A Happiness that Spreads Around

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We chant on goodwill. We chant it every evening before we meditate to remind ourselves of why we’re here. It’s the underlying motivation for the practice. We want happiness. That doesn’t harm anyone. It doesn’t harm ourselves. It doesn’t harm other people. It doesn’t interfere with their true happiness and their ability to, as the chant says, look after themselves with ease. The meditation is just one form of that kind of happiness. There are basically three, all together. There’s the happiness that comes from generosity, the happiness that comes from virtue, and the happiness that comes from meditation. All of which are very different from the kind of happiness that comes from nice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. The happiness that simply comes from the pleasures of the senses is something that you really can’t share. It creates divisions. And the more people are running after that kind of happiness, the more divisions it creates. Whereas the happiness that comes from generosity, virtue, and meditation is something that you don’t have clear dividing lines. When you’re generous, it’s obvious that you’re not the only one who’s benefiting from your generosity. The people around you are getting the gift of what you’re giving, which may be a material thing, or may be your knowledge, your time, your forgiveness. And giving these things each other you benefit, and the recipients benefit as well. And many times, the people who see the action benefit too. It’s a reminder that we’re here on this earth not each just fighting for his or her own interest, but that your interest, your true happiness, is connected with the happiness of others. So it’s a kind of happiness that spreads around. The same with the happiness of virtue. And not killing, not stealing, not having illicit sex, not lying, not taking intoxicants. You benefit, and the people around you benefit. As the Buddha said, this too is a gift. It’s a gift of universal safety. No one has to fear any of these things from you. And when your gift is universal, then you have a part in that universal safety as well. If your gift is partial, i.e., there are some people you will kill and other people you won’t, some people you’ll steal from and others you won’t, so down the line. Or you drink a certain amount but say, “Okay, I’ll stop when I have a sense I’m getting a little bit too buzzed.” Then safety isn’t universal. It isn’t all around. It’s not really safe. So the precepts are there as a gift to yourself. They’re there as a gift to others. And they’re all an important part of the practice. All too often when people talk about the practice, they’re thinking about meditation alone. Not realizing that generosity and virtue have an important part to play, because they train you in good qualities of mind that are really good to bring to the practice. If you’ve had training in generosity and you come to the meditation, again, as a gift, it’s a gift to yourself and to other people. And it really changes the dynamic. It’s not so much, “What am I going to get out of this today?” But in giving energy to this, you’re confident that you’re going to benefit and other people will benefit as well. But it’s the giving that has to come first. So you give your energy, you give your attention. Then you find that as you do become more mindful, more alert, more able to step out of your thought worlds, you benefit. And the people around you benefit too. Because it’s those thought worlds that lead to action. And if they have a lot of greed, aversion, and delusion, then the kinds of actions they’re going to lead to aren’t going to be harmful. So in this way, you’re relieving other people of the burden of having to put up with their greed, aversion, and delusion, because you’re learning how to hold them in check. That’s the beginning state of the meditation. It’s just learning how to hold these things in check without creating a lot of tension around it. This is one of the reasons why we work so much with the breath, trying to make the breath comfortable, easeful. Have a sense of the whole body breathing in, breathing out, thinking of the breath energy coming in and out all the pores of the body, and spreading your awareness to fill the whole body. So breath is filling the body, awareness is filling the body. As the breath gets more comfortable, more nourishing, there’s a sense of the awareness and the breath sort of melding together. Then when a thought comes up, it’s not so much that you’re threatened by it or have to put up a lot of tension to deal with it. You simply can watch it come and watch it go. You don’t have to get involved, because you’ve got a better place to stay. If you’re living just in your thoughts, then when a new thought comes in, you have to jump into it, because it’s going to push your old thought out of the way. You just go jumping from thought to thought to thought, totally subjected to whatever that thought world might be. This passes where the Buddha says that you start thinking, and then the categories of your thinking turn around and they attack you. Sometimes the attack is gentle, and sometimes it’s really harsh and strong. So you need a place where you can get out of all of these thought worlds, and the