From a Position of Strength

December 24, 2016

We start the meditation with thoughts of goodwill, a wish for true happiness, our own true happiness, and the happiness of all other beings. And then we move on to the breath. This is because for a goodwill to be solid, it needs a solid foundation. It’s easy to think thoughts of goodwill when things are going well, when people are treating you well. But as the Buddha said, even if people are trying to kill you, you have to have goodwill for them. And that’s not easy. As he said, even if bandits were pinning you down and sawing off your limbs with a two-handled saw, you still have to have goodwill for them. That’s a demanding standard. So how can you have goodwill for them? Unless you have something inside that’s more solid than your body. In other words, there has to be a quality in the mind that is solid. That’s why we’re trying to develop it with the breath. You focus on the breath, make it as satisfying as you can. Think of it as a whole body process, based on breathing in and breathing out. And do your best to keep the mind still there, to find its sense of well-being, its food. The mind has its need for food, just like the body. So feed it well. The Buddha compares the different levels of jhana, or right concentration, to everything from water to honey and ghee, butter, to good food for the mind. Because it’s this food that strengthens the mind. When you have this good food inside, then the tendency to go out and want to look for things to chew on or nibble on outside gets a lot weaker. Then you find that you need less outside, which means that you’re less exposed to danger. So you want to nurture this sense of well-being inside, because that’s one of the causes for being able to have goodwill for people who are difficult, for people who are threatening. Even when your external circumstances are bad, try to make sure your internal circumstances are good. This is why we have to work at the concentration. The same holds true for the general principle of being equanimous about the arising and passing way of things. It’s all very fine when things are going well. And if we were just observers, there wouldn’t be much problem. But we’re not. We have to feed, too. As the Buddha said, that’s one of the defining characteristics of taking on the identity of a being, as beings need to feed. This is how we cultivate and come into conflict. We live in the same world. Your emotional food, your physical food, or where you’re looking for these things, may overlap with the areas where other people are looking for these things as well. It’s the nature of food that one person eats it and another person doesn’t get to eat it. As long as your survival as a being depends on having a wide range of food out there, there’s going to be conflict. And it’s going to be harder to simply observe the arising and passing way of things. You need to put the mind in a position where it’s really strong and it’s got its own internal source of food, like the city of Ayutthaya in Thailand. It was on an island surrounded by different rivers. And it not only had a city there, but it also had gardens and farms on the island. So when the city was laid siege to, it could withstand the siege for a long, long time. Think about the condition of the world right now. We’re being laid siege to. So you’ve got to have your internal gardens, you have to have your internal source of food. So at the arising and passing way of things, some of which will be okay and some of which are going to be very not okay. But you have to be okay with them so that you can deal skillfully with them and not get knocked off balance. Because if you’re knocked off balance, there goes your goodwill. There goes all the other good teachings that you’re trying to be mindful of. Because a sense of being threatened can very easily take over. So you need something inside that can’t be threatened. Ultimately, the only thing is a taste of the deathless. That’s the only thing that’s totally secure. But the path there is also a safe path, the path to realizing that your internal qualities are the things that matter most. These are your true food, these are your true strength. So you want to nurture them well. Put in the effort to develop a good, strong state of concentration. The word “effort” here relates, of course, to right effort. We chanted it just now. Chandaṁ janeti jñāyamati viriyāṁ arapeti cittaṁ bhagavad-dhāti mad-dhāti You generate desire and you uphold your intent and your persistence. In other words, you learn how to motivate yourself on the path. When you find that you’re getting discouraged, the mind isn’t settling down. The way you’d like it to, you’ve got to give yourself pep talks to keep yourself going, to remind yourself that this may take time. Sometimes, even when there doesn’t seem to be much concentration at all in the mind, there are still little seeds there. If you had no concentration, zero concentration, you wouldn’t be able to sit here. You’ve got some. It’s just that you need to learn how to stitch together those little moments. Or, to use another analogy, it’s like little seeds. You walk along the path and there are little tiny plants sprouting along the path. And you want to look carefully. Some of those plants are weeds, but some of them are going to be trees. Trees that can provide shade. Trees that can provide fruit. Trees that can provide timber. So you have to learn to see which of the little seeds here you have to nourish and which ones you have to protect. So those little moments of concentration, you protect those. And when you find yourself naturally slipping off, say, “How can I stitch this together, just at least for one more moment, or another moment?” And bit by bit by bit you find that you can stitch them all together. So generate desire. Be persistent. Really stick with it. Don’t let yourself get discouraged. Another reason why we give ourselves pep talks is to uphold your intent. In other words, remind yourself why you’re doing this, what you’re after here, what you have intended to do to begin with. Hold that high. You’re here to get the mind to settle down. You’re here to get the mind to gain a little more clarity. This is something human beings can do. But it requires dedication. It requires ardency. In other words, putting your whole heart into it. And all of the skills of character that are required for mastering a skill. This is one of our weaknesses as a culture. Our physical skills, the manual skills, the skills that everybody used to have to learn, have been taken over by machines. And there are very few people left who’ve learned the skills that are needed to stick with something long enough to be skillful at it. But if you can think of any manual skill or physical skill you developed, remind yourself, “How did you develop that?” There had to be the desire, but the desire had to be just right. In other words, not so strong that it got in the way, but strong enough so to keep you going. Yet you have to be observant. You have to notice when you’ve made a mistake and not let the mistakes destroy you. If you fall, pick yourself right back up. Remind yourself you’re not made out of glass. You fall off the breath, you’re not going to hurt anything. Just get back on right away. And try to be quick in noticing when the mind is about to slip off. So all these are the attitudes of right effort that go into right mindfulness, and right mindfulness goes into right concentration. They’re all connected. And it’s by developing these strengths that, in the Buddha’s image, we develop a fortress, a solid, safe place. The difference here being, of course, that we’re not doing battle with other people. At least, we’re not trying to kill them as they would with a fortress. We may have to get into conflict with other people as we try to work out what’s best in society. But we have to do it with goodwill. Otherwise, if you’re dealing with another person who’s difficult and they sense you have ill will for them, it’s going to be a bother. But if they sense some goodwill, at least, you never know. Like those bandits trying to saw off your limbs. If you really have goodwill for them, maybe you can say a word that may not stop them from sawing off your limbs, but will get to them. Which would be for their long-term welfare and happiness. This is why we need that solidity inside, so our goodwill can actually find an expression. That may not make a difference right away, but it will make a difference in the long-term. You always have to remember, it’s the long-term that counts. So we’re working on a long-term happiness. Remember that question that the Buddha said lies at the beginning of discernment or wisdom. “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The wisdom there lies, of course, in seeing that there are things you can do, that you have to do, and that long-term is better than short-term. It sounds like a no-brainer, but sometimes we have no brain when it comes to issues of happiness and well-being. And that’s because we don’t have a good foundation. We lose our minds because we feel lost. So to maintain your mindfulness, to maintain all the things you know are good inside, you’ve got to develop the sense of being solidly centered, that this is your safe place. Then when you come from a safe place in your thoughts and your words and deeds, they’re all for the good. Both your good and the good of the people around you. you

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