An Independent Goodness

June 20, 2017

We meditate for the sake of a happiness that’s independent of outside conditions, but also for a goodness that’s independent of outside conditions. When you read Ajahn Lee’s Dhamma talks in his writings, he talks a lot about being concerned about maintaining our goodness. I remember when I was translating those passages, it sounded a little strange. But then I reflected that the problem was not with Ajahn Lee, the problem was with our culture. There’s very little emphasis on goodness. You look at the books on Amazon, type in “goodness,” and they’re all about baked goods. There’s very little about what it is to be a good person, good in your actions, good in your words, good in your thoughts. But it has a lot to do with your self-respect, being able to live with yourself. Look at your actions and say, “I haven’t harmed anybody. I’ve been generous in cases where it was possible, and sometimes even difficult.” And having that kind of goodness inside gives you a genuine basis for self-esteem. I was on the plane yesterday overhearing a woman who was playing a little game with her daughter, and every time the daughter did anything good at all, she was being praised for all kinds of stuff. It struck me that too much praise for basically meaningless things makes the idea of praise, makes the idea of goodness, kind of cheap. You have to remember, goodness is something special. One of the reasons we meditate is to develop that foundation for goodness inside, so that even in difficult situations we have inner resources, we have our inner sustenance. When people mistreat us, either verbally or physically or mentally, we don’t have to throw the same stuff back at them. In other words, we can think of their actions as simply falling at our feet, and we don’t have to pick them up to throw them back. Let things stop there. Reflect on karma, the fact that we’ve probably got a lot of different kinds of karma that we have no notion of at all, what we’ve done in the past. So when something bad comes your way, don’t think of it as anything outside of the ordinary. Because, as human beings, we all have a mixture in our history of good and bad karma. But we don’t want to create any new bad karma. We don’t want to do anything that we realize is really beneath us. So we need these resources inside, a sense of well-being that comes from within. The sense of being generous, the sense of well-being that comes from being virtuous, and particularly the well-being that comes from meditation. Because once that’s developed, it’s really solid and it does get more and more independent of outside conditions. This month, with the weather, we’ve been spoiled. The first half of the month was unseasonably cool, but now it’s unseasonably hot. But we want to make sure that our practice keeps on an even keel. So remind yourself that the breath is neither cool nor hot with the weather outside. In fact, when it’s hot outside, you can actually think of a cooler breath inside. Find the spots in the body that are cooler than the rest. Think of the energy of that coolness spreading out with the breath as you breathe in and breathe out. In the same way as when it’s cold outside, you’re trying to find the warm spots inside. Emphasize those. Because your willpower needs support. And so the breath and the ability to get your mind centered are an important sustenance for that. It’s easier to get the mind centered when you have been generous and when you have been virtuous. So all these qualities go together. For the time being, forget about the heat, forget about the cold. Just be with the breath, focused on finding a spot in the body where it is comfortable to stay focused. And as you’re attentive to the breath, the breath will begin to smooth out. And as the breath smooths out, there’s a greater sense of well-being inside. Just think of that well-being suffusing throughout the body. That is a support for the mind. It’s an inner source of well-being. But it also requires skill. Otherwise you can’t simply wallow in the well-being. You’ve got to keep watch over it. As I said this morning, it’s like a cache of food you have out in the wilderness. If you’re not careful, all the other animals in the wilderness are going to come and take your food. And then you’ll have nothing to support your goodness, nothing to support your happiness. You have to be, as the Buddha said, “heedful, ardent, resolute.” In other words, realize that little thoughts can sneak into the mind, worm their way into your consciousness. And if you’re not careful to get rid of them right away, breathe right through them, or even think of zapping them if you notice where they’re coming in, if you’re not careful to do that, they’re going to take over. So you have to have a vigilant eye as you watch over your stillness. And this is where the ardency comes in. As soon as you see anything unskillful happening, you do your best to replace it with something more skillful. When you’ve got something good, you protect it. Do what you can to make it grow, even if it’s just a little bit of well-being. Try to protect that. Some people have trouble saying, “Well, I don’t know what kind of breathing feels comfortable.” Well, hold the breath for a bit. Until not breathing at all gets really uncomfortable, then you’ll notice, when you breathe in, where does it feel good? Focus there. As long as things feel okay, maintain that okayness. Protect it. Watch over it. Even though it may not be the best food, it has the potential for becoming something really good. It’s like a little plant that hasn’t borne fruit yet. You don’t stomp on it because it doesn’t have fruit. Wait for it to develop. You water it. You nurture it. Make sure the bugs don’t come and eat it. And eventually the fruit will come. So show some patience. This is where the resolution comes in, or resoluteness comes in. You just stick with it regardless. And if things don’t seem to be going well, wait for a while. Be patient. Watch. Just see how they might be going better, or how you might be able to nudge them in a better direction. The instructions are there in the books, in the Dhamma talks, but sometimes you have to figure out what is precisely your problem. So stick with it. With this combination of qualities, this is what gives rise to the kind of food you need inside, the strength you need inside, this strength of concentration, this strength of mindfulness. It’s nurtured by conviction that your actions really do make a difference. So you’ve got to be careful about them. This is what the principle of goodness is all about. You want to act in a good way because the goodness will then come back to you. Then you can have that nice warm feeling inside that you’re also doing good for other people outside. So we all want good things in life, but we have to realize that they’re going to come only when we create the causes. And the causes have to come from within us. If your goodness relies on conditions outside being good, there’s nothing reliable about it. Those are the ways of the world. They have their pairs. There’s gain and there’s loss. There’s status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. And go down the list, heat and cold. And these things go back and forth. And for most of us, the quality of our actions goes back and forth as well. But you want something that’s solid, something that’s reliable. You have to make your mind reliable. You have to make it more solid and reliable too. And this is how you do it. Give it something to focus on, be mindful and alert, ardent. Give it something heatful and resolute. Cut the mind so that its goodness really is independent of things outside. So people can mistreat you, but you don’t mistreat them back. And you don’t suffer from their mistreatment. This is one of the big problems we have. People say things and we grab them and stab ourselves with them. Or they do things and we stab ourselves again. So no wonder we’re weak, with all these wounds that we’ve inflicted. Other people may want to inflict their wounds, but we’re the ones who actually inflict them. Otherwise their words can just go right past. If you don’t take them in, they don’t have to have an impact on you. So it’s not just the concentration. There’s also an element of conviction, also an element of discernment, realizing that the true causes of happiness have to actually come from within. The causes for suffering come from within. The things outside, those are just tools by which we can make ourselves suffer or make ourselves happy. Even when things outside are really bad, we don’t have to suffer. When they’re really good, we don’t have to be happy. We’ve seen this all around us. People know that no matter how good things are, as the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn’t have enough for our sensual desires. So we have to learn that we don’t look outside for happiness. We don’t look outside for the causes of our pain. They’re inside. And it’s up to us to develop the skills whereby we’re creating happiness, we’re creating the goodness, and not letting these things depend on outside conditions. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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