The Gift of Ardency

November 10, 2012

Today has been a busy day. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day. So let’s take some time right now to get some of this busyness out of the mind. Focus on your breath. Take a few good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. And notice if long breathing feels good. If it does, keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change. That’s all you have to do. You have no other responsibilities right now, nowhere else you have to go, nothing else you have to think about. This is your only duty right now, and it’s a duty that’s not imposed on you from outside. The only thing that’s imposing it is the stress that comes when the mind overworks itself and thinks lots of needless thoughts about lots of needless topics. Here’s a topic where you can settle in so the mind can be simply aware of itself in the present moment in its own action. You can judge, “Is the mind settling down?” If not, what can you do to change? You might change the breath. Make it shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Or you may find that the problem is with the mind. It’s not willing to settle down. It’s got some other issue that’s eating away at it, or it’s eating away at the issue. If that’s the case, remind yourself that’s nothing you have to think about right now. What’s going to happen tomorrow will happen tomorrow. There’s no need to plan for it right now. What’s happened today is done and gone. What you’ve got to do right now is heal the mind from whatever wounds it’s picked up from your own greed, aversion, and delusion during the day. And to prepare the qualities it’s going to need tomorrow to look after itself so that it doesn’t wound itself again. So if you’re feeling upset about something that somebody else did or said today, that’s why we had the chance on goodwill just now, the chance on equanimity. Spread goodwill to that person. You have some goodwill for yourself. And realize that you can’t go back and change the past. So learn how to have some equanimity about what’s happened. If you’re feeling tired right now, here’s a good place to stay and regain some energy and breathe in a way that feels energizing. Because you can choose the way you breathe. It’s one of the few bodily processes that you can change voluntarily. So take advantage of that fact. In fact, if you’re finding yourself bored with the breath, realize that the breath can have a huge impact on the body. So it’s not something you want to be bored with. Try to explore what kind of impact it’s having on the mind right now, what kind of impact it’s having on the body. And if you’re not sure, well, you can change things and notice what a change in the breath will do for the body and mind. So here’s something to explore. Have the kind of nervous energy that just keeps wanting to think about things regardless. No specific issue, but just the energy that likes to think, “Well, I’ll use that energy right here with the breath.” When you breathe in, where do you feel the breathing? And is the breathing limited only to that spot? Or can you feel more subtle energies in the body that accompany the breath? Those are called breath energies as well. These things can flow in any of the nerves of the body, around any of the bones. They can flow from the blood vessels all the way out to the pores in any part of the body. So try to notice what you feel in the different parts of the body. Try to expand your awareness. Either go through the body section by section, or think of the whole body all at once, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. See what you notice. So even though you are thinking and analyzing the present moment, at least you’re here in the present moment and you’re here in the body. That’s what matters, because that’s where the mind can gain some rest. If we’re to go thinking about things in the past and the future, you have to create thought worlds. That takes energy. Sometimes our thought worlds are useful, and sometimes they’re just totally useless. We’ve learned that they have some uses, and so we just keep churning them out, churning them out. It’s like knowing that your car can take you places when you leave the engine on. So you leave the engine on all day and just keep running the motor, regardless of whether you really need to go anywhere or plan to go anywhere. It’s a huge waste. What you want to do is train the mind so that if it’s not thinking about anything that’s really helpful or useful, you can bring it back here into the present moment and let it rest, let it regain its strength. When you do this, you’re giving a gift to yourself and a gift to the people around you. You’ll become less a victim of your own greed, aversion, and delusion, and the people around you are not victimized either. So this is something where you’re giving. Many of us, all too many of us, come to the meditation thinking about what we can get out of the meditation. But it’s good to remind yourself that if you’re going to gain anything from the meditation, you have to come to it with a giving attitude. A lot of the jhans in Thailand say that the practice is just one thing all the way through. And part of that one thing is the spirit of giving. You’ll be seeing this in large measure tomorrow. Vigatan is a day of giving, all kinds of things. Giving