Right Here in the Present

October 16, 2022

It’s been an active day. And it’s been active in a good way. So start with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all the people who came today. Goodwill for the people who didn’t come today. If you want to make your quest for happiness reliable, you’ve got to learn how to have goodwill for everybody. Because after all, your happiness is going to depend on your actions. And if you have ill will for anyone, it’s going to be very easy to misbehave around that person or those people. So you’ve got to ride hard on your thoughts. Ask yourself, is there anybody out there for whom you would wish to see suffering? You can probably think of a few people. And ask yourself, what good would come from that? And part of the mind might say, well, justice would be done. But then you have to remember the whole issue of justice. It depends on knowing that there’s a beginning point to the story where it’s easy to point out who was the first person to misbehave. Or who was the first person to react to someone else’s behavior in an outrageous way. And then you can tally up the score. But as the Buddha said, a beginning point for samsara, this process of going on and dying and being reborn, dying and being reborn many, many times, has no conceivable beginning. So you can’t even conceive it, much less know it. So where would you arbitrarily place the starting point for the story? You can see people behaving outrageously right now. Then you have to remember the fact that you’re living in the same world as people like that. It has something to do with your own karma. In this way, thinking thoughts of good will, even though they extend out in all directions, keep bringing you back right here. You see the results of your past bad karma, and you ask yourself, do you want to keep on doing that? Well, no. Do you want to keep on experiencing those results? No. So you’ve got to learn how not to create any negative karma. That means getting your mind under control. Good will has a beginning point for that. But you’re going to need a lot more than good will. Good will is both a determination and a kind of mindfulness. So let’s develop our determination. Let’s develop our mindfulness. That’s why we bring our attention to the breath. Keep the breath in mind. As for all the other beings in the world from whom you have good will, you can let them go for the time being. Because you realize that the beginning point of all your experience lies right here. So you want to get the beginning point in good shape. So you focus your attention here. You use the breath because the breath is very close, close to the mind. As you get more and more familiar with being right here, it puts you in a position where you can see more clearly what’s actually going on in the mind, and particularly what kind of intentions are coming up in the mind, and how do you act around them. The Buddha said he got his practice on the right course when he began to divide his thoughts into two types. Those are based on unskillful motivations, and those are based on skillful ones, basically. Are you familiar enough with your intentions to know which ones are going to be skillful and which ones are not? If you’re not, you’re leaving a really important part of your life unprotected. So you want to hover around right here. That is, stay with the breath. It requires that you take an interest in it. This is why we talk about working with the breath, playing with the breath. The energy of the breath has an impact on the body and has an impact on the mind. And then learning how to adjust that impact. So it feels really good being here. If you’re going to keep watch on the mind, you want to put yourself in a position where it’s comfortable to stay. You want to observe the behavior of a particular gang. They set themselves up in a room across the street and watch and watch and watch. And if they’re in an uncomfortable position, they can’t watch for long. So they have to be provided with some comfort, but not so much comfort that they fall asleep. Well, it’s the same here. The only difference being that you can provide yourself with lots of comfort, and if you maintain your mindfulness. It doesn’t have to push you to sleep. And that way you can provide yourself with lots of good feelings inside. By the way you breathe, ask yourself, what would feel really good right now? What kind of energy would you like? Well, you can provide that. Breath has all kinds of potentials. What would feel really gratifying? Which parts of the body seem to need breath energy? Let it go right there, straight there. And then keep that up as long as it feels good. And as you focus on the breath like this, you can’t help but see your mind. Particularly as you try to set one intention up to stay with the breath. Turn up against it. Because this is the way the mind is as it goes through the day normally. One intention comes, then another intention comes, then another one comes, and they keep mingling. And if you don’t have a clear frame of reference or point of reference, it’s hard to keep track of which intentions you’re actually acting on. All too many people, when you ask them, why did you do that when they did something that was harmful? They’re often at a loss. They just felt like it. Why do they feel like it? They don’t know. So you have to ask yourself, when something unskillful comes into the mind, why would you want to act on it? Because you’re not paying careful attention. If you really do pay careful attention right here, you begin to realize that just feeling like doing something actually has lots of steps. And there are lots of choices that the mind is making in the course of going from one step to the next. And if you can’t see that, you’re lost. If you can see that, you can direct those choices in the right direction. So learn to stay right here. If you have a feeling that the mind needs