A Harmless Happiness

February 20, 2014

We have these chants at the beginning of the meditation to pull the mind out of the narratives it’s been following throughout the day, to give it a larger picture, to wish well to all beings, to extend compassion to those who are suffering. Empathetic joy for those who are happy or doing things that are good, that are going to lead to happiness. And then equanimity for all the things that we can’t change, that we can’t affect. Having this larger perspective gives us a good chance now to focus back on the present moment without dragging in all the narratives for the day. Because whatever you’ve been looking for throughout the day, you have to step back and realize that the best thing to look for is a happiness that’s totally harmless. It doesn’t harm you, it doesn’t harm the people around you. Because so much of the happiness we search for in life does have an impact on others, and it’s not an easy impact. That reflection we had now on the requisites—food, clothing, shelter, medicine—the fact that we’re born means that we have these huge gaping holes in us that need to be filled up. We need food all the time. We need clothing and shelter to protect us. And the body’s going to break down, it’s going to have troubles, and we need medicine. That places a burden on other people. Even just the basic facts of existence are a weight on the world. So when you decide for happiness that doesn’t require all that, that’s when you’re ready to meditate. You sit here in the present moment, and what have you got? You’ve got the mind and you’ve got the body. The body’s sitting here breathing, the mind is thinking and aware. You want to bring all those things together. Think about the breath and be aware of the breath. When you breathe in, where do you feel the breathing process? In other words, the energy that flows through the body that brings the air into the breath. The air into the lungs and then allows it to go out. Where do you feel that? Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths to see. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. Make it shorter, more shallow, faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Experiment for a while to see what kinds of breathing feel best for the body. Remember, the breathing is a whole body process. Your entire nervous system is affected one way or another by the breath. Before you settle down on one spot, you want to make a survey through the different parts of the body to make sure everything is relaxed. Your elbows are relaxed, your wrists are relaxed, your ankles, your knees are relaxed. But you’re sitting erect. Don’t relax so much that you fall over. Then think of the whole body being involved in the breathing process so that you’re bathed in the breath. And as for any thoughts that might wander out, you don’t have to follow them. This is an hour where the responsible thing is to stay with the breath because you’re training the mind to be a good tool so it can see things clearly, see where you’re causing unnecessary stress for yourself and others, and how you can change those habits. Now to see that, the mind has to be very stable. It has to be in a good mood. Soothing it with a breath like this helps. It calms you down, makes you feel nourished. When the mind is soothed like this, it’s a lot more willing to look at where it’s been unskillful in its habits. So if you do the meditation right, you’re not the only person who benefits. People around you benefit, too. If you’re throwing less greed, aversion, and anger at them, then they’re going to be happy that you’re meditating. This is a really safe source of happiness right here. This is your breath. No one else is going to try to come and take it away from you. So try to get as much good nourishment from it as you can. As the breathing gets more and more comfortable, you have to be especially careful to be fully aware of the whole body, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Otherwise, if your area of focus gets too small, it’s very easy to drift off. But if you’re aware of your hands in your hands and your feet in your feet, in other words, you fully occupy your sense of the body right here, it’s hard to slip off. But the mind does have a habit of shrinking up to a little small dot very quickly and running off. So you have to be very careful and very watchful. To find yourself wandering off, come back to the breath. In other words, just drop whatever thought that was, and the mind will automatically come back to the breath. You don’t have to pull it back. And then as you come back, reward yourself with a really good breath, at least one really, really satisfying breath. And of course, after that one’s over, you say, “Why stop with one? Two, three, four, just keep at it.” The needs of the body may change, so keep on top of that, too. Each time you breathe in, try to gain a sense of whether the breath still feels nourishing and gratifying or whether something needs to be changed. Is it getting too heavy? Because as the mind begins to settle down, it tends to lack a lighter and lighter breath. But if the breath gets so light that you’re beginning to get drowsy, go back to heavier breathing again. Learn how to make use of this energy in the body. So you come out of the meditation refreshed. The body feels refreshed, the mind feels refreshed, it’s solid, at ease. And then try to maintain that. This is not something you do just while you’re sitting here. You need time to practice. It’s like learning how to play the piano. You don’t go out and perform in public right away. You practice off by yourself, but then after a while, if you’re the only one who’s hearing it, that’s not all that good. So you just try to bring this into your daily life. Because after all, the breath goes with you wherever you go. You can stay with the breath. As you talk to other people, you can stay with the breath as you work. If it’s too much to be aware of the in-and-out breath at those times, at least have a general sense of the breath energy in the body, the energy tone of the body, where it’s beginning to tense up, where it’s beginning to get tight, where it’s beginning to feel flat. What can you do to raise the level of the energy when it needs to be raised? What can you do to calm it down? Relax. Start dealing with difficult situations so that you can learn how to deal with them effectively. Because all too often our emotions get in the way, and that way we can’t see what’s the other person doing, what does the other person really want. Is it reasonable or not? Sometimes people are asking for perfectly reasonable things, but our emotions get ticked off by something. Or otherwise, sometimes they try to lure us with something, but you have to step back and say, “Is this something I really should go for?” If you have a place to stay like this, you’re not so quick to jump on other people’s words or other actions. And you find that you can handle these situations more skillfully. That’s one of the ways you bring the meditation into your daily life. The other, of course, is to follow the precepts. The Buddha teaches five. No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no intoxicants. Because the things that knock the mind over are not only things that come from outside. Your own actions knock it over. If you do something that’s harmful to somebody else, it’s going to be a scar in your mind. And then you either have a raw wound, or else you try to cover it up with scar tissue and so on. It doesn’t matter. I didn’t really do something wrong. It’s a lot of denial. And that way you close off parts of your sensitivity. And when you do that, you can’t see yourself clearly. So it’s good to have a proper context for the meditation in life, not just taking the breath technique into your daily life. You think about the precepts. You think about being generous, because the more generous you’re going to be with your material goods, your time, your energy, your knowledge, your forgiveness, the more wide open the mind feels. You realize you have wealth that you can share. It may not be material wealth, but you have other kinds of wealth. And the mind becomes a much more livable mind when you’re able to share these things. And you realize that you do have freedom of choice. If we’re constantly operating on our greed, aversion, and delusion, our hungers, we’re constantly obeying our thirst. There’s no sense of dignity in our lives at all. Years back, I was giving a Dhamma talk, and I happened to mention the word “dignity.” Afterwards, a woman, a Russian emigre, came up and commented on the fact. She said she’d been in America ten years. She had learned the word “dignity” when she learned English back in Russia, but she’d never heard an American use the word. That says a lot about what’s happened to our society. You can give dignity to your life by your choices, by your generosity, by refraining from harmful actions. Use the meditation, use the breath as your nourishment so you can keep on doing good things. This way, the meditation becomes part of a larger practice, a life that really is harmless, a life that really is helpful to you and other people. The Buddha focuses on ways of finding happiness where the happiness isn’t just yours. It’s not the kind of happiness that’s based on gaining material wealth or gaining status, or all the pleasures for yourself. That kind of happiness creates boundaries. What we’re doing here is creating a kind of happiness that erases those boundaries. When you’re generous, you benefit, the other people benefit. When you’re virtuous, you benefit, other people benefit. When you meditate, you benefit, everybody else benefits. That’s the kind of happiness we’re looking for. Start taking that larger perspective at the beginning of the meditation. Try to keep that larger perspective as you leave meditation as well and go out into your daily life. That’s the way in which the practice gives its full benefits.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2014/140220_A_Harmless_Happiness.mp3.mp3>