A Happiness Worthy of Respect

October 14, 2013

Get your body in a comfortable position. Sit with your back straight. Not ramrod straight, but straight enough so you’re not leaning on any part of the body. Face straight ahead. Close your eyes. Place your hands in your lap, one hand on top of the other. If you need to move at any time during the hour, if there’s a pain in your back, in your legs, sit with the pain a little bit before you move. Don’t be too quick to move. It’s good training in not being reactive and learning some patience and endurance. That’s getting the body in position. As for the mind, that takes a lot more to get it into position, or at least to keep it in position. All you have to focus on right now is the breath. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing. There’ll be the air coming in and out through the nose, but also the movement in the body. Energy moving in your chest, in your stomach, in your shoulders, in your head. Allow both the air and the energy to move freely. If you feel any tension in your shoulders or back or anywhere in the body, allow it to relax. Maintaining your upright position but letting everything else relax. You want to let the blood flow freely throughout the body. Otherwise you’ll start going numb. Notice how the breathing feels. Ask yourself if it could be more comfortable. Sometimes long breathing is comfortable, sometimes shorter breathing. Deeper or more shallow? Heavier? Lighter? Faster? Slower? Experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels best right now. Focus on the parts of the body where the breathing energy feels clearest, where it’s easiest to keep track of it. Your mind’s going to wander off. But every time it wanders off, as soon as you catch it, just bring it right back. Any thought that comes up, you don’t have to finish the thought. Just let it go. And you’re back at the breath. The reason we focus on the breath is because it’s your guarantee you can stay in the present moment. And we want to stay in the present moment because that’s where you can watch your mind. Your mind is the most important part of your life, and yet there’s a lot of it that’s really mysterious. Sometimes you find yourself doing something or saying something or thinking something and you don’t know why. You have no idea where that came from. And yet those actions can really rule your life, for better or for worse. So we’re going to try to make the actions for the better, because the mind is the most important thing in your life. You want to train it so that it’s a power for the good. Show some respect for your desire for true happiness. We do a lot of bowing around here. The reason we bow to the Buddha is because we respect him for his example, and also because he teaches us to respect something worthy of respect in ourselves, which is our desire for true happiness. For example, happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. Because if your happiness harms other people, they’re not going to stand for it. But if your happiness is harmless, people will leave it alone. And the only kind of happiness that really is totally harmless and totally safe is the happiness that comes from within. And that’s what we can find as we train the mind, looking for the potential for happiness inside and allowing it to grow. We start with the breath because it has a huge impact on the state of your mind. If the breath is comfortable, there’s that much less weight on the mind. There’s nothing in the body to really irritate it. Even if there may be pains in some parts of the body, if you can stay with comfortable breathing, the mind’s in a much better mood. And when it’s in a better mood, then it’s a lot easier to train it. Because the mind does have its bad habits. It has good habits, and bad habits. But it doesn’t like to think about its bad habits. And because you don’t think about them, that’s why they take over. So what you’ve got to do is strengthen your good habits so the bad habits don’t have so much power. So your good habits are things like being mindful. You make up your mind you’re going to do something good, you’re going to stick with the breath, and then you keep remembering that, keep reminding yourself, “Stay right here, stay right here.” That’s mindfulness. Then there’s alertness, which watches what’s actually happening. Are you staying with the breath? Where are you staying with the breath? What’s the breath like? If the mind wanders off, you’re alert to that fact too. And then there’s a quality called ardency, and this is where you really show your respect. What it means is that if you notice you’ve wandered away, you come right back. You don’t dawdle around, but you come right back. You come right back to the breath because you know that’s where you want to be. When you’re with the breath, you try to be really sensitive to how it feels. When you breathe in, what kind of breathing feels refreshing? What kind of breathing feels energizing? What kind of breathing feels relaxing? Because the body has different needs, and you want to learn how to be acquainted with the breath so you can use it to counteract any sense of dis-ease in the body. So when you’re tired, you can breathe in an energizing way. When you’re tense, you can breathe in a relaxing way. So you can give rise to a sense of being balanced right here. The energy in the body feels full, it feels refreshing. That’s the kind of breath you’re going for. As for any other thoughts that come into the mind, just learn how to put them aside. No matter how much they scream at you and tell you they’re really important for the time being, you don’t want