A Funeral Meditation

October 4, 2012

Close your eyes. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Think thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is a wish for true happiness. You wish it for yourself and you wish it for all beings—people who are alive, people who are alive, wherever they’ve gone, where they all find happiness. And then bring your attention back to the breath. Notice when you breathe in where you feel the breathing. When you breathe out, where do you feel it? Does it feel comfortable? If it feels comfortable, keep up that rhythm. If it doesn’t feel comfortable, you can change. You can try longer or shorter, deeper or more shallow, heavier or lighter. The purpose is to give the mind a good place to settle down in the present moment. And if it’s not comfortable, it’s not going to want to stay. Why are we in the present moment? There are lots of reasons. One is because all the choices we make in your life are being made right here. You want to be aware of what those choices are. At the same time, when someone has passed away, how are you going to communicate with them? It’s only through the quality of your mind. You can’t send a letter. You can’t call them up. But there is this current of the mind, and these currents can be felt. Especially if someone has recently passed away, they’re very sensitive to these currents. So what kind of current do you want to send? Do you want to send a good one? This is why it’s traditional that we make merit when someone has passed away. We do something good because that’s what shores up the mind at a time when it’s felt a great loss. There’s a passage in the Canon where Sariputta, one of the closest disciples, has passed away. Ananda, another close disciple, hears the news and goes and reports it to the Buddha. He comments that when he heard that Sariputta had passed away, it was as if he’d lost his sense of north and south, east and west. The directions were all a blur. And the Buddha asked him, “When Sariputta died, did he take virtue with him? Did he take concentration? Did he take discernment? Did he take the good things of life away?” In other words, the good things we can do with our minds. No, he didn’t. Those are still here. The quality of generosity, the quality of virtue, the quality of a good mind, these are all still in the world. And these are things that we can develop still. So we do this to put our minds in a good mood, and then we extend that current to those who have passed away. This way, even though death has intervened, it reminds us that death is not the end. As long as the mind still has the desire to keep on getting born again, it’ll keep getting born again. And so when someone has passed away, you want to send some good energy in their direction, because they’re settling into a new place. So in this way you do good for yourself, you do good for the world around you, you do good for the people who have passed away. Some people say that meditation is a selfish activity because you’re just focusing on your own mind and your own breath, looking after your own mind. But that’s not the case. As I said, the mind has these currents. Sometimes they come out in our words, in our actions. Sometimes it’s just the current itself that can be felt. And when your mind’s in good shape, you’re in a much better position to do the right thing, say the right thing, think the right thing. And when you give in less to your own greed, aversion, delusion, your own grief, or whatever, you benefit, the people around you benefit as well. So you want to look for this source of internal strength. Because this hasn’t been taken away, this is still here. So take some time now. Be with your breath. When the breath starts feeling comfortable, it’s important that you start spreading your range of awareness in the body. Think of the whole body breathing in. Every cell is energized by the energy of the breath, all the way down to the tips of your toes. And as for any thoughts that come in, just let them go, let them go. Because this kind of breath energy, this kind of breathing, is healing for the body, it’s healing for the mind. And all the wounds that the mind has in terms of the events of the world around us, events that touch us very closely, we need to know how to heal the mind. Again, so that quality of the mind is something that’s nourishing for us and can’t help but spill out and nourish the people around us. Whether they’re physically near or physically far away, the people who are near to our hearts can pick up on the quality of this energy. So try to create a good energy in the mind and think of it spreading out to fill the whole body. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, if there’s any tension or tightness anywhere in the body, go through and make a survey. Let it relax, relax. Unwind. Then as good energy fills the body, you can think of it radiating out as far as you can imagine. And that’s your gift to the world. It’s your gift to yourself, your gift to the people that you love. Realizing that it’s been a long, long time that we’ve been going from life to life to life, as the Buddha said, it’s very hard to meet someone who hasn’t been your mother, hasn’t been your father, hasn’t been your daughter, your son. They’re all around us. And when the meditation ends, you can look at yourself in the mirror. Think thoughts of goodwill for everyone, from your own sense of well-being. So again, the greater a sense of well-being you can create with the breath in the mind right now, the more you have to offer at the end of the meditation.

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