to rest, okay, let it rest right here. But rest mindfully. In other words, be clear about the fact that you’re staying with the breath. Otherwise, you begin to zone out. A sense of comfort arises and things begin to dissolve into a very vague kind of state. Sometimes you come out of it and you ask, was I asleep right now? Well, no, but was I awake? Not really. That’s delusion concentration. In other words, you’re still, but everything’s very blurry. There’s no way that that’s going to help gain any insight, because you want to keep your mindfulness sharp and clear. Know that you’re here with the breath. And that’s why other things, just let them go. But hold on right here. The image that I’d like to give you is of red ants. They have these big red ants that tend to live in mango trees. I guess they must eat the sap of the tree. I guess they certainly don’t eat the fruit. But they will attack anybody who tries to pick a mango. And when they attack you, they bite. And when they bite, they hold on. In fact, if you try to take the body of one of these ants who’s biting you and pull it to get it off, sometimes the head will detach from the body, and it still doesn’t release its grip. And as John St. Island would say, try to have your mind hold on to the topic of your meditation with that kind of tenacity. Otherwise, just have a sense of what would feel really good as you breathe in, breathe out. And then try to maintain that. Things will change. The needs of the body will change. Things will change in the course of the hour. So try to notice that. And the breath starts getting mechanical. Otherwise, you’ve found a rhythm that you like, and you just stick with it and stick with it and stick with it. After all, it’s not quite so good, but you still stick with it. Okay, the mind is going to get irritated. It’s going to want to go someplace else. So try to be on top of things. Be really, really sensitive. And what’s holding you back from being sensitive? Well, your concern about other things. Well, let all of that go. It’s just your awareness of the breath right here, right now, with that sense of ease. And you can cut through all the other moorings you have that keep you tied to the world. You’re creating another world here inside. And it can be very simple. Just awareness, breath, sense of fullness, sense of ease. In the beginning, you’re talking to yourself about it. You can put all those things together and hold them together. And then when they seem to be at ease with one another, settle in. Okay, then you can stop the talking and just be with breath, breath, breath, coming in and going out. You’re talking about noble silence on retreats. But they actually took the term from something else. It’s from the second jhana, when the mind is no longer chatting to itself. If you really want to rest, that’s a good place to rest. But it does require that you chat to yourself a little bit to begin with, to get things adjusted and get things just right, and to catch the mind one-on-one. But as you settle in, this seems more and more the natural place to be. You can let go a lot of that conversation. And the mind can get really energized by the fact that it doesn’t have to talk anymore. And you see, it’s possible to find a genuine form of well-being. It doesn’t require that you take anything from anyone else. It doesn’t harm anybody. It’s in this way that doing the practice is a form of goodwill in and of itself. I mean, obviously it’s goodwill for yourself, but it’s also a way of showing goodwill to others. You don’t need to keep leaning on them. You can be less and less of a burden. What is and is not dharma. If what you’re doing is burdensome on other people, it’s not dharma. It’s not divinity. So here’s one way of being really unburdensome. And that thought can make it even more appealing to stay here. So whatever thinking you have to get engaged in, to fend off the thoughts that say, well, this is selfish. This is not accomplishing anything. The world is falling apart. What am I doing here? What can I say on my breath? This is the best place to be when the world is falling apart. You’re not contributing to the falling apart of the world. And at the same time, you’ve found something here that gets the mind headed in the right direction. If you have to leave the world, okay. If you have to stay on, you’ve got a good place for the mind to rest so it can gather its strength, so it can continue doing what’s right, even though everybody else may be doing all kinds of unskillful things. You’ve got your own independent source of goodness right here inside. So dharma being something that you, everyone has to know for themselves. It’s an individual thing. Yet somehow we keep getting told that it’s all about interconnectedness. As the Buddha pointed out, the way we’re interconnected with one another is through our karma. And there’s a lot of suffering that’s involved with that interconnectedness. Here we’re trying to find something independent inside so that whatever karma we do have is going to be good. We can find something inside that’s totally independent. So be intent on focusing right here. A lot of important things are happening right here. And there are a lot of things that you can come to understand right here as you understand them. So we’re here to rest. And there’s going to be work to be done right here as well. But as long as the mind needs to rest, allow it to rest. There’s no hurry to move on to anything else. Because everything you need to see is going to be right here. With a sense of well-being, a sense of being stable, a sense of feeling at home right here. You’re putting yourself in a position where it’s a lot easier to see. And to develop the sensitivity that you’re going to need to see things that have been happening all along. But you’ve been missing. Here’s your chance to open things up. Amen.

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