them. Because most of these thoughts have to do with the world. And what does the world have to offer? Not much, really. There’s gain, material gain, and then there’s loss. There’s status and there’s loss of status. There’s praise and there’s criticism. There’s pleasure and pain. And those things come in pairs. You can’t have the good side without the bad side. They keep coming and going. And if your happiness depends on things like that, it’s like building a house out on the ocean. The waves rise and fall, and sometimes they can turn your house over. You want to build your house on something that’s a lot more solid, and that’s why you have to build it within. There are these good qualities of mindfulness and alertness and concentration you’re trying to develop. And even when you leave concentration, you want to have a sense of inner center that you can stay focused on as you go through the day. It’s like your gyroscope to make sure that the events of the world don’t knock you over. So when people are critical, it doesn’t knock you over. When people praise you, it doesn’t knock you over. When you gain status, it doesn’t knock you over. When you lose your status, it doesn’t knock you over. When people get a lot of wealth and a lot of status, it goes to their head, and they start forgetting that they’re a human being and other people are human beings. They somehow think they’re higher or better than other people. When you lose your wealth, lose your status, you suddenly feel worthless. Both are unskillful. What you want to remember is that when things happen in the world, you want to be able to get some good use out of them. In other words, good use in training the mind. So when wealth comes, you learn to be generous. You think of other people who don’t have as much wealth as you do, and you want to share. When you lose your wealth, you realize, “Okay, that’s the way the world is. Things come and go.” You also find out who your friends are. Same with status and loss of status. When there’s praise, you have to ask yourself, “What is this person praising me for? Otherwise, you get carried away.” Remember that the use of praise is to remind you that you want to be even better. As for criticism, you have to look at whether it’s true or not. If it’s true, you’ve learned something important. Here’s an area where you can improve yourself. If it’s not true, you’ve learned something about the person who criticized you. Same with physical praise. Physical pleasure, physical pain. These things have their uses. You can’t make them the basis for your happiness, but you can learn some important lessons from them. They develop good qualities inside. Because that’s where our real wealth is, the good qualities we have right here, right now. If they’re not good yet, well, we can make them better. The Buddha never said that we’re basically good or basically bad, but we have good qualities, good potentials, and bad ones. So we want to develop the good ones. And let the bad ones wither away. This is how we find that true happiness inside. It starts out by being generous, by being virtuous—in other words, trying to be harmless. That’s when we take the precepts. And by gaining some control over the mind. Even though this isn’t the end of the path, this is the way there. It’s a good path to be on. You’re not harming yourself, you’re not harming other people. You’re training your mind to be clearer, more observant. So you can begin to see for yourself what’s skillful and what’s not. In the beginning, we have to learn from other people who are more experienced on the path. But with time, we learn to observe for ourselves. When we do something, what are the results? If we made a mistake, and you want to talk it over with someone who’s more advanced on the path and make up your mind, you’re not going to make that mistake again. That’s the way you learn from your own actions. It’s like developing a skill. In John Lee’s images of the Buddha, there’s a picture of learning how to make clay tiles. First you learn simply how to mix the clay with the water. Then you figure out how to fire the tiles. Sometimes you put in too much heat, sometimes too little heat. Well, you learn from that. The next time around you adjust the heat so it’s just right. Then you might decide that the sand wasn’t filtered or sifted finely enough, so the next time around you sift the sand. In other words, you make something and then you look at the results. And if it’s not good, you figure out what went wrong and then you go back and you try it again. It’s the same with staying in the breath. Sometimes the breath is too light, so you start drifting away. If you find that the breath is getting really comfortable, try to think of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Have a nice broad sense of awareness that goes to the body. Because otherwise, when the breath gets very light and very subtle, you can drift away and lose your focus if your range of awareness is too small. So try to make your range of awareness larger. Think of the whole body from the top of the head down to the feet. You breathe in, the whole body is breathing. You breathe out, the whole body is breathing. That way, when the breath gets really light, you don’t fall asleep. So take some time to get to know your breath. What it can do to bring the state of your body into balance, what it can do to bring the state of your mind into balance right here, right now. So you sit here with a sense of fullness, a sense of well-being. Knowing that your mind is on a path to a happiness that’s really worthy of respect.

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