A Higher Happiness

November 13, 2010

The Pali word for meditation, bhavana, literally means “to develop.” And in a way, we’ve been developing all kinds of good qualities today. Persistence, endurance, working together to do something good, preparation for tomorrow’s event. But now it’s time to develop something more subtle. You want to develop the qualities of the mind, like alertness, mindfulness, and concentration, getting the mind to settle down. So as in that chant we had just now, have some respect for concentration. For most of us, our respect is with the thinking mind, the mind that can come up with good ideas, clever ideas, amusing ideas, new ideas. But this is a time to develop a different aspect of the mind, the mind’s ability to settle down and gain some nourishment simply by settling down. Because the thinking of the mind, even when it’s good, tends to wear it out. And for most of us, the only time the mind gets to rest is when we’re sad. But there’s no mindfulness going on there at all. There’s no alertness. And so that’s all the stillness of sleep does, is it gives us a bit of a rest. But it doesn’t give us the chance to develop any insight or understanding into the mind, which is why we need a way to make the mind still and alert at the same time. So focus on the breath. The breath is a good place to focus because it’s always here. It’s always right now. When you’re with the breath, you’re with the present. And when you’re with the present, that’s the way you develop alertness. Now, to stay present, you have to develop mindfulness as well. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. In this case, you have to keep reminding yourself, “Stay here with the breath,” because it’s so easy to forget and so easy to fall back to your old habits. This is one part of the mind that says, “Look, you’ve got a whole hour here. You can think about all kinds of things, and all kinds of things will come up.” But you have to be determined you’re not going to go with those thoughts. The only thoughts you’re going to deal with are the ones that keep you with the breath. That’s what you have to remember. That’s what you have to be mindful of. So take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and notice how they feel. Where do you feel the breathing process? Here we’re talking not just about the air coming in and out through the nose, but also about the movement of the muscles in the body as the lungs expand and contract, and the flow of energy anywhere you feel it that’s related to the fact that now the breath is coming in and now the breath is going out. Are those sensations comfortable? Sometimes the breath can be too long or too short or too strenuous. Think of the breath just coming in naturally on its own. You don’t have to pull it in. It’s going to come in. All you have to do is watch. And if it feels uncomfortable, just place a thought in the mind saying, “How about longer? How about shorter? Or deeper? Or more shallow? Heavier? Or lighter?” Allow the body to respond. Survey the different ways breathing can feel right now and what the body seems to need most right now. And when you’ve found a rhythm that feels good, stick with it. And then protect it. In other words, keep reminding yourself that you’ve got to stay here. Whatever else comes up in the mind, you don’t have to go with it, because the mind does have that habit. As soon as things get comfortable a little bit, it starts to wander. So it says, “Enough of that. Let’s go on and find another pleasure.” But here we’re looking for something more than just pleasure. We’re looking for a good, solid place for the mind to stay, where it can watch what’s going on, how it creates trouble for itself. And part of that trouble is that tendency of the mind to keep wanting to wander. The Buddhist word samsara refers precisely to this, the mind’s wandering. We tend to think of samsara as a place, but actually it’s a process the mind just keeps generating. It wanders into the past, wanders into the future, wanders up, wanders down. And here we’re trying to change that habit so it’s going to stay right here. So if a thought comes wandering in, let it wander out, but you don’t have to follow it. You don’t have to check it out to see if it’s a good thought or a bad thought. If it needs a little adjustment, just let it go, let it go. Your only responsibility right now is to stay alert to how the breath feels. And if you’ve found a rhythm that feels good, stick with it. If that good rhythm, after all, doesn’t feel so good anymore, it’s a sign that the body’s breath needs have changed. So explore a little bit more. See what the breath can do for the body now, what the body needs now. Let this get mechanical. Don’t put the breath on automatic pilot. You want to be very careful to watch, watch, watch what’s going on. If you find a spot in the body that seems congenial, focus your attention there. Allow the breath energy to feel good there all the way through the in-breath and all the way through the out-breath. In other words, protect that spot so you don’t start squeezing it towards the end of the out-breath. Or stuffing more breath in at the end of the in-breath. Use that spot as your gauge for when the breath is getting too long or too short. So it feels right coming in, and then it feels right when it stops, and then it feels right when it starts up again as it goes out. Back and forth, in and out, in and out, feeling good all the way through the cycle. Have a sense of ease that doesn’t rise and fall with the breath, but stays constant through the in-breath, through the out-breath. Look after that spot. It’s like starting a fire on a windy day. You’ve got one match. You’ve got a little bit of kindling, a few sticks, and then some larger sticks and some logs. So you have to be very careful once you’ve got the kindling lit to protect that little flame. Don’t get careless. It looks like it’s beginning to catch, but all of a sudden a big wind comes through and you are not protecting it anymore. Okay, then it’s going to go out. Fortunately, you do have another match, so you can try it again. But it’s best to not waste your matches. Once the breath gets going, well, stick with it, stick with it, stick with it. This is a quality of persistence that really makes a difference. Because as you stay with that sense of ease, at that spot in the body, even though it’s nothing extraordinary to begin with, as you stay with it, you begin to find that it does get more and more outstanding. It feels really good. And when it feels good that way, then start thinking of that good feeling just spreading out from that