The Wear & Tear of Life

November 29, 2015

Every evening, before we meditate, we start with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for others. Reminding ourselves that that is our aspiration—well-being, happiness. The words sukha and pali run the gamut from pleasure all the way to bliss. Review stops along the way, including ease, well-being, being healed from all the wear and tear of daily life. That’s why we’re meditating. So think about that as you focus on the breath. Try to breathe in a way that feels healing for the body and refreshing for the mind. Have spots—it helps to fill up some of the gaps. Because life, as the other reflections remind us, is full of aging, illness, death, and separation. We still have a lot of craving for the things that will end up bringing on more aging, illness, death, and separation. That phrase that we chant, “Subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death,” in the Thai translation, says that these things are normal all over the world. They happen every day. Something like 200,000 people die every day. And yet we still want happiness. As the Buddha said, our craving, our desires, are focused in the wrong place. It’s not bad to want happiness. It’s not bad to want well-being. In some of that, you have to approach it wisely. There are basically three steps. There’s generosity, there’s virtue, and there’s the meditation. These are ways of looking for happiness that cause no harm to anybody and actually spread well-being around. If your happiness depends on material gain, status, praise, then it creates boundaries. Because when you gain something, somebody else has to lose it. But the happiness that comes from being generous, the happiness that comes from being virtuous, the happiness that comes from meditation, these create no boundaries at all. In fact, they erase them. So think about that as you meditate. You’re doing something that erases boundaries. And allow yourself to feel the pleasure of what a really good breath can be like, and then another good one, and another good one. So you can heal the wounds of the day and heal the wounds of the past week, month, year. That strengthens the mind so it can continue looking for happiness in the right way and avoid the things that it knows are going to lead to harm. And a lot of things that you don’t really know are going to lead to harm. But you begin to realize, as the mind gets more and more sensitive to this sense of well-being inside, that certain ways of thinking, certain ways of breathing, holding a body, interacting with other people, are subtly damaging. You didn’t notice it before, but as you get more sensitive, you begin to notice it. So this is one of the other advantages of meditation. It creates a heightened sensitivity. At the same time, it gives you a heightened strength of just being more sensitive, you’d be at a loss. The world would weigh even more down on you. But when you can create a sense of strength inside through the breath, a sense of well-being through the breath, a sense of well-being that comes from just being steadily with one thing, the mind’s not forced to jump around all the time. That gives you the added strength so that your increased sensitivity doesn’t drive you further away from being engaged in life. You can be engaged and be engaged in a skillful way. So take the time. Try to be meticulous in your watching over the mind, because it’s the little things that drive you off the breath. So that when aging and illness and death and separation come, you’re in a much better position to deal with them. Because you realize you’ve got strength of mind, you’ve got a core of goodness inside you, that these events don’t have to take away. I tell in the canon of the story of Sariputta, who was the Buddha’s right-hand disciple, passing away before the Buddha did. Ananda, who was another close disciple, came to tell the Buddha about it. He said it just knocked him for a loop. He’d come to depend so much on Sariputta’s help. And the Buddha said, “Well, when Sariputta died, did he take virtue away with him? Did he take concentration away with him? Discernment? Release? All the really valuable things in the world are still here. That’s what you’ve got to remember. Regardless of aging, illness, separation, death, the good things in life are still available if you take advantage of them. They’re to be found primarily here in the mind. We depend on others for encouragement and support. But we have to learn how to be more independent. The support and the encouragement is so that we can become independent. Traditionally in Buddhism, we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. That doesn’t mean the Buddha’s going to be around to help us or the Dhamma’s going to come out and pat us on the back. What it means is that they’ve provided a good example of how to depend on yourself. And you want to take them as an example and develop the qualities that they developed in your own mind, so that just as they learned how to depend on themselves, you can depend on yourself and take all the wear and tear of life in stride. So the meditation here is one of the important skills for finding strength. Because it does two things. One, it helps you to drop a lot of the things that put unnecessary weight on the mind. You’re sitting here and you don’t have to think about anything else for the time being. It’s just the breath. Just keeping the mind with the