A Fence for Freedom

June 19, 2013

The chants at the beginning of the evening are there to get you in the proper mood to meditate. We think about the pleasures of the world and how they’re all subject to aging, illness, and death. So if you look for happiness there, there’s going to be disappointment, there’s going to be suffering. So the question is, where do you look to find a happiness that’s more reliable? You look into your actions to see if you can act in a way that’s harmless and that can lead to something that’s more than action, something deeper inside. This is why we have the reflection on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to begin with, because the Buddha set that example that it is possible to find a true happiness that’s not dependent on conditions. It’s not subject to aging, illness, and death. And even though our actions don’t create that unconditioned happiness, that would be an impossibility. At least they can take us there. In the course of doing that, we find a happiness that doesn’t harm us, doesn’t harm anybody else. That’s what it means to look after yourself with ease, in the most profound sense of the term. So what are these actions that lead to happiness, that lead to a genuine happiness? The actions of the mind, particularly right now as we’re sitting here with our eyes closed, not saying anything. We’re keeping the precepts. We’re keeping our livelihood right. The factors of the path then have to do with training the mind. Right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. A lot of people don’t like to hear that there is an effort to be done in meditation. Just this last weekend when I was at that temple in North Carolina, there was a Thai man who was saying, “Well, if you really try to force the mind to settle down, doesn’t that create a lot of stress? And aren’t we trying to get rid of stress here?” Well, there is some stress that has to be endured in order to put an end to stress. The question is if you can learn how to be skillful in getting the mind to settle down so it’s not just confining it and making it feel trapped. You want to give the mind something it likes so that it stays here. This is why we work with the breath. The breath is the basic energy that helps keep the body alive. Here we’re talking now about the air coming in and out of the lungs so much as we’re talking about the energy flow in the body that, among other things, brings the air in and lets it go out. But as you get more sensitive to the body, you begin to realize there’s breath energy everywhere. And sometimes it has a sense that it’s flowing well, and other times it seems to be blocked. So that’s the work, looking into the breath energy of the body to make it a place where it’s nice to settle down. In Pali, this is called vittaka and vichara. It’s directed thought and evaluation. You keep directing your thought to the question of how can the breath remain comfortable, and then you work on various ways to make it comfortable. Once the basic in-and-out breathing feels comfortable, then you think of allowing that sense of comfort to spread throughout the different parts of the body. The more subtle breath energy is to flow. And that’s the work. The more care and attention you bring to the work, the better the results are going to be. John Lee has a couple of good images. One is that it’s like sifting flour. If you use a really coarse mesh, you get lumps of flour. But if you get everything really fine, you get flour of much higher quality. In other words, the more attention you bring to evaluating the breath, the more sensitive you are to even the little tiny bits of discomfort and how you can iron them out or smooth them out, you’re going to get a much nicer place to stay. So you’re working in comfort. The problem is, often as things begin to get comfortable with the breath, they begin to drift away. So you want to be aware of the whole body. As you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, try to keep that awareness as large as possible. In the beginning, you may want to go through the body section by section to familiarize yourself with how the breathing energy feels in different parts of the body. But after you’ve gone through the whole body—the abdomen, the front of the stomach, the lungs, your neck, your head, down the back, down the shoulders, down through the arms, down to the hips and the legs—if you’ve been around the body a couple times that way, then see if you can keep your awareness large so it fills the whole body. This way you can be centered but not feel trapped. The expansiveness of your awareness makes up for the fact that you’re not letting the mind wander around as it likes. This is a principle that holds throughout the practice. When monks are first ordained, they immediately feel chafed by the rules. They say, “You can’t do this, you can’t do that.” But then you begin to realize that the fact that you have these rules opens up large possibilities. You have the freedom throughout the day. You don’t have to work at making a living. You don’t have to worry about where tomorrow’s meal is going to come from. It’s because you have the rules that you’ve got the freedom to practice as much as possible. It’s the same with restraint of the senses. Normally we’d like to be able to look at and listen to and smell and taste and touch whatever we want. But we tend to hold back a bit and realize, “Okay, if I look at these kinds of things, it’s going to give rise to lust. If I look at these kinds of things, it’s going to give rise to anger. If I listen to this, it’s going to give rise to anger.” You learn to listen in a new way. It’s not that you don’t look at anything, but you try to look at these things in a way that doesn’t give rise to lust or anger. It’s the same with your listening and so on down the line. In some cases that will mean that you have to avoid certain topics, certain situations. At first it feels confining, but then after a while you begin to realize you’ve got a lot of freedom that you didn’t have before. The mind is less cluttered, and it’s easier to attain these expansive states of mind and awareness. So even though there are parts of the practice that fence you in, you find that they fence you into a really nice place. It’s like a fence around a national park. It’s what allows the animals in the park to be wild and not live in fear of being hunted. So even though there’s a fence around them, they’ve got a lot more freedom than the animals that are outside the park. So as you’re sitting here focusing on the breath, don’t feel confined. Realize that the fact that you’re letting go of your normal patterns of thinking opens up a whole new world inside. You’re able to explore the subtleties of the energy in the body. You’re able to explore the subtleties of the mind that become more and more apparent as you drop your ordinary thinking. So these are restrictions, but they’re restrictions for the sake of freedom. All the Buddhas don’t say, “You shouldn’t do this,” or “You shouldn’t do that.” They’re for the purpose of focusing your attention on areas where freedom lies that you may not have appreciated it before. After all, the deathless is always there, but we don’t see it because we’re so engrossed with other things. It’s what’s by narrowing down our range in terms of our normal thoughts and activities that we actually become aware of another dimension that’s a lot bigger and a lot more expansive and where there’s a lot more freedom. So it’s a restriction for the sake of freedom. Always keep that part in mind.

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