A Special Desire

October 2, 2016

Each of us has something special to us, which is that desire for happiness that has no drawbacks, that happiness that’s blameless, that happiness that doesn’t change into something else. That’s a part of us that we should respect, that we should actually give priority to. The problem is, as we live in the world, all these other needs of the world, all the needs of the body, the needs of our family, whatever responsibilities we may have, they tend to come in and press us in the other direction, i.e., to take whatever happiness we can find–good, bad, indifferent, long-term, short-term, whatever. Of course, we’re so pressed with other things that we don’t have the time, we don’t have the energy to find the kind of happiness that really would give us satisfaction, especially if we give satisfaction to that special part inside us. So it’s good that we take time to come out and meditate, to give that special part of the mind some time, to give it the opportunity to blossom. One of the important skills that allows us to find that kind of happiness is meditation. The Pali word for meditation, bhavanam, means “to develop.” We’re developing good qualities in the mind, the ones that enable that special part of the mind to find that happiness at once. Qualities like mindfulness, alertness, ardency. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. It doesn’t mean just simply watching things come and go. It means that you remember. When something that you recognize is unskillful arises in the mind, you know how to deal with it. You know how to let it go. If there’s something you recognize is skillful, you know how to develop it. You remember what’s worked in the past. Or what other people have told you that seems reliable, you put it to use. That’s what the ardency is about. Alertness is watching what’s actually happening, seeing what’s coming, and also seeing the results of what you’re doing to see if you’re really getting the results that you want. These are basic qualities of the mind. But for them to do work, they need to be developed. And then they turn to something special in the mind. Because you begin to realize that as you become more alert to what works and what doesn’t work in the mind, and you can keep that in mind, you can keep mindful of it, then you can apply that skill anywhere in your life, not only as you’re meditating. This enables you to be in charge of the mind. As the Buddha said, you want to get so that you can think whatever you want to think and not think whatever you don’t want to think. And you raise your standards for what kind of things you want to think about. You want to think about the way to a true happiness, a way to happiness with no drawbacks. And whatever skills that will lead in that direction, those are things you want to know, things you want to be alert to, things you want to remember. For example, when dealing with unskillful things coming up in the mind. You’re sitting here meditating, and all of a sudden something comes up related to the past, related to the future. Sometimes it’s tinged with a little bit of greed, or lust, or anger, or fear. You can’t let those thoughts take over, because otherwise you won’t be clear about what’s going on in the present. They’ll pull you off in other directions. Even sometimes things that are good, ordinarily, once they get in the way of your meditation, they become an obstacle. You can be thinking about all the good things you want to do, or the virtuous things, or the dangerous things you want to do today, or tomorrow, or the next day. But this is not the time and place for that. So even thoughts like that at this moment are things you want to clear out of the mind. The Buddha listed five techniques for dealing with unruly thoughts. The first one is simply when you notice that something has come into the mind that’s not skillful, or that’s not what you want right now. You just change the topic. It’s like changing the topic of a conversation. If someone’s talking about something you’d rather not talk about, you just ask them a question about something else. In other words, you simply recognize the mind is winded off. You remember, “I’m not supposed to be there. I’m supposed to be with the breath.” It’s quick. It’s simple. And many times it works. Other times, though, there’s something deeper in the mind that keeps pulling you in another direction. So you’ve got to dig it out. You can dig it out by thinking about the harm that these thoughts can create. If you were to think them for twenty-four hours, where would they lead? And then you compare that with what meditation can lead to, how happiness has no drawbacks. Which would you prefer? So what you see, you really would prefer being with the breath, because this is what provides you with the opportunity to get out of your ordinary ways of thinking. Then you can let go of those thoughts. Anything that helps you see the drawbacks of those thoughts. One technique I’ve found that works for me is to find the mind wandering off and thinking about who knows what, and ask myself, “If this were a movie, would I pay to watch it?” Usually the answer is no. The acting is horrible. The story is something you know already. I’ve been over it many, many times. That’s why I wait. I waste your time with it again. That’s the second technique. The third technique is when the thoughts are really insistent and the mind just keeps churning them out. You make up your mind you’re going to ignore them. It’s like someone else is having a conversation in the far corner of the room, but you don’t have to go over to that corner of the room and join them. You stay in your corner of the room. No matter how many thoughts there are in the mind, they don’t destroy the breath. It’s still here. So you can stay with the cessation of the breath, coming in and going out. And as for those thoughts, if you don’t pay them any