Under the Trees (outdoors)

August 2, 2015

Sit and meditate. Close your eyes. Think thoughts of goodwill. First for yourself, may I be truly happy. And for all others around you. This thought seems to have more meaning when you’re sitting out under the trees like this. Because you realize there are beings all around you. There’s the sound of the squirrels, the sounds of the insects, the birds. You realize that we’re not alone. We’re surrounded by all kinds of beings and they all want happiness. That’s why we’re meditating. We want happiness too, but we realize that if our happiness depends on someone else’s suffering, it’s not going to last. And it wouldn’t seem fair. This is why the Buddha said the happiness that comes from meditation is a happiness that’s not only skillful, but also blameless. When the monks go out in the forest like this, they’re told to dedicate the merit of their meditation to all the beings around them. And to make a sort of a brief announcement, sometimes the beings there don’t like to have human beings coming in. It gets in the way of their normal way of life. So you tell them, “I’m here just for a short while. I’m not trying to move in permanently. I don’t want to take advantage of the quiet and the peace here to develop my mind. I’d be happy to dedicate the merit of that to anyone.” Anybody else who cooperates. That way you’re on good terms with everybody around you. When you’re on good terms, it’s easier to turn your mind inside. That’s when we focus on the breath. It’s what’s right inside us right here. You close your eyes, this is probably the most noticeable thing in the body. The breath comes in, the breath goes out. And of the different aspects of the body, it’s one of the few that you actually have a lot of control over. If you learn how to control it well, you can take advantage of that. So try some short breathing first, and then try some long. Deep down inside. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. Make it shorter, faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Lots of ways you can adjust the breath. And when you think breath, don’t think just of the air coming in and out. It’s the movement of the energy through the body that allows you to breathe in, breathe out. And when you get very sensitive to the body, you realize that energy flows throughout all your nerves, all the muscles, all the blood vessels. It’s a whole body phenomenon. Unless you want to breathe in a way that feels nourishing for the whole body. Now if your thoughts wander off, you don’t have to follow them. Just drop the thoughts and you’ll be right back here at the breath. If you find yourself wandering after other thoughts, well drop those thoughts too and you’ll be back at the breath. Each time you come back to the breath, try to breathe in a way that’s especially gratifying and feels really good inside. Because the work we need to do is inside. And you want to be able to have a focus that’s steady. With a sense of well-being. The well-being helps strengthen your focus, strengthen your concentration. By paying attention to the breath, you begin to realize how much your sense of well-being has to do with simply the fact of how you’re breathing. How you hold the body, how the energy moves around in the body. And the more you explore that, the more you realize that you’re going to have a source of happiness that’s independent of things outside. It doesn’t matter who you’re with or where you are as long as there’s a comfortable breathing. You’ve got at least one part of your awareness that’s yours and you’ve got it under your control. So think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, and what way of breathing would feel really good. What does the energy flow affect? Because sometimes the energy flow goes up and it gives you energy, but sometimes if it goes up too much in the body, it’s going to give you headaches. And the flow of the energy goes down. As you breathe in, you think of the energy flowing down like butter melting down through your body. That can be relaxing, but it can also put you to sleep. So you have to find the right balance. And if there’s a right balance, then it can see inside. At the same time, as you’re meditating, you’re developing the qualities you’re going to need in order to understand your mind and develop good qualities. For example, the Buddha talks about what he calls the basis of success. The four qualities that you have to apply to any job, any activity you have in order to succeed at it. And as you’re meditating, you’re not just watching the mind, but you’re also developing these qualities in the mind that you can use now while you’re meditating. And once they’re developed here, you can apply them wherever you need to. There are four qualities in all. There’s desire, there’s persistence, intentness, and your powers of discrimination, using your intelligence. For example, with desire, for the meditation to go well, you have to want to do it. Now when you want to do it, you realize you want the results. But if you focus just on the results without focusing on the causes, those results are not going to come. So even though the main emphasis of your desire is at the results, you have to focus them first on the causes. So staying with the breath, that’s a cause. So learn how to make yourself favorably inclined to staying here. This is one of the reasons why we play with the breath, adjust the breath. Become something enjoyable. You begin to see right here, right now, that there are good benefits that come from paying careful attention to your breath. And if that’s not enough, you can think about the whole prospect of getting your mind under control. Because that’s the desire. You want to be able to think what you want to think and not think what you don’t want to think. And yet the mind normally just turns out whatever it wants, often without consulting you. And you just follow along. But here you want to get some control. You want to be the master of your thoughts, not the slave. And you think further out. As aging, illness, and death come, you want your mind to be under control so its thoughts don’t lead you in ways that are going to cause suffering. So this is one of the reasons why it’s good to have something to hold on to, like the breath, so that when any thought comes up, you say, nope, I can drop that and just come right to the breath. So think about the good that comes from meditating. The fact that your mind will be under control becomes your friend and your servant, basically, not your master and a harsh master of thought. When you’re thinking this way, it