Give Peace a Chance

April 18, 2011

The world changes so much. Sometimes the changes are so great that it seems like one world has replaced another, and the old world is something you can never go back to. But even with lesser changes, we find that the mind has a pretty bumpy ride, as long as we’re riding along in the world. That’s why we come to the Dhamma, to find something that’s steady and unchanging. Because that’s the only way any true happiness can be found. As the Buddha once said, “There is no happiness other than peace.” And over the centuries, people have felt uncomfortable with that. And they’d say, “Well, there is no happiness higher than peace.” But he says, “No, no happiness other than peace.” Because it’s only when the mind can stay with something for a while that has any sense of well-being at all. And the happiness we find in the changing things of the world, or the things that we can hold on to at least for a little bit, a little sense of settling down, then of course it’s gone. And we take that to be a normal part of happiness. It comes and it goes. But the Buddha’s saying, “No, no happiness other than peace.” No, the happiness lies in the staying. And as soon as it goes, that’s turned into something else. So we try to find something that gives us some stability. And he offers us the path. Now, the path itself is not the goal. It’s not the true happiness we’re looking for. But it takes us there. And it uses happiness as part of its path. It’s right there in concentration, giving rise to a sense of well-being, giving rise even to a sense of a rapture. That’s our nourishment as we follow the path. The Buddha compares it to stores of food in a fortress, the soldiers or the effort that we make, the gatekeeper who tries to protect the fortress. That’s mindfulness. Notice that mindfulness is not just accepting whatever comes up and being okay with it. The Buddha compares mindfulness to a gatekeeper. The gatekeeper has to know who you let in and who you don’t let in, who’s reliable and who’s not reliable. And then the soldiers, of course, have to defend the fortress from any kind of attack. But it’s a sense of well-being that comes from concentration. That’s what keeps the gatekeeper and the soldiers going. Without that source of food, they’d run out of energy. So this is where we have to work on a sense of well-being and learn how to work with a sense of well-being so you don’t turn it into just another chore. Learn how to sit still for a second and appreciate whatever well-being there can be, just by sitting still, allowing the breath to come in and out. With as few restrictions as possible. Notice where the well-being is. It may be in areas that you might not have noticed before. A little sense of fullness in the parts of the body that are not tensed up as the blood fills the vessels there. Notice that and let the breath flow smoothly around that. Without adding any extra constriction, any restrictions, any limitations. Allowing things to be for a while. In the parts of the body that do seem to be restricted, allow them to open up and breathe in a way that doesn’t keep them restricted or tight. You’ll find that when you can do this, the mind does gain a greater sense of not only well-being but also a sense of nourishment, a sense of strength. It can begin to settle down and have its own space here so that it doesn’t have to keep riding the rocky road of the world with all its ups and downs. So give the breath some space, give your mind some space. And as for all your other concerns, right now just let them go. There are things we do have to think about, things we do have to plan for, but you have to have a sense of time and place. And right now is the time to give the mind some nourishment. It’s like knowing that you want to travel someplace. But you’ve got to stop, find a place where you can find some food. And even though there’s part of the mind that says, “Well, you’ve got to get going,” well, you can’t get going if you’re out of food, if you’re out of nourishment. So you take time off from the trip. It may seem like a waste of time, but no, it’s not. It’s an essential part of moving forward, stopping here, giving the mind some rest. This is where the path is very different from a physical path. You don’t have to walk from here, say, to Palomar or from here to any other place. You’re walking deeper and deeper inside. And for inside to open up, you have to give it a sense of well-being. There are parts of the mind that are suspicious. There are parts of the mind that are resistant. They have their own agendas, their own beliefs. And they may not trust you, the current you. Remember, you’ve got lots of yous in there, and some of them are really resistant to this path. They’d prefer their old ways of looking for happiness. So you’ve got to win them over. And one way is just being really gentle with the breath, being really gentle with the mind right now as you get it to settle down. Anything unskillful comes up. Notice it and just let it go. And if it wants to hang around, well, it’ll hang around, but you don’t have to get involved. Remind yourself of that. Just because thoughts are looking in the mind and keep popping up here and popping up there, doesn’t mean that you have to get involved with them all the time. You’re trying to develop your sense of well-being. This is your food you’re feeding on right now. So you protect your food to make sure that the unskillful thoughts don’t come up and just steal