Dedicating Merit

June 3, 2016

Focus your attention on the breath. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing. Let your attention settle right there. If the breath feels comfortable, maintain that rhythm. If it doesn’t feel comfortable, you can change. When we practice concentration, the aim is to give the mind a place where it can settle down and have a sense of security in the present moment, aware of itself, aware of the breath. So breathe in a way that allows you to feel secure here, feel comfortable here. Breathe in a way that’s soothing. There are so many things that come in life that hit us hard, so there’s no reason for us to treat ourselves harshly. The breath is the force of life. And because we can change it, we can change it in a way that gives us a sense of ease and well-being. Otherwise, we breathe in an uncomfortable way and it adds to our sorrow, it adds to our sense of being burdened. So try to find a breath that feels comfortable. One that the mind can settle down with and stay with, with a sense of interest, a sense of well-being. We’ve had a death in the community. At times like this, it’s always good to think about why we practice and realize that the practice is something we can hold on to in the midst of aging, illness, and death. The Buddha teaches us to look at these things squarely. To realize that once we’re born, these things lie in wait for all of us—aging, illness, death, and separation. And so when someone passes on, the Buddha has us reflect in two ways. One is to do good and dedicate it to them, because of the merit we do. Other people, when they’ve passed away, they know that we’ve done that, dedicated it to them, and they feel appreciation for that. That becomes their merit, too. When someone has passed on, we can’t talk to them directly, we can’t send them food, but we can send the current of the mind. So you want to send a good current, a current that’s refreshing, a current that energizes us and energizes them. This is why we practice generosity. Take the precepts, meditate. To begin with, it’s for ourselves and for others, but specifically when someone passes away, we do this so that we can put the mind in good shape. Realize that even though death has happened, there are still things that are worth living for. There are still good things in life, and the practice is the number one good thing in life. So we do this practice to put the mind in good shape so that the current that we’re sending to the person who’s passed on will be a good current, something they’ll be happy to receive. They see that we’re doing good in line with the good that they taught us how to do. That would be comforting for them. So we’re doing this partly for them. We’re also doing it partly for ourselves. As the Buddha said, when someone passes away, you have to reflect. One, something happens everywhere. There’s a story in the canon that King Pasenadi has come to see the Buddha. And while he’s talking with the Buddha, one of his courtiers comes to him and says, “Your favorite queen has passed away. She breaks down and cries.” And the Buddha says to him, “Didn’t you know that this was going to happen someday? Doesn’t this happen to everybody?” So anybody in the world who felt separation, who doesn’t die, we all face these things in life. This is our common lot. So reflect on that, and then we reflect that we have to prepare for these things. We’re seeing separation now, and someday we’ll have to face our own death. And are you ready? What good things do you need to develop in your mind that will enable you to feel confident that when you go, the mind will not be harmed by that, will not be taken down by that? Try to develop those qualities as you can. This is another reason why we meditate. We’re trying to develop the qualities that we’ll need at that point. Because you have to be mindful, you have to be alert. You’ll need concentration, you’ll need discernment. These are the qualities we develop as we meditate. So as you meditate, you’re actually preparing yourself, finding a refuge in the present moment, but at the same time giving yourself training in the qualities that you’ll need when you go. Because at that point, there are a lot of things that are going to be rushing in on the mind, and you have to be able to choose which is the most skillful thing to focus on. That’s what we’re doing right now. You focus on the breath. Other thoughts come in. You say, “Not right now, not right now,” and your ability to stay with the breath. And to put aside anything that’s going to be a burden on the mind, anything that’s going to pull the mind down. That’s a skill that you’ll need all the way through life and all the way through death, because death is something you do go through. It’s not the end. We come out the other side with a new birth, a new identity, and you want that to be an identity where you can continue to practice. Where you have the opportunities to hear the Dhamma, practice the Dhamma. In other words, you want a good rebirth. Ideally, we want to get to the point where we’re