idea that the world could be at peace. But it’s not a task that the Buddha set for us, because each of us has our own ideas about what would be a good way to live in the world. And there’s no way you can force other beings to live in line with your ideas. And the more you try to force them, the less peaceful things become. But you can set an example inside. An example with your own thoughts, your own words, your own deeds. At the very least, the world of your becoming will have a peaceful center. That’s your main responsibility. As Ajahn Suwat used to say, “Each of us has only one person.” What he meant was that each of us has only one person we’re really responsible for. You can’t be responsible for the deeds of other people, but you can be responsible for your own. And all too often we neglect our own true responsibility and go around trying to straighten out everybody else. That’s one of the reasons why the world is in such turmoil. Everybody’s straightening out everybody else and not looking at themselves. So you want to look inside and see what you can straighten out here. And you find that the breath can be very useful this way. Ajahn Lee talks about how the breath is the main element or the main property of the body that brings the other elements or properties into balance, into harmony. So notice how you conceive the breath. When you think of the breath coming in, what’s the mental picture you have? Does the mental picture force the breath in a way that makes it impossible for harmony to develop, for peace to develop, for balance to develop? Try to keep in mind the fact that your primary sensation of having a body is breath. And so breath should be your first perception of things. All too often we think of the solid part of the body as breathing the breath in and breathing the breath out. And so we focus on the solid parts as our primary experience of the body, as our primary agents. And how to get the breath in, how to get the breath out. We sometimes take the tense and tight parts and try to breathe with them, which of course only makes things worse. Remind yourself that the breath can penetrate everywhere, and the breath is primary. It comes before your other sensations. Just hold that thought in mind. If you have a pattern of tightness or tension someplace in the body, think of the breath penetrating through it totally, instantly. No obstacles, nothing. Because it’s there beforehand. The tension comes afterwards. If you reverse the priorities, reverse your perceptions like this, the breath has more range. It can do more in the body. You’re not placing limitations on it. So allow it to just dissolve any perception you hold. Each time you breathe in, think of the body as a clean slate. The breath can go everywhere, anywhere, all at once. It can go in strange directions and do all kinds of things. Whatever’s needed to keep the body feeling buoyant. Whereas when you breathe out, don’t breathe out too long, because the more you breathe out long, the tighter things become in the body. So allow the breath to go out just right, and then breathe in again, breathe in again, breathe in again, and allow the breath to dissolve anything that seems uncomfortable, that seems blocked. Then, after you’ve played with the breath like this for a while, ask yourself, “What feels right? What feels balanced? What’s balanced in the body, in terms of the breath? Are things too light, too heavy, too warm, too cold?” See if you can use the breath to bring them into balance. In doing this, you create a sense of ease between body and mind. A sense of harmony. So the peace that you feel inside is palpable. It’s not just an idea. It’s a sense of well-being. In Thai, they have the compound santi-suk, which means peace and happiness, peace and ease. And the two go together. When the mind is at peace, there’s a sense of well-being. And when you can keep this well-being going, then you’re acting from a sense of well-being. The things you say, the things you do as you’re dealing with the world outside, come from a better place, come from a stronger place. So you’re not acting out of hunger, you’re not acting out of a sense of feeling threatened. And when you have this sense of peace, then it’s easier to feel good will for all beings, and not to want to harm anybody. You’d ask yourself, “Why would I want to harm anybody? It’s just going to destroy the sense of well-being that you already have.” The reason people harm others is because they feel that they’re lacking a sense of well-being or that their sense of well-being is threatened. And they’ll do just about anything to attain their idea of a secure sense of well-being. But then they just keep chasing that idea and never reaching it because the things they do are destructive. But if you’re coming from a sense of well-being, you wouldn’t want to harm it. And if your well-being comes from inside, you realize, after a while, that there’s no way that other people could threaten it. The only threat comes from your own lack of mindfulness, your own lack of attention. This helps keep your priorities straight. So peace begins here. Harmony begins here. You’re not out to conquer the world. You’re here to conquer yourself, to overcome the lack of mindfulness that allows you to have a sense of well-being, the lack of alertness, the lack of discernment and concentration that can have a bad effect on your well-being. There’s a phrase in the canon that says it’s hard for a person without merit to do meritorious things. I’ll translate that into more colloquial English. It’s hard for a person without a sense of well-being to do things that would lead to genuine well-being. I’m sure you wonder how you’re going to get started on that. Well, it’s right here. Be very attentive to how the breath feels in the body. Bring a friendly interest to the breath. Try to remove whatever limitations you have on the concept of breath so it can help bring things into balance. Then, when you’re coming from this sense of well-being, it’s a lot easier to do the right thing, say the right thing, whatever’s helpful, whatever’s harmless. Because you’ve found a source of happiness that’s harmless as well. So there’s no need to do hurtful things or say hurtful things or think hurtful things. All you have to do is learn how to maintain this sense of well-being and allow it to grow from within. So if you’re looking for peace, this is where you look. You don’t want to wait for other people to get peaceful or for other people to be good. Because you’ll wait until your dying day. You want to start right now. Goodness in the world, peace in the world, harmony in the world have to start right here, right now, with you. The good thing about this peace is that it spreads around. It’s one of the few forms of happiness where everybody gets a share. In other words, the good things you do for other people are based on this sense of well-being. Don’t diminish the well-being. Actually strengthen it. So pay careful attention right here. This is where everything starts.

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