it away. But otherwise, you don’t have to get involved with them. You know they’re there, but you just know it enough to be wary of them. But you don’t have to get involved right now. Right now is your time for settling in, settling down. We have to have a sense of time and place in our practice. Those standards the Buddha gave for speaking apply to the mind as well, to the perceptions of the mind, the thoughts of the mind. Is it true? Is it beneficial? And is this the right time and place? Just because something is true doesn’t mean it’s necessarily beneficial. And just because it’s beneficial in some way or another doesn’t mean that you have to deal with it right now. You have to learn how to put certain things off. Have a sense of priorities. You have to remind yourself that your inner strength, your ability to cope with these things, depends on your finding a sense of nourishment inside. As the Buddha said, all beings subsist on food. And he’s not talking just about physical food. The mind needs its food as well. It feeds on sensory contact, it feeds on the act of consciousness itself, and it feeds on your intentions. So what kind of food are you giving it? When we’re working here with the breath, we’re working with good intentions, healthy intentions, healthy food—something that really is nourishing, that really does strengthen you. So right now is the time to feed, to settle in. There are two common images. One is that of the mind. One’s concentration is food for the mind, the other is a home for the mind. In fact, it’s all four requisites. It’s clothing for the mind. It keeps you protected. And it’s medicine for the mind. It heals the wounds, many of which are self-inflicted. So as you allow the mind to settle down and have a sense of well-being, you give the body a sense that it has space to just open up. It doesn’t have to tense itself up to help you with your thinking, which often happens. The body does that. When you’re thinking about something, especially if it’s long and complicated, all these patterns of tension will build up in different parts of the body. This is why they say that mental work is often more taxing than physical work. Because you have these little markers in your body for each little thought. Each marker is a little bit of tension, a little bit of tightness, squeezing the energy there as a marker to yourself. If your body is just filled with markers like this, no wonder it’s going to get sick. No wonder it’s going to feel tired, exhausted. Even just sitting and thinking, you can get tired. So now’s the time to think one thing and allow all those other markers just to be cleared out. Breathe through them. Think of any tightness in your nerves or tightness in your blood vessels. Of course, the nerves don’t have tightness, but if the image you hold in your mind is of them opening up, who knows? You’re opening something up that’s useful. There are also those little tiny muscles in your blood vessels. Think of all of them relaxing. So every part of the body is receiving its share of the blood. Every part of the mind is receiving its share of well-being and ease. So you can really settle down and have this sense of peace, a place where you can really stay for long periods of time without having to be constantly tensed up and ready to jump. This is what smooths out the patterns. This is a much better path to follow than the path of the world, which has all of its ups and downs and its bumpy parts and its open chasms. This is a path that is smooth and walkable. It’s not always easy, but the hard parts are actually easy. The path itself is all made of good things, everything from right view all the way to right concentration. It’s all good stuff. Think of it as food. It’s good, nourishing food. It’s medicine. It’s really effective medicine as a home. It’s a really comfortable home, protected from most of the storms of the world. And the place it leads to is totally safe. It’s a refuge, a harbor. As the Buddha said, it’s the ultimate happiness. He wasn’t promising just the ability to accept things or to be equanimous about things. He was saying total, unlimited freedom or total, unlimited happiness, the deathless. That’s where the true happiness is. It’s in a space beyond space and time, a dimension beyond space and time. It’s a space that nothing can touch. And that’s why it is true happiness. There’s nothing to disturb it at all. So that’s where we’re headed. And even though the path may have its ups and downs, as we keep switching back and forth between the path of the world and the path the Buddha taught, still we find that the part of the path that he recommends is the path of true happiness, especially in right concentration. We can get at least a taste of a much better happiness than what the world has to offer, something more continuous, something more reliable. And even though it’s not the deathless, it’s a huge improvement over what we normally take for happiness. That’s a lot of what the Buddhist teachings are about, a re-education in happiness as to where true happiness lies. So take this time to explore the potentials you have right here. Rather than squeezing them out, give them some space so that your sense of the body as you feel from within really does become a really good place to stay. It gives rise to that sense of ease, pleasure, well-being, fullness, refreshment, rapture. Let food, medicine, shelter, clothing for the mind.

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