gives rise to the desire to meditate more, put more energy into it. That’s the second one, persistence, which can also be translated as energy and effort. And once you’ve decided this is a good thing to do, OK, you just stick with it. You don’t give up when it gets hard. You just keep at it, at it, at it. You don’t give up when you get discouraged. Just keep at it. Because there’s a lot to be learned just by doing the same thing over and over and over again, coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath, making it comfortable, trying to make it more comfortable. Each time you do it, you may have the opportunity to see something new about the mind. It’s not that it’s always the same. You’re trying to do the same activity, but you’ll find each day you do it, you’ve got a different mind. Different events during the day, different emotions during the day are going to come up. And the fact that you’ve got this home base here, this is a place in which you can measure the movements of the mind, you begin to see this is how your mind flows. It goes up and it goes down. Sometimes it’s too easily affected by events around it. No matter what the state of mind, you say, there must be a way of dealing with this. After all, we have the example of the Buddha and all of his noble disciples. And it’s not that your problems of the mind are any really different from any of theirs. They were able to find the techniques to get around their mental problems where you can find yours. To some extent, we depend on their instructions, but to another extent, we have to use our own powers of observation, which I’ll get to in a moment. So you just keep looking, looking, looking. You keep at the breath again and again and again. You keep coming back. This is when you have to bring those two other qualities. First is intentness. You really put your whole heart into doing this. You pay careful attention to what you’re doing. And you really want to do it well. You don’t just go through the motions. You ask yourself, “Is this really the best way I could be breathing right now? Let’s try experimenting a little bit more.” If you’re experimenting too much and you don’t get good results, just drop that and say, “Well, however the breath comes in and goes out, I’m going to watch it for a while until I can catch and see what I was doing wrong.” But pay full attention here. Finally, the last quality is your intelligence, your ingenuity, your powers to one, and see the distinctions. If you breathe in one way, what kind of state of mind do you have? If you breathe in another way, does it change the state of mind? If you can see the distinction, okay, then you’ve learned something. If you can’t see the distinction, try different changes in the breath, different places to focus your awareness. Use your ingenuity to get around every problem. Again, in some cases we have the teachings of the people from the past to help us, and other times we have to figure it out on our own. But that figuring it out on your own, that’s how your discernment gets developed. If everything were handed to you, if this were a foolproof practice, you could do it and still be a fool. But the whole purpose of this is that it makes you more intelligent. Because the things that are going to pull you away, your greed, aversion, and delusion, they’ve got an intelligence of their own. They’ve known how to pull you around for who knows how many lifetimes. And you’ve fallen for their tricks for who knows how many lifetimes. So you want to be able to see through it. Understand, okay, when greed comes, this is why I like the greed. When anger comes, this is why I like the anger. And you can see for yourself, is it really worth it or not? Now, it helps to have a good, strong state of concentration, with a sense of well-being, because that helps protect you against a lot of the power of these defilements. So work on your concentration, work on your breath right now. Try to keep the mind here with the breath. Sense of the whole body. When you gain that sense of the whole body, see how long you can maintain it. One common problem that comes up is you’re able to do it for a little while and say, okay, that’s enough, what’s next? Well, it’s not enough. We’re here to learn how to do these things well. How to maintain them as long as we can. Because the effects of the concentration are like cream for your skin when it has a rash. You don’t just put the cream on and then wipe it off. You put the cream on and you let it stay there. And the longer it stays, the more it’s able to have a good effect on the skin. It’s the same way with the concentration. The longer you can stay with the breath, the more it’s going to help have a good effect on the mind. These qualities that we’re trying to develop, the qualities of desire and persistence, intentness and intelligence, the more you use them, the stronger they get. It’s like exercising your body. If you don’t use your body at all, it gets all weak and unable to do anything. If you keep at it, exercise it just the right amount. The body gets stronger in the same way as you exercise your mind, here with the breath. Those good qualities get stronger too. Then you can use them both for the purpose of the Dharma and for whatever other work you need to do in the course of your life. You’ve got a job that you know you should do, but you have trouble talking yourself into it. Well, you’ve already had practice talking yourself into meditating. You’ve already had practice learning to be persistent, to put your whole heart into the meditation, to use your intelligence. Well, you can use those same qualities of whatever else that comes up. In this way, you become more and more a master of your mind, not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but throughout the day. Your mind becomes your friend. You’re not constantly battling inside. (waves crashing) So work on developing these strengths of mind, ’cause after all, these are the things that are gonna be able to help us find that happiness we want, the happiness that comes from within. Learn how to rely on your mind, and it can create a happiness that you can rely on as well. And because these qualities do come from within, they’re totally blameless. They don’t have to put a burden on anybody else at all. So that wish for goodwill, becomes not just an idle wish, it becomes an actual quality of your life, that you are living for your happiness and for the happiness of others. Your thoughts, your words, and deeds are conducive for happiness all around. (birds chirping)

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