Chant Before You Meditate

July 1, 2015

When we sit down to meditate as a group, we always start with some chants. And when you meditate alone, it’s often useful to start with a few chants as well to remind yourself of why you’re meditating. Because concentration is basically two activities. One is choosing one object to stay with. And having a sense that it’s where you really do want to stay. And then two is fending off any other objects that may come into the mind. You have to have a sense that they’re not worth following. Because almost every thought that comes into the mind will come with a little argument as well, telling you why this is a good thing to think about, why it might be entertaining. In fact, when you look very carefully at the way thoughts form in the mind, you’ll begin to see there’s that element of saying, “Yes, this is what I want to run with, and you develop it.” This is why thoughts that appear in the mind are not totally the result of past karma coming in. There’s somebody in terms of present karma that’s letting them in the door. So you have to fend them off to begin with. You may have noticed that some of the chants we had just now had to do with aging, illness, and death—the way the world is outside, the way the world is in your mind. Everything gets swept away. That’s what the chants on being subject to aging, illness, and death are about. They’re not just swept away. Everything that you might own gets swept away as well. So if you find your thoughts going out to concerns about the body, concerns about the body, concerns about things you may own, people you love, things you like, pleasures you like, you keep reminding yourself these things come and then they go, go, go. The sensual pleasures that you’ve experienced in the past couple days, where are they now? They’re all gone. When you stop to think about how much effort gets put into getting the food you need, getting the clothing and shelter, and sometimes it goes beyond what you just need, you take a lot of these things because you like them, but then what happens? The pleasure is gone, gone, gone. Was it really worth all the effort that went into it? So these chants help to remind you that the things you might be thinking about right now that are not related to the breath are really not worth thinking about nine times out of ten. And as for the one time out of ten, you don’t have to think about that right now. If it’s something really important, something really worth thinking about, you want to get your mind in good shape before you think about it. Just because it happens to run in the door doesn’t mean that’s the time you have to deal with it. It’s like a child. You tell the patient, “Okay, you’ve got work you’ve got to do right now, and when the work is done, then you’ll be able to pay attention to whatever the child is demanding.” And then you put it outside the door. As for the breath, you want to remind yourself why it is good to be with the breath. You can think about the advantages to the body. When the breath energy is allowed to flow throughout the body, it’s a lot healthier than it would be otherwise. All the diseases that are caused by stress can be really treated with good breath energy. So even if the mind doesn’t settle down as much as you’d like it to, during the next hour, at the very least you’re working on something that’s going to be good for the body. And of course, when the body is made more comfortable through the breath, then it’s going to be easier for the mind to stay here. And you’re strengthening good qualities in the mind. As the body relaxes, the mind gets its exercise. You’re exercising your mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. This faculty is something that’s very important. William James, a psychologist, pointed out one time that we tend to pay attention to things in discrete moments. Our normal attention span is extremely short, but it’s simply our ability to remember that we want to stay with something. And the element of will with which we decide to stay with something, that’s what makes all the difference. Between just a random moment of attention and something that you pay full attention to, and then you can do something with it, make a change in something, rather than just being alert to the fact that this is there now, and that’s here, over here, and this is over there, and this is back here, right here, the mind could just wander around for a long time, jumping from one thing to the next. But nothing gets accomplished that way. To accomplish things, you have to be able to stitch your attention together. And it’s the qualities of mindfulness and what the Buddha calls “hardensing.” You’ve got something you want to accomplish. So you pay attention to the breath, and if you find that that moment of attention is about ready to falter, you just remind yourself again why you want to be here, why you don’t want to be anywhere else. That’s why the chants that we did just now have these two foci. In other words, one, why you don’t want to put all of your attention into the breath, the other, why you don’t want to pay attention to the breath. Keep in mind that the breath is someplace you don’t want to go, and keep in mind that the breath is someplace you do want to go, and that you’re going to gain something from it. You gain all these good qualities of mind, strength of mind, that the mind is going to need in order to deal with issues as they come up. Because when aging comes, what are you going to have to protect yourself, aside from the concentration and discernment that you’ve developed? When illness comes, diseases can be cured to some extent by medicine, but your mental attitude toward them is going to make all the difference as well. And many times when you find a particular illness, it doesn’t have the medicine that you want or the medicine that you need. Because it’s inevitable that at some point the body’s going to break down. And no matter how much medicine you pour into it, it’s not going to stop it from dying. And what is the mind going to do then? Where is it going to look for help? We have the chant on taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and what that means is following their example. That is, through training the mind to be independent of things that age, grow ill, and die. That’s how you find true happiness. Where do you look when you start with the breath? Try to get the mind centered right here. The practice of meditation has a lot of values built into it. Sometimes you see it presented as a totally valueless enterprise. It’s just a technical skill. But if you really want to do it well, you have to have the right values to go along with it. When you have your values straight, it’s a lot easier to overcome the hindrances, overcome any distractions, and to get more and more firmly planted in the object of your meditation, both in terms of concentration and in terms of understanding the mind as it settles in. You’ve got both tranquility and insight working together here. These are qualities you’re going to need, so we work on them. As for your thoughts about yesterday or tomorrow, you don’t need those. You can’t take them as your refuge. But you can take the good qualities in the mind as your refuge. So when you forget these things, you catch yourself forgetting these things. Sometimes it’s good to go through the chants again, even when you’re on your own. They act as a fence to keep you here in the area that you’ve chosen to focus your awareness. They help keep you from wandering off, playing truant. There’s work to be done. This is the place to do it. We don’t know how much time we have left, but we do know we have right now.

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