The Brightness of the Dhamma, the Darkness of the World

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When you establish mindfulness, you’re doing two things at once. On the one hand, you’re trying to keep focused on the breath. If that’s your frame of reference, then that’s the one we’re going to work on right now. And you bring certain qualities to that. You want to be alert to the breath, what it’s doing. And you want to be mindful. In other words, keep in mind the fact that you’re going to stay with the breath, and also keep in mind the fact that you’re going to be working with the breath. Because there’s a third quality called ardency. It’s basically the desire to avoid unskillful mental states. So when you’re being mindful, it’s not simply a matter of watching whatever comes and goes. You’re actually encouraged to give rise to skillful states and maintain them once you’ve got them. That’s a way of fending off unskillful states. So there are a lot of recommendations on how to breathe. Breathe in a way that gives rise to a rapture. Breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure. Breathe in a way that calms the processes of the body. It’s usually a good idea to energize things first, because if you just sit here getting calmer and calmer and calmer, it’s very easy to just drift off. So in the beginning, take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths and try to breathe in a way that refreshes the body, gives you energy. Not nervous energy, but a sense of energy that you can maintain, that strengthens you. It gives you a great sense of well-being. That’s going to involve experimenting with different ways of breathing and experimenting with different places where you’re going to focus. So these are some of the things you want to keep in mind. That you want to be alert to the breath and that there are things to be done with the breath, things to be done with the mind. That’s the main activity we’re engaged in here. But in order to stay engaged here, you have to learn how to, as the Buddha says, “subdue greed and distress with reference to the world.” In other words, you have to see the drawbacks of anything that comes up in the mind that’s going to pull you away. Greed covers all the things that you go to because you like them. Distress covers all the things you fasten on because you’re upset or unhappy about something, disturbed about something. And this is why we have those chants on all the negative qualities of the world, on all the negative qualities of the body, on all the other things that you could be pulled away with, because you want to remind yourself that there’s not much to be found by abandoning your frame of reference here. Start fantasizing about it. Start fantasizing about bodies, your bodies or somebody else’s. And remember to include in the fantasy, okay, there’s lymph, and there’s pus, and there’s blood, and all the other parts we chanted about just now. And on top of that, the Buddha has you reflect on the fact that the body is subject to all kinds of diseases. Whatever part of the body you’ve got, you name the part, there are going to be diseases that are connected with that part. Of course, the body gets old, gets sick. Remember this aspect as well. As for things outside, the Buddha has you reflect on the fact that you can’t take them with you. And even while they’re here in the world, they don’t really belong to you, in the sense that you can’t say, “May this never deteriorate. May this never fall into anybody else’s hands unless I’m willing.” Things don’t know that they belong to you. And there’s going to be separation at one point. What you’re left with, of course, is regret if it’s something you really liked, a sense of being deprived. On the other hand, there’s also all the unskillful things you’ve done in order to get those pleasures. The pleasures you’ve had over the past six months, in terms of sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations. Okay, where are those pleasures now? They’re gone. And then think about the things you did in order to gain those pleasures. Sometimes they were very unskillful. That’s what you’ve got left, the karma. And then, as in that chant we had just now, the world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. You have to leave everything behind. And then finally, as the Buddha said, the world is a slave to craving. Whatever you get in the world, it’s under that push of that slavery. Everywhere we go, as the Buddha said, we go with craving as our companion. Everywhere you look in the world, the fact that you’re going for something, you’re trying to hold on to something, there’s going to be craving buried in there. And as we all know, where there’s craving, there’s going to be stress and suffering. Now, the Buddha’s reflections on these things are one of the reasons why he’s been branded as a pessimist. He’s not just trying to badmouth the world. He’s trying to remind you that when you’re training the mind, trying to develop good qualities of the mind, anything that would pull you away back into the world has a lot of drawbacks. And when you reflect on these things, then it makes it easier to put them aside. This is why when he gives instructions on breath meditation, like the time he gave instructions to his son Rahula, he sometimes prefaces it, prefaces the topic of breath meditation with these other reflections. Reflections on the drawbacks of the body, reflections on the drawbacks of the world. So you realize that there’s no reason to go wandering off anywhere else. The potential for true happiness doesn’t lie in that direction. It’s just the potential