Even if It Rained Gold Coins

July 28, 2017

We start the meditation every evening with thoughts of goodwill, which is a wish for true happiness—our own true happiness and the true happiness of others. That’s to remind ourselves of our motivation. We want to find a true happiness that doesn’t harm anybody else’s happiness. Through the principle of karma, each of us has to find happiness within ourselves. But if we’re not skillful, we can cause a lot of trouble to other people, make it very hard for them to find happiness. So we’re looking for happiness that’s skillful. And it begins with training the mind. Because any happiness that’s based on things outside is going to cause conflict. You want something, well, somebody else may want it too. But here you are with your breath, and it’s totally yours. You’re totally free to range around in the breathing as much as you like. And try to figure out a way to breathe in a way that feels really good, so the mind can settle down in the present moment with a sense of well-being. So experiment for a while with your breath. Does long breathing feel good now, or shorter breathing? It’s good to start with long, deep breathing, to sort of air things out. If it continues to feel good, keep it up. At any point where it doesn’t feel good anymore, you can try changing. More shallow? Faster? Slower? Heavier? Lighter? See what the body needs right now. And see what the mind needs right now too. The mind wants pleasure, so give it a sense of well-being inside. It’ll be less likely to need to look outside. As the breath gets more comfortable, remember you’re not focusing just on the in-and-out breath, but there are breath energies in the body that you can pay attention to too, that are related to the in-and-out breath, but they’re more subtle. They course the bloodstream, they course through the nerves, through the muscles, throughout the entire body. And here again, you have free range. You go through the body. If you see any patterns of tension anywhere, just allow them to relax. That allows the energy to flow more smoothly. And when it flows more smoothly, there’s a greater sense of well-being, a sense of wholeness in the body as everything works together. This is an area where you have a lot of freedom. We live in a world where everyone has freedom of choice. There may be restrictions placed on those freedoms, but the choice as to whether to do something skillful or unskillful, that’s always ours. You are finding happiness inside that doesn’t need to take anything away from anyone else. The question sometimes arises, though, is that selfish? And the answer is no. For one thing, you’re taking less of the world outside to find your happiness. And if you do decide that you want to help other people, you’re coming from a better place when the mind is trained. It requires strength to help the world. This is where you gain your strength, by developing a sense of feeling at home inside. Then, as you learn the skills to find happiness inside, you can share those skills with others. To what extent they’ll be happy to pick up on those skills, that’s their choice, too. This is the problem with living in a world where we have freedom of choice. Lots of people will choose to do all kinds of things, and you can’t stop them. Sometimes, if you try too hard to stop them, you become a tyrant yourself. The Buddha was once asked, “Will everybody in the world gain awakening, or one-half, or one-third?” And he didn’t answer. Venerable Ananda, who was there at the time, was concerned that the person who asked the question might get upset at the Buddha for not answering his question, so he pulled him aside and said, “Suppose there were a fortress. With a single gate and an intelligent gatekeeper, the gatekeeper would walk around the fortress and wouldn’t see a hole even big enough for a cat to slip through, aside from the gate itself. He wouldn’t know, then, how many people were going to go into the fortress, but he would know that who would go into the fortress would have to go through the gate. In the same way, the Buddha doesn’t know how many people are going to gain awakening, but he does know that if they’re going to gain awakening, they’re going to have to follow his path. In other words, he set out the path. He was happy to teach people who were willing to be taught, but it was up to them to want to be taught. That’s the kind of world we live in. We have to accept the fact that there’s a lot of limitation on how much we can do for other people. But whatever good we can do for other people has to come from within. So you’re starting at the right place. This is not an irresponsible happiness. It’s very responsible happiness that we’re after here, because we’re thinking about the impact of our happiness on others. Most people don’t think about that. At the same time, we’re finding a happiness that doesn’t have to depend on sensual pleasures. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn’t have enough for our sensual desires. No matter how fair the world becomes, or how you try to design a society, there are always going to be people who are not satisfied. Mara once came to the Buddha. The Buddha posed the question in his mind,”Is it possible to rule without violence, to rule righteously?” Mara came up and said, “Try it.” And the Buddha realized that that was a temptation that was going to get him into a lot of trouble. Then he said to Mara, “Even if one person had two mountains of gold, it still wouldn’t be enough for that person’s desires.” So nobody would be satisfied. There’s no satisfying the world. There’s no controlling the world. You have a little bit of control over other people, but only when they’re willing. So the Buddha took the wise approach, which was to straighten things out inside, take care of your corner of the world. And if it has an influence that spreads out, fine. Because after all, part of the path is not only to meditate, but you’re also generous and you’re virtuous. You give where you feel inspired. In terms of virtue, you’re generous. You’ve made up your mind that you’re not going to kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, or take intoxicants. That’s taking an important stance right there. If everybody took that stance, the world would be a much better place. But you can’t force people to do that. But you’re setting an example. And you’re relieving other people of the problems that could come if you were not taking the precepts. So it’s hard to say that we’re being irresponsible by practicing. We’re being very responsible about our happiness, because we realize that has to come from within. This is one area that’s part of the world, and it is the area that we have so much to put some control over, at least to some extent now. There will come a time when the body begins to get weaker and your mental faculties begin to go. So you want to take advantage of the fact that you have the time now, you have the opportunity now, you have the freedom now, to straighten things out inside. If you don’t do it, no one else is going to be able to do it for you. And if you don’t do it now, it’s not going to get easier with the passage of time. They sometimes say that Theravada is the selfish branch of Buddhism. But it’s hard to say that you’re being selfish when you’re looking for happiness through generosity, virtue, and meditation. Meditation is our sense of what you can actually do for other people. You cannot awaken other people. You cannot give awakening to anybody else. You’re the only person you can awaken. You can teach other people, you can give good examples, but then they have to make their choice, as in the case of the Buddha. He would have wanted, I’m sure, that the whole world would benefit from his teachings. But he had no control over that. So he cleaned out his own mind and offered to teach the skills to anybody else who wanted to clean out theirs. In a world of free choice, that’s the best you can do. For the areas where you can’t have any impact, you have to have equanimity. Because if you let those areas get you down, then you’re actually going to have less strength to do the things that you could otherwise have done. Equanimity is an admission of limitations. But it’s also a way of focusing your energy that, within the limitations of what you can do for the world, you’re going to do your best. So again, it’s not defeatist. It’s strategic. Because of the world outside, as long as people are looking for sensual pleasures and trying to fulfill their sensual desires, there will never be enough. But if you find an alternative source of well-being, the road to enough is actually the best thing you can do for everybody, for yourself and for the people around you. That’s what this practice is. It’s the road to enough. The Ajahns in Thailand talk about Nirvana as being the land of enough. It’s a dimension where there’s no hunger, there’s no need, and there’s no need for desire. It’s complete in and of itself. That’s the only enough we’re going to find in this world. So the responsible course is to do what you’re doing right now. Try to bring as much mindfulness and alertness and ardency as you can to this practice. So you can test the Buddha’s claims that this is the path to enough. And it’s not the enough of defeatism. It’s the enough of success.

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