spot. You don’t have to follow it. Just think spread, spread, spread in all directions, up to the head, down to the feet. But don’t lose track of that one spot. That’s where you give the mind a place to settle down and show it that it can really find a sense of well-being. All too often it’s been through this spot before, who knows how many times, but it never realized that this spot had some potential. It was just a waystation on the way between the past and the future, or the future and the past, or any place else where the mind’s attention was grabbed. It would go wandering after some other thought, wandering after some other idea, out looking for pleasure, not realizing that it had the sources for pleasure or the resources for pleasure right here inside. So learn to appreciate the potential you have right here for creating a sense of well-being, a sense of ease. And at the same time, you’re developing good qualities of mind, the alertness that stays sensitive to what’s going on, the mindfulness that keeps reminding you not to give in to your old habits or give in to any of the excuses the mind might give for wanting to think about yesterday or plan for tomorrow or whatever. You’re going to stay right here, right now. That’s all you’ve got to do. Keep reminding yourself of that, because as you develop these qualities of alertness and mindfulness, they’re going to be useful in all kinds of activities, not just the meditation. The reason we’re here is to see the movements of the mind. The breath acts as our anchor in the present moment, and we develop our sensitivities as we stay with the breath. But the purpose of all this is to start seeing the mind. It’s like the breath is a mirror for the mind. Because the longer you stay with the breath, the more you begin to notice the mind that’s watching and the mind that’s protecting and the mind that’s being mindful. And then when something slips in, you can see it. It’s a little bit of greed, a little bit of anger. Here they come. And if you’re alert, you can catch them at the very beginning. And when you can catch them that soon, then you’re in a much better position. If you wait until they’ve totally overcome the mind, you’re really at a disadvantage. Because when these thoughts come in, it’s not just an idea in the mind. They start affecting the way you breathe, they start affecting all the different hormones in your body, and all of a sudden you find yourself stuck with a body that’s on the side of the greed or on the side of the anger, the lust, the fear, whatever. And you get overwhelmed. Then the mind tells itself, “Oh, this fear is going to get me.” “This feeling is so strong in the body. It must be what I really feel about whatever.” And then you give in to it, forgetting that these feelings come and they go. And they’re fabricated, they’re put together just like anything else. Which means, even though you may feel them intensely, you don’t have to regard them as your true feelings about something. The better question is, is this a skillful feeling? Is this a skillful idea? What kind of consequences is it going to lead to? This is why the Buddha never talked about questions of what you truly are, what your true nature is—good or bad or whatever. He says, “Focus on what you’re doing. Look at your thoughts as actions. They have consequences.” This is where the alertness comes in. You can actually watch the consequences, both in the immediate present and what happens when you follow through with a certain thought. And if you see that it didn’t go well, then you try to remember that. So the next time that feeling comes up, you can be mindful. Remind yourself, “Okay, don’t go there.” Then the question is, if you don’t go there, where else are you going to go? Well, you can stay right here with the breath. Make the breath comfortable. But what if you have to do something else? Well, ask yourself, “What would be the most skillful thing to do here?” See what ideas come up, and then you can test them with what you remember. We have such a storehouse of ordinary, common-sense knowledge, wisdom, that we don’t make use of because we get dazzled by some new defilement. Particularly the idea, “Well, if I have a particular feeling, this must be what I really feel. I’ve got to follow through with it.” That’s dangerous. The question should be, “Where is this going to go? Where is this going to lead me? How is it going to affect other people?” And you need as much mindfulness and alertness to keep yourself on the right course so you can refrain yourself from unskillful ideas, unskillful actions, and channel your ingenuity into finding something that’s more skillful. So this is why I say, “Don’t go there.” In resting the mind this way, it’s not just rest, but it’s developing the qualities you’re going to need in order to manage your mind better, to realize that your actions do make a difference, and those differences are important. And if you really care for yourself and care for other people, you want to remember what’s skillful and what’s not, and how if an unskillful intention comes up, how you can say no. If a skillful intention comes up, how you can say yes, even if it seems difficult. Realizing that in the long run, it’s all for the better, and there’ll come a time when you really are glad that you said no to the unskillful and yes to the skillful. That’s something else you want to remember because it’s easy to forget. So the food of meditation is like that kind of health food that tastes really good. It tastes good and it’s good for you. You’re not just indulging in a little moment of pleasure, but you’re also developing good strengths of mind. So use your mindfulness, use your alertness to protect whatever sense of stillness you can find inside, and give it a chance. Give it a chance to grow because that becomes your foundation, becomes a source of strength. So when it’s difficult to say no or it’s difficult to say yes, you have the strength to draw on, both while you’re sitting here trying to work with the breath and as you go through the rest of the day. Because the strengths you develop in the mind don’t get left here when you finish meditating. It’s like exercising the body. Whatever strengths you build into the body, you can have to use for other activities as well, not just down at the gym. So use this opportunity to develop this center that you can maintain, and all the strengths of mind that go into protecting it. Because they’re going to protect you from doing unskillful things and enable you to do the skillful things that make life a lot better.

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