Merit for the King

December 5, 2021

Today we’re meditating to dedicate the merit of the meditation to Rama IX, the late king of Thailand. Today is his birthday. He would have been ninety-four years old. We think of the goodness he’s done for Thailand, the goodness he’s done for Buddhism, and we’d like to show our gratitude. We can’t send presents to him because the post office doesn’t have an office where he is. But we can send the current of the mind. The Jains in Thailand talk a lot about this, that the mind has its currents, and they use the word “current.” The word “current” has two meanings in Thailand. One is the current of a river. There’s a flow that flows out of the mind, just like the current of a river. But they also use the word “current” to describe where the radio waves that are broadcast. You might ask yourself, “What kind of energy are you broadcasting?” The best energy comes from a mind that’s one. Otherwise, the signal is all garbled. Sometimes the waves cancel each other out, sometimes they augment each other too much. But if the mind is one, the waves are in unison. They can provide a good message. So think about what kind of current you’re creating. Try to make the mind as one as you can. That’s the first step in any kind of meditation, is looking at your mind and putting it in good shape. Sometimes you can sit down and just focus on the breath and there you are, no problem. Other times, the mind needs a little work. It either has too much energy or too little energy to settle down with the breath. If it has too much energy, try to think in ways that are calming. Give rise to a sense of well-being in the present moment. The Buddha recommends that you think about your past generosity, you think about your past virtue. Or you can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as inspiring examples for what you want to do. In terms of your generosity, especially think about times when there was something you wanted to use, but you realized that someone else could make good use of it, or would be happy to have it, and you were able to overcome your stinginess and you gave it, not because you had to, but because you saw it was the right thing to do. Same with your virtue. Try to think especially of times when you could have broken the precepts, there might have been a reward, you could have gotten away with it. But something inside you said, “No.” Other people might not know that you’d broken the precept, but you would have known. And you had a sense of honor that you didn’t want to do that. Think about these things. It gives rise to a sense of uplifting energy in the mind. It’s calming to the mind. It’s the kind of happiness that feels really, really good, unlike the happiness of sensual pleasures, which feels good for a while and then turns into something else. But the knowledge of your past goodness sticks with you for a long time, and it’s good for a long time. On the other hand, if you have too much energy in the mind, you can think about death. Death could come at any time. When we’re born we fall in line, and it’s not the case that we always go out to the end of the line. Sometimes younger people go first, older people go later. Where you are in line, you don’t know it. You could be very close, and there’s very little advance warning. Are you ready to go? You stop and you realize, “Well, no, I’m not. I’ve got to stir up some energy to work on the mind, so I will be in good shape in case I have to go.” Think in these terms. It gets the mind into balance. When you realize it’s ready to focus on the breath, then you direct your thoughts to the breath, and then you start evaluating it. Start out with some good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. But then you can ask yourself, “What kind of other breathing would feel better?” You can try shorter breathing or in-long-out short, in-short-out long. Faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Weaker, stronger. And if you find a rhythm and texture of breathing that feels really good, then you stick with that as long as you can. As long as it feels good. Try to stay in the present moment as much as you can. You bring three qualities to this. Mindfulness, keeping things in mind. In other words, remembering why you’re here, remembering to stay with the breath. The same thing with remembering how to recognize skillful mental qualities when they come up and unskillful ones when they come up. Remember what to do. So even though you’re in the present moment, you do make some reference to the past, just enough reference to be useful. The same with the future. Instead of sitting here thinking about how much you’d really like to get an awakening or how much anything in the future you’d like, you realize the best way to prepare for the future is always to be here in the present moment, developing mindfulness and alertness. Especially if you start thinking about work you have to do. The responsible thing is to start thinking about the work. You have to remember your mind is like a tool. And if you use the tool without taking care of it, after a while the tool becomes useless. It’s like a carpenter’s tools. If the carpenter doesn’t keep his saw sharp and his chisel sharp, then after a while they become useless. So even though it takes time to sharpen these things, you have to stop your work for a while and sharpen them. It’s the same with the mind. The mind needs to be sharpened because it gets really dull. So remind yourself, if you have any worries about the future, the best way of preparing for the future is to come back in the present, to learn how to apply the past to the present moment in a skillful way, and apply thoughts of the future in a skillful way, to add to your motivation to stay right here, right now. As for thinking about the past, sometimes you’re thinking about times when the meditation went really well. You start wondering, “Why is today’s meditation not so