not reborn at all. But that’s not annihilation, that’s nirvana, ultimate freedom. So death is not the end. It’s something you go through. So you need the skills to go through it. Mindfulness and alertness are the skills in the beginning. Concentration, when you realize that at that point, all you can focus on will be your awareness, awareness itself. Even the breath at that point will go away. All the other thoughts will come and go, pains, feelings of pain. Sometimes there might be a little bit of pleasure in there, but it’s mainly pain at that point. Those things come and go, but the awareness stays. It’s a process that keeps on continuing, keeps on going. So you want to learn how to stay with that awareness so you’re not pulled down by other things and not distracted by other things. That’s what the concentration is for. So as you’re sitting here with the breath, realize that you’re developing a skill that you’re going to need. The ability to stay with something good and comforting, something that’s very close to your awareness. So when the breath itself no longer is there, you’ll be right here with awareness. You’ll be scattered off someplace else. Underlying all of this is the discernment you’ll need in order to realize what’s worth focusing on and what’s not. What will be for your long-term welfare and happiness and what will be for your long-term harm and pain? Giving into greed, aversion, and delusion will be for pain. Giving into lust, giving into sadness, will be for pain. So you learn how to separate your mind from that. You realize that there are things that come up in the mind, but you don’t have to go into them. You don’t have to feed on them. You’ve got something better to feed on here. You’ve got the breath. You’ve got the confidence, the concentration you’ve developed, the sense of bright awareness you’ve developed. That will be your refuge, something you can hold on to. So these are two of the reasons why we meditate when someone has passed away. One is to dedicate the merit to them. Because of all the forms of merit, as the Buddha said, meditation is the highest. The merit that comes from generosity is merit. But even greater is the merit that comes from virtue. And even greater than that is the merit that comes from developing the mind through concentration and discernment. So you take that merit and you develop it and then you dedicate it to the person who’s passed on. If they find out that you’ve done this, either directly through their own awareness, or if they’re told, say, by a deva, they’ll appreciate that. That will be for their merit. That will lift them up, too. And as I said, if they know that you’re doing this, they’ll be happy to realize that you’ve maintained the traditions that they’ve trained you in. I guess that’s a sad thing in a family when someone in the family has been teaching you skillful things to do, and then when they go, you stop. So try to maintain all the goodness that you’ve learned and the person who’s passed on. That way you keep their goodness alive, even though the body’s no longer alive, even though they’re not here to talk to you anymore. At least the goodness that they have taught you, that can be their way of living on. And at the same time, this gives us an opportunity to reflect and learn how to be heedful. Because as the Buddha said, all skillfulness comes from heedfulness. Realizing that there are dangers in life, but that there are skills we can develop in order to avoid those dangers. And those skills are our refuge. The skills of being generous, the skills of being virtuous, the skills of training the mind through concentration and discernment. These are the skills we’re going to need to live our lives skillfully, and when the time comes to be ill, to be ill skillfully, and when the time comes to die, to die skillfully. These things are all things that can be approached as a skill. So here’s our opportunity to do good for ourselves and do good for others. That’s the best kind of goodness there is and a lot of things in the world that you can do are good for you, but not for others, or vice versa. It’s good for them, but not for you. But it’s the Buddha taught, and everything meritorious is good all around. It’s a goodness that doesn’t create divisions. The goodness of the world is in terms of wealth, status, praise, sensual pleasures. Because that kind of goodness doesn’t spread around. In other words, one person has these things, it means that somebody else has lost them. When you’ve got the people who gain and the people who lose, that creates divisions. But with merit, nobody loses. Everybody gains. And as a result, it overcomes divisions. It’s what brings us together. And when the time comes to go, we can still develop merit as a way of, as I said, keeping the goodness of other people alive. And sharing some of our goodness with them, directly through the mind. So as Ajahn Chah said, “Any goodness that has no drawbacks, that’s genuine goodness.” This is what we’re doing right now.

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