breath is an ideal place to go. Something physical. And you can use it to create a sense of well-being, so that when you’re refraining from jumping into a thought world, it’s not with a lot of tension. In fact, often it’s by releasing the tension around that thought world that you can make it dissolve. It’s one of the classic ways of dealing with obstructive thoughts. You need to notice that in the creation of the thought, there’s going to be tension. So instead of fighting it with more tension, you figure out where the tension is. It’s partly in the body, partly in the mind. You focus on the bodily part. A thought world appears. You might sense it in your chest. You might sense it in your head, around the eyes, in your jaws, in your arms, wherever. And as soon as you notice that, when this thought appears, there’s a certain pattern of tension that appears as well. You can dissolve it away. That’s how you hold your thoughts in check. Not by running up against them, but by presenting no place where they can land. They just dissolve away. So this is one of the reasons why we spread the breath around. We keep our awareness spread throughout the body. It gives us a good foundation. It’s not knocked off by the thought worlds that come up and appear. If your range of awareness is very small and a thought world comes, it can overwhelm you. There’s a sense that it’s bigger than you are, and all of a sudden you find yourself inside it. But if you’re bigger than the thought, it’s not nearly so threatening. You just watch it dissolve away, dissolve away. It’s like going out into the desert during the winter. There can be fog and rain and drizzle here and closer to the coast. When you go out to the desert, you watch the clouds come over the ridge. They’re there in the sky for a brief moment, and then they just dissolve away. So the heat and the dryness of the desert give them no place to stay. So in this case, the heat of your meditation—and the Buddha does talk about meditation as jhana, which is related to a verb “to burn,” which means to burn with a steady flame—is going to burn away these thought worlds as they appear. You give them no place to land. You give them no place to attack. In this way, you get more and more in control of the thoughts and intentions that otherwise might lead to actions that would cause you to suffer or cause other people to suffer. Start losing their power. They may not be totally uprooted, but at least you’ve created a state of mind in which they have very little power. It’s hard for them to take over. It’s a work on developing this spacious state of mind. When the Buddha gives instructions on breath meditation, he’s got sixteen steps altogether. The first thing you do is train yourself to do. In the beginning, you just watch when the breath is short. You watch when the breath is long. You learn how to be sensitive to what the breath is doing. And then you start training yourself. It’s no longer passive. It’s more active. Make yourself aware of the whole body, breathing in, aware of the whole body, breathing out. And then you try to calm all the manifestations of the breath, wherever the breath is. If the breath feels harsh, tense, or tight, work through it so that it feels easy coming in, easy going out. If it helps, try to think of the body as this big sponge with lots of holes. The breath can come in and out from every direction. It makes the breath more easeful. It gives you a greater sense of well-being, so you’re not so hungry. That’s another reason why we jump into thought worlds. It’s not just because they overwhelm us, but because we want to go feed on them. The mind is hungry. It wants something to chew on, because it feels starved. So here, give it a sense of fullness as you breathe in, fullness as you breathe out, a sense of nourishment. The Buddha talks about right concentration as a kind of food. So when the mind is well-fed like this, it’s not going to go around opening up garbage pails or garbage bins, dumpster diving, the way it tends to do normally, because it’s got good food to eat. So why take other people’s garbage? And why take your old garbage, the old bones that you pull out every now and then? Like a dog pulls out a bone to chew on. The meat has been chewed off years ago. Yet the dog keeps chewing on the bone. All it gets, of course, is the taste of its own saliva, because it doesn’t have anything better to eat. There’s a sense of going to gnaw on something. But here you’ve got something good. The breath coming in, the breath going out. You can learn how to feed on it, learn how to make it nourishing. And this way, with better food to eat inside, then you’re less likely to go feeding off other people. You start feeding off of good mental states. This too is a way the happiness of the meditation doesn’t stop with you. Its effects reverberate around you. So remember this. This is an important principle in the practice. We’re looking for a kind of happiness that doesn’t cause oppression to anybody, a kind of happiness whose limits are very ill-defined. In other words, it’s not just your happiness. It’s a happiness that spreads around. So on days when the practice gets dry, remind yourself you’re here not just for yourself. You’re also here for everybody around you.

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