Harmless Happiness

September 28, 2013

We chant those passages on goodwill every evening, because they’re a good framework for the meditation. They remind us of why we’re here. We’re looking for a special kind of happiness, that happiness that doesn’t conflict with the true happiness of anyone else. You look at the way most people look for happiness in the world, and the pursuit of happiness leads to a lot of divisions. If I want something and you want the same thing, and it’s a material object or relationship of some kind, one of us is going to have to lose out. That’s why the normal pursuit of happiness is often considered a selfish thing. And it creates a lot of divisions. But when we meditate, we’re looking for a kind of happiness that doesn’t need to take anything from anyone. It actually makes us better people, more generous people, so we have more to offer other people. It’s a kind of happiness where we benefit and others benefit, and there’s no clear dividing line. Of course, the special sense of well-being that you gain from the meditation is yours. But the fact that you’ve got that is a kind of strength and a kind of wealth. And it’s through strength that we can be kind to others, and it’s through wealth that we can be generous. So even though this strength isn’t measured in external forces and the wealth isn’t measured in money, still it’s a very tangible thing. So it’s something you want to work on all the time. Because it’s useful in two main areas. One is dealing with your own internal pains and external discomforts, both physical and mental. Patience is an important part of the practice. Endurance is an important part of the practice. And it’s not just simply gritting your teeth, trying to get through something. You develop a strength inside that you can tap into, a sense of well-being, that makes it a lot easier. Endurance may not be easy, but knowing how to focus the mind, knowing how to control your thoughts so they don’t create a lot of havoc inside, can make endurance a lot easier to bear. The Buddha himself, when he was wounded by a stone, when he was struck by a stone, he got a stone sliver and went right through his foot. You can imagine how painful that was. There’s a passage where Mara comes and taunts him, “Why are you lying down there like a sleepyhead? Are you drunk on poetry?” The Buddha said, “No, I lie down here with goodwill for all beings.” That’s one of the ways in which he created strength to deal with the pain, was developing goodwill. The concentration that comes from goodwill can take the mind far. And at the same time, it takes you away from being focused on your pains and all the stories that we tend to develop around pains. As you know, one of the topics of meditation is looking at feelings in and of themselves. And it’s hard to look at them in and of themselves. A feeling comes up and we’ve got a story to go along with it. As the Buddha said, we’re shot by one arrow and then we shoot ourselves with other arrows. The physical pain is the first arrow, and then all the other arrows that we think up. That’s how we make it difficult to deal with the pain. So try to get the mind in a state of concentration. Find a part of the body that’s not in pain. Focus there. And if it seems like the whole body is in pain, focus on thoughts of goodwill. At the very least, you’re here not harming anyone else. You’re developing good qualities of mind. That gives you strength. So when other people say hurtful words, when difficult things come from outside, you’ve got the strength to deal with it in a skillful way. One of the things I noticed coming back to America was a confirmation of something I’d learned in Thailand. Thais tend to regard Americans as being very weak in dealing with pain, in dealing with difficulties. You notice that after 9/11, a lot of people just couldn’t handle the idea that they weren’t perfectly safe. In Thailand, people have to learn that danger is all around, and you learn how to live with it. And there are lots of discomforts in life. Learn how to live with those and not get overwhelmed by them. That’s why we like to keep things simple here at the monastery. It’s a test for your concentration and as practice in learning how to deal with pain. If you don’t have the evening meal, the accommodations are simple. Which means you’ve got to learn how to look for your pleasure inside. Staying here with the breath, developing the qualities of mindfulness and alertness around the breath, directing your thoughts to the breath, evaluating the breath, so you can develop a sense of well-being inside. It’s not just a physical well-being. You’re trying to develop a sense of mental well-being as well. Here you are perfectly harmless. That’s a good thing to remember. Even when the meditation may not be going so well, the fact that you’re trying to train the mind is a totally harmless thing. There are so few things in the world that are harmless. And you’re developing strength. You can learn how to rely, learn how to trust yourself. Because as we all know, life isn’t just one easy progression to better and better things all the time. The body starts aging. There’s a nice passage in the Canon, as one monk says, “Aging comes as your body is like somebody else’s.” It’s not the body you had before. You’re used to having certain strengths, certain abilities, a certain level of health. Then all of a sudden this goes and that goes, and it’s not like your old body. It’s like it’s something else. That’s just aging. Then there’s illness and there’s death. What is your refuge going to be? That’s a strength of mind that you develop as you learn how to deal with difficulties. And you find that you do have sources of strength that you wouldn’t have noticed if you hadn’t been placed in certain difficulties. The Chan Fuehring had a number of students who, after he passed away, began to slack off in their meditation. The ones who didn’t slack off tended to be the ones who had an illness or one kind or another. And they realized that the meditation was the only way they were going to be able to keep themselves together, to withstand the pain, to deal with the fact that the body was going to be weak. You gain strength from training the mind, both physical strength and a kind of moral strength, in the sense that you are not going to be tempted to do anything unskillful no matter how much discomfort you’re in, no matter how bad the situation gets. You want to be able to rely on this strength. So we look for our goodness within. We look for our strength within, our inner wealth within, and take whatever potentials we’ve got and make the most of them. Because that’s where your hope for true happiness can actually find something that’s not just an empty hope. It can find a real foundation. So it may seem like a little thing to work with the breath, but it’s a really important skill. It’s one of the few things that sticks with you all the way through life. And the strengths of mind that you develop staying with the breath will stick with you beyond all through life. So give this practice the attention it deserves, the respect it deserves. One of the basic concepts in Buddhism is refuge, and this is where you find it. We’ve got the examples of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. But for their examples to be really helpful, to really make a difference, we have to internally analyze their qualities. And that’s what we do as we practice. So that even though there is aging, illness, and death, the mind doesn’t have to suffer. That’s one of the contemplations that the Buddha has you think about. You want to practice so you find an attainment inside so that even when aging comes, you won’t have to suffer. Even when illness comes, even when death comes, you won’t have to suffer. That’s a really worthwhile motivation, because it also means that on your way to aging, illness, and death, you’re not going to do anything that’s going to harm anybody. It’s like they say on those signs as you go into wilderness, “Leave no trace.” Leave no trace of harm. And you’ll be able to look back on your life without any regrets.

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