For Long-term Welfare & Happiness

October 15, 2017

As the John Fuing used to say, take the merit that you made today and invest it. In other words, think of the sense of well-being that comes when you know that you’ve done something good, something helpful, something worthwhile. And make that sense of well-being the beginning of your meditation. When you try to get the mind to settle down, it has to settle down with a sense of ease, a sense of pleasure. This is the best way to do it. A lot of people don’t understand merit. As the Buddha said, acts of merit are another way of saying happiness. It’s an interesting idea. Happiness is not so much a feeling, it’s in the activity of doing something you know is harmless, something you know is actually helpful. There’s a sense of self-esteem that comes with that, which you don’t get with a lot of other pleasures. But this is a pleasure that gives you a good foundation inside. Because to practice meditation requires that you have some self-esteem, a sense that you’re able to do this. You’ve done good in the past, and now you can do it again. Raise the level of goodness inside. So breathe with a sense of well-being. Try to figure out what kind of breathing feels good, what kind of breathing that can maintain that sense of well-being right now. And allow it to bathe the body. Because, as the Buddha said, there are different kinds of merit. Generosity, virtue, meditation. Meditation outshines the others, in the same way that the moon, when it’s full, outshines the stars. It’s the same quality of lightness, but it’s more intense. Because merit, after all, is the Buddha’s first answer to the question that he says lies at the beginning of wisdom. This is not a lowly practice, making merit. The beginning of wisdom is, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” When you’re generous, it leads to long-term welfare and happiness. You observe the precepts, you meditate, all these things lead to long-term welfare and happiness. And they’re all things that you do. The wisdom lies in that realization that it has to come from something you do, the well-being that comes from just sitting around and feeling good. That comes from your past good actions. But that can wear out if you’re not investing it some more. So you’re invested here. This, too, is a way of being wise, getting the mind to settle down. Because it’s when the mind is settled down, when it’s clear, that you can see things inside that you wouldn’t have seen before. Our lives are shaped by our minds, shaped by our intentions. And if we’re not really clear about our intentions, the shape can be pretty strange. Yet also often you ask people, when they’ve done something, “Why did you do that?” And they’re not all that clear about what their intention was. Which is the most important part of the action? What do you hope to accomplish by your actions? If you do things just based on mood—feel, like doing something—you have no idea where that intention is going to go. So you want to be clear on, when you’re doing something, why you’re doing it. This requires that the mind be clear, still. It’s like the difference between watching a tree when you’re standing in front of it and watching the tree when you’re running past it. When you run past it, it’s just a blur. You may pick out a few details. But there’s a lot that you miss. Or if you take the time to just stand there and watch, you can see all kinds of detailed things you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. Unfortunately, in the beginning, what you see is a lot of distraction. You realize how much the mind is out of control. It thinks this, then it takes a swerve to the right, then a swerve to the left, up and down, jumping all over the place. It’s like the hobos who used to take trains around the country. They’d hop from one train to another train and sometimes have no idea where they’re ending up. But if you’re patient, the mind can jump around. But you don’t have to jump with it. This is an important principle in getting the mind under your control. It’s realizing that you don’t have to straighten out your thoughts. You don’t have to chase them down. A thought comes up that’s not related to the breath, not related to your object of meditation. You just let it go. You don’t have to figure out what it’s about, or turn it into an intelligent thought. Because the mind churns out a lot of random stuff, like those random word generators. And you have no need to keep track of everything. But you want to keep track of the breath. And that’s not destroyed by the words that come into the mind, the thoughts, the images. Take the image of the breath coming in and out of the body. Think of the breath as a whole body process. Let that sense of comfortable breath fill the body. And the more you get in touch with what feels good right now, in terms of the way you breathe, the less you’ll be interested in following your other thoughts. Because we follow our thoughts because we think they’re going to provide some pleasure for us. But here’s some immediate pleasure right here. So try to cultivate that. If the mind’s not willing to settle down with the breath, you can try another object. You can try the word bhutto. Just repeat bhutto in the mind. You can think about the different parts