Don’t Get Swept Away

January 10, 2019

As the chant said just now, the world is swept away. What’s not said in the chant is that we want to make sure that we don’t get swept away with it. This is why we meditate, why we train the mind. Because your body is part of the world and it’s going to get swept away. So that the goodness of your mind remains, that it survives. If we think of the Buddha as a survivalist, this is the thing he wants to make sure survives. What is the goodness of the mind? It lies in its actions. The actions come from your intentions. So we’re working on training our intentions so that we don’t get swept away with it. We don’t want to get swept away in the wrong direction. This means we have to develop three qualities. Mindfulness, remembering the importance of our actions and our intentions. And alertness, watching them as they happen. To be alert in the present moment, you’ve got to have something that anchors you here. Because otherwise, when the thought world appears in the mind, you go into that thought world and it’s like you’re in a different time, in a different place. It’s like a function key on your computer. You press that key and all of a sudden the keys mean something else. “C” doesn’t mean “see” anymore, it means “copy.” And the worlds that you create have their own time and their own place, even though the mind is still right here. But these worlds create other right heres. And when you’re in those other worlds, you don’t see clearly what’s happening. So you need the breath to keep yourself anchored. So be alert to the breath. And be alert to the mind as it relates to the breath. And be alert to the fact when it’s not relating to the breath, when it’s going off someplace else. This is where you bring in the third quality, ardency. You want to be really mindful, really alert. So as the mind wanders off, you bring it right back. You don’t let it stop to sniff the flowers or look up at the sky. There’s work to be done. Because when you are with the breath, then you want to be as sensitive as possible to it, and sensitive to its potentials. Because you’re not just sitting here watching things. There are meditation techniques where they tell you simply, “Watch what’s happening and don’t do anything.” But as the Buddha said, those techniques don’t really give you many results. There was one time when he was talking to the monks and encouraging them to do breath meditation. There was one monk who said, “I do breath meditation already.” This was a monk who didn’t have a very good reputation. So the Buddha said, “What kind of breath meditation do you do?” And the monk said, “Well, I try to put aside thoughts of the past and thoughts of the future and focus being equanimous with whatever comes up in the present moment as I breathe in, as I breathe out.” The Buddha said, “Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but it’s not the kind that gives the best results.” The one that gives the best results is when you train yourself to breathe in certain ways. Breathe giving rise to a sense of fullness, refreshment in the body. Breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease. Breathe in a way that you get sensitive to how the breath has an effect on the body, and how feelings in the body have an effect on the mind. How your perception of the breath and perceptions of other things will have an effect on the mind. So there’s work to be done. Because you don’t simply stop with having an effect. You’re trying to bring a sense of refreshment and then calm things down. Calm the body down, calm the mind down. Now, calming it down sometimes means you have to gladden it. In other words, the mind is lacking in energy. So try to breathe in a way that gives you energy. With the breath you might try long in, short out. Or if the mind is wobbly, you want to breathe in a way that steadies it. Steady the mind as you breathe in, as you breathe out. This can mean breathing in a way that you have a sense that the whole body is engaged in the breath. If you find that a particular thought is weighing on the mind, do your best to release the mind from that thought. In other words, look at how it comes, look at how it goes, and ask yourself, “When it comes, why do you go for it?” Because thoughts don’t come and stay on their own. They have to be nourished. They have to be stitched together. So why are you stitching them together? What’s the allure? And then look at the drawbacks. Here you are trying to get the mind to develop a new skill, the skill of settling in. You find yourself rehashing old arguments, rehashing old incidents, planning things for tomorrow, things you could do at any other time. For right now, here’s your opportunity to sit quietly and develop the skill of being on top of the mind here in the present moment. So, three qualities. Mindfulness, remembering why you’re here, and also remembering the lessons you’ve learned from past meditations as to what works and what doesn’t work. Alertness, as you watch the breath and watch the mind around the breath, to notice whatever you’re doing and also the results of what you’re doing. And then urgency, trying to do this well. When you have these three qualities, then whatever task you set your mind to, it’s bound to succeed. You are setting them to an important task. Maintaining the goodness of our mind, the goodness here meaning that we do things that don’t harm ourselves and don’t harm other people. We find our happiness in ways that harm no one. That’s the three qualities that are said to be attributed to the Buddha. Wisdom, compassion, and purity. Wisdom is knowing what’s skillful and what’s not, what leads to long-term welfare and happiness, and what leads to long-term harm and pain. Compassion is the desire not to want to cause either yourself or anyone else harm and pain. Then purity is looking at your actions to make sure they actually do fall in line with the principles of wisdom and compassion. So these techniques of working with the breath are not simply tricks or techniques. They’re there to embody certain qualities of wisdom, compassion, purity, goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others, discernment. All kinds of good qualities in the mind can get developed through this exercise. The exercise is not an end in itself, but it’s there to help you realize that you have this potential in the mind. You can find happiness in a way that harms nobody. You can find something of solid worth in the mind that doesn’t get swept away with the world. You want to take advantage of this opportunity to develop the skill. This is how the goodness of the mind reveals itself. It remains, even though the world is swept away. Things don’t endure. This endures. So do your best to develop all the qualities of the mind around the exercises with the breath. It’ll give you something inside that’s good and lasting, as everything else gets swept away. (whooshing)

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