Meditators Without Borders

April 17, 2012

Begin the meditation with those thoughts we chanted just now. “May I be happy. May all living beings be happy.” That’s an important part of our motivation for being here. We’re looking for happiness that doesn’t cause other beings to suffer. Most of the forms of pleasure and happiness in the world create divisions where either you gain and someone else loses, or they gain and you lose. Or you may trade gains and losses. But here’s a happiness that doesn’t create boundaries, something really worth developing. It’s a happiness that comes from within. That’s our motivation. Once we’re clear on the motivation, the next step is to get to work, to do the various techniques that allow the mind to settle down. Focus on your breath. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? It’s not the air coming in and out, but the movement of energy in the body that allows the air to come in and to go out. Where do you feel that movement? You might want to breathe really deeply for a while to feel the movement throughout your torso. And if deep breathing feels good, stick with it. Try to settle down, to calm down, to find a rhythm that feels nice, that feels that you could maintain it for a while. You may find that this is going to require some fine-tuning as the needs of the body change. But try to find a way of breathing that feels either refreshing when you’re feeling tired or calming when you’re feeling tense. If you want, you can use a meditation word to go along with the breathing. But in, toe out. Butto means awake. But in, toe out. But if you find you can stay with the breathing, you can drop the meditation word so you can look more carefully at how the breathing feels. And if the mind wanders off, bring it back. Each time it wanders off, bring it back again. This is not a time to let the mind wander as it likes. This is a time to actually develop some qualities of mind, the qualities that will allow you to see for yourself what’s going on inside, and to step back from whatever thoughts would come in and pull you away. This requires mindfulness, which is the ability to keep something in mind. Like right now, you’re going to keep the breath in mind. And there’s alertness, watching to see how the breath feels, and also watching to see your mind. Is your mind staying with the breath? If it’s not, as soon as you catch it wandering off, bring it back and reward it each time you come back with a really nice breath. I was talking this evening with a psychologist who was saying that they’ve done some studies about how people develop habits, and one of the very quickest and easiest ways to develop a new habit is to set up a system of immediate rewards. So you want to make it more habitual for the mind to come back, so reward it each time it comes back with a really nice breath, something that feels really gratifying. If you get angry with the mind for wandering off, it’s going to wander further away. So be very patient but firm. That’s called ardency, the quality of mindfulness. It’s a skill that we’re trying to master. Everything in the Buddhist teachings is a skill. Even the teachings that sound more like philosophical ideas are actually strategies for thinking that help in training the mind. An important part of the strategies is knowing when to think them and when to put them aside. Right now, there’s only one thought you want to hold in mind, and that’s the thought of needing to stay with the breath and trying to make it comfortable, to help it settle down. When the breath starts feeling comfortable, think of that sense of ease and comfort spreading throughout the body. The more sensitive you are to how the breath energy flows in the body, the easier it’s going to be to allow that sense of comfort to spread. It’s like opening up a new road. Once there’s the new road, then the traffic can flow freely. So think of all the nerves in your body as being breath channels. The energy of the breath can flow anywhere in the nervous system, all the way out to the pores of your skin, out to the tips of the fingers, out to the tips of the toes, all around. Try to make this sense of the body as you experience it from within the only thing you’re really interested in right now. If you find the thoughts wandering back to the past, remind yourself the past is gone. If they wander off to the future, remind yourself you don’t really know what’s going to happen in the future. What you do know is that you’re going to need good qualities of mind to deal with whatever comes up. You’ll need mindfulness. You’ll need alertness. You’ll need this quality of ardency. Preparing for the future is to get back here into the present moment and work on these qualities. Stay with the breath. Watch over the breath. That’s the most responsible thing you can be doing right now. And it turns out it’s also pleasant. Sometimes we talk about working with the breath. Sometimes we talk about playing with the breath. The basic idea being that this is work that’s enjoyable. It’s a form of play that actually gives benefits. You’re not just fooling around. It’s like a person who picks up a guitar, plays with the guitar, and after a while learns how to play the guitar in a way that gives enjoyment for lots of people. Because as you develop these skills, you’re not the only one who’s going to benefit. The Buddha gives the analogy of two acrobats. One acrobat standing on the