good?” Well, think about the past only to the extent that you can ask yourself, “Well, what did I do to make it go well?” And if you can’t remember, let it go. If you can remember, give it a try. See if it works this time around. If it doesn’t work, well, it’s time to pay more attention to the present moment, because the present moment is where all this is happening. It’s where you’re developing your skills, because you want to be able to see your mind in motion, see your mind in action. They now have what they call spiritual technology, where they can manipulate the brainwaves or give you biofeedback so you can manipulate your own brainwaves a little bit to get you into concentration. But they can’t guarantee any kind of insight, because insight comes from watching your mind in the present moment, seeing where you have choices and seeing where the choices make a difference. That’s something only you can do for yourself. As for meditations that were really good in the past, you can’t watch them anymore. Just keep telling yourself, “What’s happening right now is better than what happened in the past.” Because at least you have the opportunity to see. Years back, when I was at Wat Dhammaset, we’d have these salesmen come driving past the monastery, sometimes in the afternoon. There was a guy who sold water jars, and his spiel was pretty simple, just water jars, water jars. There was a guy who sold salt, and his was pretty simple too, just salt, salt. There was the one who sold Chinese dumplings. He had the most elaborate spiel. You could hear his truck coming over the rise, and he had a little loudspeaker on the top. He seemed to be a little bit drunk. Every day he’d call out that he was selling his Chinese dumplings, and he’d always say, “Today’s dumplings are better than yesterday’s.” And then the next day, “Today’s dumplings are better than yesterday’s.” Day after day, he kept on getting better and better. He wanted one that was going to reach the Platonic ideal of Chinese dumpling. But then someone pointed out to me, “Well, where are yesterday’s dumplings right now? If they’re not in your intestines, they’re down in the cesspool. So whatever dumplings you have today, they’re better than yesterday’s.” So it’s the same with your meditation. No matter how good it may have been in the past, what’s good about it now is the lessons you may have drawn. And if you didn’t draw any lessons, then just forget about it. Focus on what you’re doing right now, because it’s the state of mind in the present moment that really matters. So work with the breath to get it comfortable. If there are pains in the body, you don’t have to pay any attention to them. Focus, to begin with, on the areas of the body that you can make comfortable. When you feel that you can stay there solidly and the breath energy feels good, then you can think of that good breath energy going through the pains. Just to loosen up any tension you may have developed around them. And then, when you’re feeling really secure, you can actually investigate the pain. See what is it that takes a physical pain and turns it into a mental pain. In other words, something that you find trouble sitting with, that’s something you say you can’t stand. What’s the bridge? Did John say that the bridge is perception, the mental labels and images? You look into that. What’s your image around the pain? Why does it feel like it’s so invasive? Is the pain actually there in the knee, if it’s in the knee? Is it the same thing as the knee? Actually, they’re different things. The knee is made out of the four elements. The pain is not any of the four elements. The pain is something else. And then there’s your awareness. That’s something else, too. It knows the pain, it knows the blood. It knows the body. The body doesn’t know itself. The pain doesn’t know itself. It doesn’t have any meaning to itself. We’re the ones that give it meaning. That’s what meaning is to have for you. You start looking into the perceptions you have around the pain, you begin to realize you’ve taken these things, you’ve glommed them together, when they really are separate. And when you can perceive them as separate, then it’s a lot easier to live with the pain and not make it a pain in the heart or a pain in the mind. This way you learn how to maximize the pleasure that the elements in the body can provide, particularly the breath. And you learn not to be pained by the pain. That provides a really good foundation for the mind to be here in the present moment with a sense of well-being. And that’s the kind of mind that creates a good current. The kind of current that you would be proud to send to somebody, especially somebody like the king who had done so much good. Something he’d be happy to express his appreciation for. And this is one of the ways in which meditation is good all around. All too often people say, “You’re meditating, you’re just looking out after yourself, you don’t care about other people.” But you’re realizing the mind is like an electricity generator. It generates a lot of electricity, a lot of power. With all these undrained minds going around generating all sorts of weird currents, it’s good to have somebody who’s generating a good steady current, a calming current, a nourishing current in the mind, getting that energy into the world. So put your mind in a state where you’d be proud to present it to the king, and you find that it’s a gift not only for the king, but also for you and for everybody around. As I said in the morning, when we meditate like this, when we practice the Buddhist teachings, we’re trying to make sure that goodness doesn’t disappear from the world. We can’t be responsible for what other people do, what kind of goodness they try to maintain. But just make sure you don’t ignore the goodness that you can develop, the goodness that you can give. Because that’s a gift that benefits everyone.

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