things, giving energy, giving ideas, giving help, giving helping hands, giving hand here, helping hand there. It’s all voluntary. You give of your time. And it’s very directly related to the practice of meditation. Because if you come to the meditation with an attitude of giving, seeing the happiness that comes from giving, you’ll be less likely to fret about meditating for a whole hour and not thinking that you got anything out of it. Think of this as a chance to give to your own mind, to give to other people. You’re trying to train the mind. If you catch any little bit of greed, aversion, and delusion and are able to let it go, at least for the time being, that’s developing a good habit. And if you keep at it, that habit will become not just something newly imposed, but it’ll become something more and more ingrained. So even if the meditation doesn’t go quite as well as you’d like it, it’s still better than not meditating at all. And there’s always something to give. Some people complain, “Oh, I meditated for a whole hour and didn’t get anything out of it.” It’s because they didn’t give anything. You give your time, you give your energy. There’s a quality that the Buddha calls ardency, which is an important part of the practice where you really try to do it well. So you’re not just going through the motions of the mind. That means trying and trying and trying again. And if you begin to notice that things are going well, you try to maintain them. If they’re not, you try to figure out what’s wrong. It’s basically either something’s wrong with the breath or there’s something going on in the mind. When you notice there’s something going on in the mind, it’s good to think of it as not just one mind. Lots of minds are in there. One mind may be willing to stay with the meditation and another mind may want to think about something else, anything. And here’s your chance to decide which mind you want to identify with right now. You’ve thought about who knows how many things so far. How about thinking about meditating, giving it a try, and giving it more of a try than you’ve given in the past? So it’s this quality of energy, the ardency, that really keeps you on track in the meditation, turns it into a skill. And it’s through this quality of ardency that you learn to develop discernment. It’s not that by making the mind still, great insights will come in and you can totally trust them. That’s not how discernment comes. I mean, there will be sudden things coming into the mind because it is settled down. And when it’s settled down, feeling it is, it’s more open to things lying beneath the surface coming up. But not everything that’s beneath the surface is trustworthy. Some of it’s old swamp gas. But the way you learn about things, the way you learn whether something really is trustworthy or not, is if you gain an insight which gives you some idea of what you might be doing in the meditation right now, and then you put it to the test. Actually try it out. Look at what kind of results you get. If the results are good, okay, you’ve learned something really valuable. If they’re not good, you’ve learned something valuable as well, that that particular idea wasn’t going to work out. This is how discernment develops, through trial and error, through doing, through this quality of ardency. So give a little ardency to your practice. The techniques are here. The body’s here. The breath is here. What makes the difference is the ardency. It’s a gift that’s good for you and good for everybody around you. Look at all the forms of merit that the Buddha recommends. There’s generosity, there’s virtue, and there’s meditation. There are all ways of giving yourself happiness that don’t have boundaries. When you’re generous, your happiness spreads around to other people. When you’re virtuous, you can abstain from unskillful actions. There’s a sense of well-being that comes from seeing that you have stopped harming people and stopped harming yourself. And you’re not the only one who gains a sense of well-being. The other people who are not being harmed are also better off. And the same with the meditation. You gain and other people gain. It’s very rare in this world to find a type of happiness where everybody gains. Jon Swart was once told by a man at a retreat that he was teaching, “This Buddhism you guys have here would be really good if you had a god to sort of ensure that things were going to be okay.” And Jon Swart responded, “If there were a god in this world who could decree that by my taking a mouthful of food, everybody else in the world would become full, I’d bow down to that god.” In other words, look at the way the world is designed. You gain something, somebody else loses. You eat, somebody loses. If you don’t eat, you lose. As Mark Twain once said, this is a world that was obviously designed with intelligence but no compassion, if there is an intelligent designer. But the Buddha was able to find that there are forms of happiness where everybody gains. And those are the ones that are really worth pursuing. So here you’ve got a chance, a whole hour, where you have nothing to do but not think, except for the breath. Think about the breath. Be ardent in trying to really focus on the breath. That’s an excellent gift.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2012/121110_The_Gift_of_Ardency.mp3>