mind, they’ll go away. It’s like a dog that comes around trying to get some food out of you. If you don’t feed it, it’ll bother you for a while and then it sees that it’s not getting anywhere and then it’ll go. The same with those thoughts. If you pay them any attention, that’s feeding them. So you don’t pay them any attention at all. Not even enough to chase them away. If you stay with the breath, if they’re going to be there, that’s their business, but you don’t get involved. And eventually they’ll dissolve away. That’s the third technique. The fourth technique is as you get more sensitive to the breath and the body, you begin to realize it’s not just the in-and-out breathing. It’s the whole energy flow in the body. And there are many levels to that. There’s the breath in the blood vessels, there’s the breath in the nerves going out to every pore. And as you get more sensitive to that level of the energy in the body, you begin to realize that when a thought comes into the mind, there’s going to be a slight little catch of tension, some spot in the body, which is the marker that actually allows that thought to stay. If you can find exactly where that little bit of tension is and release it, the thought will go. Now the thought comes, it’ll find out where its little marker of tension is. Because these markers can be anywhere in the body. But you look around. Try to notice, when the thought starts up, where do you tense up? If the thought stops for a moment, where was the tension released? That’s the spot you’ve got to look at. That’s the spot you’ve got to keep relaxed. That’s the fourth technique. The fifth one is simply to squeeze the thoughts out of the mind. One way is to press your tongue against the palate of your mouth and tell yourself, “I will not think that thought.” Just squeeze it out. Or if you have a meditation where you just repeat it to yourself, like putto, repeat it really fast. Putto, putto, putto, without any gaps. That squeezes the thought out of the mind. So altogether there are five methods. One, just change the topic. Two, think of the drawbacks of the distraction. Three, ignore the thoughts. Four, relax the fabrication of the thought. And five, squeeze the thought out. And you may have to work some variations on these five techniques, but they’re the five that work. As the Buddha said, when you master these five techniques, you’re the master of the mind. You can think whatever thoughts you want to think and not the thoughts you don’t want to think. And as I said, your standards of what thoughts are worth thinking will rise. The thoughts that used to go for little bits and pleasures wherever you can find them, you realize they’re not worth thinking anymore. You want to think something that’s about happiness, that’s more lasting, a happiness that has less blame to it, a happiness that’s free of drawbacks. You want to provide the happiness that that special part of your mind wants. And so as you’re more a master of the mind, it’s more likely that you’ll be able to develop whatever extra skills you need in order to find that happiness. But it starts with learning to be in the present moment like this, so you can watch the thoughts as they arise. One, the breath provides us with an anchor that we know we’re in the present moment. If we don’t stay with the breath, we tend to get floating away sometimes into the thoughts themselves, and we lose our frame of reference. So we want to watch them as a separate observer. So when you’re with the breath, you can be that separate observer because you’re in the present moment. Secondly, the breath provides you with a point of comparison. It’s like going out into a field, lying down in the field, looking up at the sky. You see the clouds, and if there’s no point of comparison on the ground, you begin to get lost a little bit. You don’t know which clouds are moving or which clouds are staying still, because there’s nothing firm to compare them to. But if there’s the top of a telephone pole, the top of a tree, something that’s very still, then you can use that as your point of reference. Then you begin to notice which clouds are moving and which clouds are staying still. It’s the same with the mind. If you have the breath as your frame of reference or point of reference, then you can see when the mind is moving and when it’s not. Then you’re not getting sucked into those movements. So stay right here with the breath. Master the ways of the mind. In other words, learn how to sidestep things that would distract you. You get to know your mind better, and you feed the mind well so that it’s more picky about what kind of happiness it’s going to go for. It’s going to lose interest in the ordinary little pleasures that it used to go running for, because now it sees that there’s a lot of drawbacks to those pleasures. You want something that doesn’t have those drawbacks. You want to have a more refined taste in your happiness. You want to find happiness that really does satisfy that part of the mind that wants a happiness without drawbacks. We know from the example of the Buddha and his disciples, we know from the lessons we’ve learned in his Dhamma, that such a happiness is possible. That’s a guarantee, but it’s an outside guarantee. You want to make that guarantee inside. In other words, you want to find that happiness yourself. So what do you do? You follow their path. Whatever the techniques of the practice were that worked for them, you try them out. Whatever qualities of mind they had, you try to develop them within yourself. So you can become a witness to the fact that, yes, that kind of happiness that the deep part of the mind, the part of your heart, really wants, it is possible. It is there. And once you find it, you realize that nothing else can compare. So here’s our opportunity to find that kind of happiness, make the most of it.

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