shoulders of another one. And the acrobat below, who’s the teacher, tells his student, “Okay, now you look out after me and I’ll look out after you, and that way we’ll perform our tricks and come down standing on the end of a bamboo pole.” And the student, standing on his shoulder, says, “No, that’s not going to work at all. I have to look after myself, you look after yourself, and that way we’ll protect each other. We’ll be able to perform our tricks and come down safely from the pole.” And the Buddha said, “In that case, the student was right.” But when you’re training the mind like this, the benefits work both ways. When you’re being kind to others, when you’re showing your good will and compassion, you benefit too. When you’re being generous, you benefit. When you’re observing the precepts and trying not to harm others, you benefit as well. And at the same time, when you’re developing good qualities of mind, that means there’s going to be less greed, less aversion, less delusion coming out in your words and deeds. That makes life better for the people around you, easier for the people around you. So again, this is one of those skills that gives its benefits without a lot of boundaries. It spreads the benefits around. So once there’s a sense of comfortable breathing and you can allow that sense of comfort to spread through the body, the next step is simply to protect that, to maintain that. What can you do to keep it going as long as possible? There’ll be a part of the mind that, once you can do that, says, “Okay, I’ve done that. What’s next?” And what’s next is learning how to maintain it. That’s a separate skill. That means dealing with any other thoughts that come up and say, “Okay, you’ve rested enough now,” or “I’m bored. I want to do something else.” You have to learn how not to identify with those thoughts. That’s an important skill. Seeing that just because a thought pops into your head doesn’t mean that you have to deal with it, or you have to take it on, or you have to identify with it. It’s just a thought that’s there. You can watch it as an event, something that comes and something that goes. You don’t have to decide whether it’s true or false. The question right now is, is this the right time and place for that? Take the principles that the Buddha once used or said that he used to decide what to say and what not to say. These were the principles that governed all of his speech. The first one is, “Is it true?” If it wasn’t true, then he wouldn’t say it. If it was true, then he’d go to the next test, “Is this beneficial?” There are a lot of true things that are not particularly beneficial, so you drop those. If it was true and beneficial, then the next step would be, “Is this the right time and place for this?” And it’s good to apply these same principles to your thoughts. There are a lot of things that can come through your mind that you know are true. It may even be beneficial. But the question is, are they beneficial right now? You’re working on training the mind in mindfulness, alertness, and training to be right here. So the thoughts can just go. One way to help them go by without getting all entangled is to see them simply as events. Something came into the mind, and something will pass away. You’re under no obligation to take it on. And when you can deal this way with random thoughts that come into the course of your meditation, you find you can transpose the skill over to other times in life when thoughts come along that really weigh you down. Thoughts that have you worried. Thoughts that have you upset. You can learn how to step back from those too, even though they may be screaming in your ears that you’ve got to worry about this, you’ve got to get upset about this, you’ve got to whatever. You can realize, “I can step back from those thoughts. I don’t have to suffer from them.” You deal with them when it’s the right time and place to deal with them, but when they’re just harassing you, you just let them go. That’s one of the most important skills you can learn, because the suffering that really weighs down the mind, the stress that really weighs down the mind, is not what comes from outside. It’s what the mind does to itself. And taking on thoughts that serve no purpose, or that serve a purpose but it’s not worth the effort and the suffering that goes into them. So you’re learning some of the really essential skills for learning how not to cause yourself to suffer. Again, this is not a selfish thing, or you’re not the only one who’s going to benefit from it. If you’re not carrying huge weights around, then when you see someone else shouldering a burden that they can’t quite manage, you can help them. But if you’re all burdened down with the fact that the workers on the docks in Bangkok used to carry these huge bags of rice or huge bags of whatever on their shoulders, bent over, if that’s your position, then you’re in no position to help other people. But if you’re not weighing yourself down with unnecessary thoughts, unnecessary suffering inside, you have more strength to help others. So again, this is a happiness that spreads its benefits around, a skill that spreads its benefits around. You become a meditator without borders. I mean, you know boundaries. You know what’s appropriate and what’s not appropriate. But in terms of the benefits that come from meditation, they’re not bounded at all.

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