for disappointment again and again and again. And so you’re going to ask yourself, “Have you had enough?” This makes it a lot easier to go wandering off, to turn to the work that’s involved in establishing mindfulness and working on the path. Because, after all, the path does involve work. I heard someone once say that it’s perfectly natural. The path is just a path of letting go. It’s like you’ve been holding something in your fist. It’s just so natural to let go. The unclenched fist is more relaxing than the clenched fist. It’s more natural. I don’t know anybody whose fist remains totally unclenched except for a dead person. As long as you’re alive, you’re going to be holding on to things and letting go. And it’s the same with the path. There are certain things you hold on to, certain things you let go of. And these practices of mindfulness that are meant to lead to concentration, those are some of the things you hold on to, just as you hold on to the precepts. You try to hold on to the right view, even though other wrong views come up in the mind, views that would pull you away. And they’re wrong because they lead not to happiness but to disappointment. When these things come up, you can’t say, “Okay, they’ll be my view for the time being.” You’ve got to remind yourself there are the drawbacks to those kinds of views. You’ve got to let them go. Hold on to the right view. That’s the practice of restraint. Restraint lets you look at and let you listen to, which doesn’t mean you go around with blinders on all the time. It’s simply that you try to pay attention to why you’re looking at something and you find yourself looking at it out of greed or out of aversion or out of lust. You either try to find another reason to look or you try to find another reason to listen. Or another way to look, in other words, a way that would cut through any greed or aversion or lust. Or you don’t look. Because if you allow the mind to wander around under the power of its greed, aversion, and delusion as you go through the day, then it’s going to be harder to get it to settle down. Because you’ve been teaching it that things of the world are really desirable, they’re really nice. Then you sit down to meditate. Part of the mind keeps saying, “The things of the world are really desirable. Why are you focusing on the breath? There’s all these other things you can think about and fantasize about and plan for.” You’ve got to remember, the state of concentration is something really valuable. You’ve really got to protect it. A similar principle goes with the other side of restraint, in other words, being restrained in what you say. For the monks, we practice restraint not because we’re trying to impress other people. Because if you let the mind wander around in all kinds of other topics about the world, it’s very hard to stop it when you come to meditate. You’ve been thinking about something, talking about it, and even though the mouth may be stopping, your inner mouth keeps on chattering. So you try to think about what impact your words have on you and on the people around you. Because remember, we’re in a community where people try to meditate. And even if we’re in a community where people aren’t trying to meditate, you want to be careful about the impact of your words on those people, the people around you. It doesn’t help to get them all stirred up with greed, aversion, and delusion, too. So remember, there are these two sides to the practice, the side where you’re focusing your attention on qualities that give rise to a sense of well-being in the mind, and the other side where you’ve got to protect what you’re doing here and you’ve got to fend off all your old habits. So you do what you can to weaken those old habits. It’s only then that the mindfulness can develop into a good, solid state of concentration, and the concentration can become a good foundation for looking deeper into the mind to see where the roots of greed, aversion, and delusion come from and what you can do to get beyond their power. Because even though the Buddha has a lot of negative things to say about the world, he was not a pessimist. He said true happiness is possible and can be attained through human effort. Some people regard that as a burden. They would rather that human beings are just material beings that live and they can do what they want, basically, because everybody’s going to end someday. Everyone’s going to go up and smoke. So what you do doesn’t matter. That attitude, it’s funny they say, that’s the normal attitude. That’s about as pessimistic as you can get. Your life is meaningless. There’s no incentive to do anything good. People really believe that kind of thing. They can do all kinds of mischief, all kinds of harm. If you’re looking for pessimism, that’s where you look for pessimism. The Buddha’s perspective, though, was that through human effort you can find true happiness. So it may place the burden of responsibility on you, but it also places the opportunities that being responsible can attain right before you. There is a happiness that’s unconditioned. It can be found by following the path. That’s the Buddha’s good news. As for what might be called his bad news, as we reflect on the body and reflect on the drawbacks of the world, that’s just to make sure we don’t get deflected from making that good news our news, our own inner news, when we, at the very least, taste that deathless happiness, to try to order your life so that it can have a taste of that. That, as the John Fruin once said, is the brightness of the world, the brightness of the Dhamma.

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