breath. That helps you to put down some of your burdens for a while. And then as the mind stays with the breath continually, as I said, the fact that you’re not forced to jump around a lot, you can stay all the way through the hour if you want, because the breath is always going to be there for the hour, the mind comes out strengthened, and you’re in a much better position to look at things. At least a little bit of detachment. As the Buddha said, you can’t really understand things, you can’t really get past the things that weigh down the mind, unless you can look at them as something separate. So you want to learn how to look at your emotions as something separate. You’re not being in denial about them, just that your awareness is one thing, the emotion is something else. Your awareness is one thing, your thoughts are something else. Your sense of being in the body, that’s something else too. And when you can see them as something else, then you can drop all the things that are adding unnecessary burdens on the mind. As soon as you get more absorbed in the breath, this gives you another place to stand. You’re not standing just on your thoughts, because that’s where the mind tends to live a lot. I think this, I feel that, and you just go from one thought to the next, hopping trains. Sometimes you get on some pretty bad trains with some pretty bad company. But if you can stay with the breath, you know your breath is your friend. It’s what keeps you alive. A thought comes in the mind and you can step back from jumping into it. You can watch it come, you can watch it go. You say,”Well, that thought would not be a good one to go into.” And it’ll go. You’ve got this place to stand. As the mind gets more and more skilled at this ability to step back, you find that a lot of the things you used to carry around, you thought you had to carry around, you don’t have to. You can put them down. In the sense of being wounded by the world, you find that it begins to heal. Because a lot of the wounds came from your own tendency to grab hold of things and pull them inside and make them part of you. And then when those things get pulled away, it’s like you’ve got this big gaping hole inside. So if you can learn how to undo that, things that you cling to, things that you hold on to, and think, “This is me. This is mine.” You see that there are things that come and they go. In our life as human beings, there’s a lot of coming and going. And it’s hard to say that there’s a sense of closure in life. It’s just random. You meet up with someone, you live with them for a while, and then you part ways. So you want to make sure that as long as these thoughts are there, they’re there. Association is there. You want to be good to one another with the knowledge that it’ll have to end. What you can take away from it is the goodness. That’s your treasure. That’s what you can hold on to. As for all the other things, you have to let them go. Because they weren’t really yours to begin with, even though the mind tends to appropriate a lot of things. You can see that habit of appropriation that causes a lot of suffering. So the sense of distance you get from your thoughts and your emotions here, it’s not a cold distance. It’s the distance of sanity. It heals the mind. It’s the way that even the breath can’t heal. It’s having that sense of perspective on things that can help pull you out. They talk about how in the night of the Buddha’s awakening, the first watch of the night, he remembered many, many, many of his past lifetimes. He saw that he’d been born in all kinds of ways. But he didn’t see an overall pattern. It all seemed pretty random. In the second watch of the night, he expanded his perspective. Think about the whole universe, all the beings in the universe. The question was, did they have multiple lifetimes, too? How were these things determined? He realized that it was through people’s actions, their intentions, that shaped where they were going to go as they left one life and went to another. Notice the pattern here. The first one is just his narrative. There’s kind of a narrowness to it, even though it was very long. But it was still narrow. It was when he took the whole universe into perspective that his own life became introspective as well, his own mental activities. It was because he saw that intentions were the driving force of all this. That was why in the third watch of the night, he focused on his own intentions in the present moment, to try to understand, “What are my intentions in holding on to things? Why are they causing suffering?” Notice, through asking those questions and pursuing them even further, that he was able to gain awakening. You understand your mind when you take the larger perspective. This is another one of the reasons why, when we think thoughts of goodwill, we emphasize all living beings out to infinity. That gives us the right perspective as we come back to our own mind and our own body, and we try to bring them together here at the breath. So it’s not just the breath that’s healing, it’s that larger perspective that gives us some distance from all the wear and tear of life, so that we don’t have to be worn and torn so much. We’ll put ourselves in a position where we’re worn and torn. We can live life, but the wear and tear doesn’t go past the surface, because we’ve learned to develop some really solid goodness inside.

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