Keep Goodness Going

May 18, 2013

Jhansu Wata often used to say that when you start to meditate, you have to put yourself in the right mood. And the right mood here means being confident that this is something really good that we’re doing here, something really important, so it demands your full attention. And also that you can do it. All the Buddhist teachings are aimed at human beings. With human capabilities. And they’re aimed at taking people who have greed, aversion, and delusion, people who are suffering from sorrow, despair, and teaching them how they can find within themselves the strengths and the abilities to overcome that greed, aversion, and delusion and to gain total release from the suffering and despair. So these are teachings that are meant for us. They’re designed for us to practice. And they’re aimed at all the issues in life that so many other teachings tend to avoid talking about. Aging, illness, death, the sufferings of life, separation from those we love. Some people accuse the Buddha of being a bad pessimist because he talks about these things, but he’s actually a doctor, like a doctor. In fact, he says he’s like a doctor. When you go to see the doctor and the doctor asks you, “Where does it hurt? What’s the problem?” You don’t accuse him of being a pessimist. Remember, that’s why you’re there. When the doctor has a cure for a particular problem, he will talk very openly about that problem. The diseases that doctors don’t like to talk about are the ones that they don’t have a cure for. So we’re doing something important, we’re doing something noble here to train our minds. Instead of letting ourselves be the victim of the sorrows and despairs of our regular life, we’ve decided that we’re going to take the initiative to find a way out of that. When there’s separation, there’s a way out. We’ve had it in the past couple days. We’re also doing this for other people, the people who’ve passed away. And John Lee talks a lot about the currents of the mind. As you’re sitting here with your mind, thinking, there’s an energy that’s given off. And people who’ve passed away recently are very sensitive to this. After all, they’ve gone through a trauma, they’ve left this life. And so they’re very sensitive to the energies that are directed their way. So this is one way that we can help them, is to sit here and direct good energy, broadcast good energy toward them. What’s the good energy? The energy of a mind that’s settled down, a mind that is still, a mind that is alert, concentrated. And take goodwill as your object. Concentrate on that. A wish for happiness, a wish for true happiness. And try to spread it as far as you can. Start first with the people who you know are suffering right now, the people you want to help. Wish that they find true happiness. That means understanding the way to true happiness and being able to act on it. From there, you spread it all around. This is to benefit both you and other beings. On the one hand, it helps you realize that even though you may be suffering from sorrow right now, you don’t have to let yourself just lie there and think about the sorrow. The goodness of the people who’ve passed away, they didn’t take goodness out of the world with them. You’ve still got some of their goodness left within you, if you’ve been close to them. So bring that out. Remind yourself of the goodness that still is there. This is an important part of dealing with separation. Years back, when I was in school, I had to do an anthropology project studying funeral rites. And the lesson I learned was that there are two things. One is that you express your love and concern for the person who’s passed away. And you also remind yourself, though, that you have to make the break. They really are gone from here, this level, right now. That doesn’t mean that’s the end of your involvement with them. As long as there’s rebirth, as long as the mind has the seeds for rebirth, we’ll meet the people that we’ve been creating karma for. Karma with both good and bad. So in this interim, when there’s a separation, you wish them well. May they find the strength. May they find the opportunities to learn about the way to true happiness and find the strength to act on it. What help you can give right now is the strength of your own mind, the good currents of the mind. Doing things that you know are skillful, that you know are noble and helpful. This way you’re helping the person who’s passed away, and you’re also passing on some of their goodness to other people, too. The more goodness we can share, the more goodness we can spread around, the better. This is how human life is possible. It’s through the goodness, it’s through the goodwill we have for one another. So this is something you want to keep alive. So whatever beings there may be, may they be happy. If they’re suffering, may they be freed from their suffering. If they’re already happy, may they not be deprived of their happiness. Those are the first three of the Brahma-viharas, or the sublime attitudes. The fourth one focuses on the fact that each of us has his or her own karma. Separation is a fact of life. There come times, even when you’re with other people, even before they die, when you really can’t do anything for them. That’s when you have to develop equanimity, that you can’t do everything for them. There’s a lot that’s beyond your control. The reason we do this is so we can focus on what is within our control. It’s not hard-heartedness, it’s just a reality check. Just as in the common pattern of funeral observances, we express our goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy for those who’ve gone on. But then we also have to remind ourselves that we’ve crossed a threshold. There’s a separation here, and life has to go on. Our goodness has to go on. We can’t let that die. So this is another reason why we meditate, to give ourselves the strength and the inner nourishment that’s needed to keep our goodness alive. There’s a story in the canon where Sarabuddha passes away and Ananda comes with the news to the Buddha. He complains that when he heard of Sarabuddha’s death, he didn’t know what had hit him. He said it was like north and south were all mixed up. He lost his bearings. And the Buddha said, “When Sarabuddha died, did he take virtue away with him?” Well, no. “Did he take concentration? Did he take discernment away with him?” No. These things are still there in the world, the good things of the world. He didn’t take the path to the end of suffering away with him. That’s still in the world. All the good things that we need in order to find true happiness are still here. So we should always remind ourselves of that. And this path we’re following, this path of the breath, is the path to true happiness. And as I said earlier, it’s a path that we can do. It’s a path designed for human beings with weaknesses, so they can overcome their weaknesses. It’s a path for people who are suffering, so they can gain release from their suffering. So if you look in yourself and you find their weaknesses, if you look in yourself and find their suffering, well, this is the path for you.

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