of the body, where your bones are. Start with the toe bones and work all the way up the legs, the pelvis, up the spine. If you find that interesting, stick with that. The whole point of concentration is to find an object that you feel comfortable with, something that allows the mind to settle down. See it. You see it to some extent as you’re trying to get it to settle down, but it becomes a lot clearer as the mind finally settles in on its object, feels at home here. And then the slightest little moves you’re going to see. You have a sense of where they’re going, good, bad, indifferent. Then you realize you can choose. You don’t have to follow everything that comes up in the mind. Then you don’t feel hungry. This is one of the reasons why concentration has to be based on something that feels good inside. Because otherwise something else comes up and you’re going to nibble on it, looking for a little pleasure here or there, because you’re not finding anything right here, right now. You’re trying to find a sense of what would feel good inside right now, in terms of the way you breathe, in terms of whatever the object you want to choose. Because this sense of well-being is actually good for the mind. It adds to the clarity and the understanding of what you’re doing and how you can direct your mind in the right direction. We were chatting just now about the different forms of blessing or protection, mangala, and one of them is having yourself well-directed, or rightly directed. Thinking about where your life is going to go. We don’t know how much time we have left, but we do know we have now. But you look in terms of the direction where you’re going. Because that can carry up a momentum that can go past this life and on to other lives. What do you want to accomplish with your life? And the mind is well-directed. You’re well-trained. You realize you have a wide range of choices. And you want to make sure that, just as you don’t do things on a moment-to-moment basis, simply on the basis of moods, you don’t want your life to be directed by your moods. You want it to be directed by that question, “What will be for your long-term welfare and happiness?” And that’s the question that goes all the way through the practice. Like today was in the words for donation, the notion of the kirtan at the very end, “For our long-term welfare and happiness.” And the monks accept this and spread the kirtan with this cloth, “For our long-term welfare and happiness.” It’s the gift that leads to long-term welfare and happiness. Observing the precepts leads to long-term welfare and happiness. Meditating can do that as well. And then you want to look at the rest of your life. To what extent does it fall in line with that principle, long-term welfare and happiness, rather than just the short-term? The things that glitter and are bright, things that are tempting, but they don’t lead to long-term welfare. That’s long-term happiness. When happiness or pleasure is not long-term, it turns into something else, and the something else is not pleasant. So it’s good to take time to think about what’s the direction of your life. Do you have the protection or the blessing of someone whose self is well-directed or rightly directed? Then you realize you have the choice. As the Buddha saw in the Night of His Awakening, the universe just goes around and around and around. There’s nobody who set out a plan for it. Nobody set out a purpose for it, which some people find disconcerting. But it’s actually liberating. We’re not here to serve anybody else’s purpose. We’re here to serve our own purposes. But you want to make sure that you don’t take that in a selfish, short-sighted way. Because you end up serving something that’s not really in your best interest. Try to think about what would be for your long-term welfare and happiness. Then try to bring the whole rest of your life in line with that. Because you don’t want your life to be pulled off in lots of different directions. That’s what they call the palace hungry ghosts. They live in palaces part of the time, but then they get shoved out and they have to wander around exposed to all kinds of things. It goes back and forth, in the palace, out of the palace. Their lives are pretty miserable, even though they have some comfort. The fact that the comfort is not reliable can actually make the comfort a source of pain. So you want to look at your mind. Is your mind the kind that goes in the right direction, then turns around and goes in the wrong direction, back and forth? That’s not shaping your life well. You want to shape your life in a direction that goes someplace that’s really worthwhile. We have the example of the Buddha, the example of the Ajahns, all the men, women, and children who follow the Buddhist teachings. They say that it is possible to direct your life in the right direction, to stick with one direction and follow it all the way through. It actually comes someplace. The rest of the universe doesn’t go anywhere. It just goes around and around and around. But the people who practice do go someplace, someplace really worthwhile. It’s simply a matter of choosing that direction and then sticking with it. The beginning choice and the choices all along the way are ours.

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