Happy to Be Here

March 20, 2024

Those five recollections that we chanted just now, if we’d stopped with just the first four, it would be pretty depressing. Aging, illness, death, separation. It would seem like Buddhism deserves its reputation for being pessimistic. But it doesn’t stop with the four. That’s the fifth one. We’re the owners of our actions. And we have the power to do a lot of good and a lot of evil. The whole purpose of the teachings, the Dhamma that the Buddha left behind, is to give us some sense of how much good we can do with our actions. We have the power within us to create a lot of happiness. One of the important ways of doing that is to train the mind. We train it through generosity. We train it through virtue. And we train it through meditation, like we’re doing right now. You give it something good to think about, something that’s easy, nearby, that can be restful, soothing. The breath. You can breathe in lots of different ways. Engage in short breathing, long breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. And you can experiment. Try different ways of breathing. See what feels best right now. Usually in the beginning it’s good to breathe long for a while as a way of energizing the body and emphasizing the sensations of the breathing. But then when long breathing starts to feel tiresome, you can shorten it, make it softer, more shallow. Not quite so long, not quite so deep. But experiment. Because sometimes if you engage in soft, gentle breathing too much, it puts you to sleep. So you can find what way your breathing feels good right now. And if there are any thoughts that go wandering off, you don’t have to pay them any attention. You’ve got lots of choices in the present moment. This is an important principle to keep in mind. Some people think that we’re taught that everything we experience in the present moment is determined by past karma. The Buddha never taught that. In fact, he argued against it. He said if that were the case, people would kill because of what they’d done in the past. Sex can do all kinds of things horribly, but they wouldn’t be responsible in the present moment. There’d be no idea that certain things should be done, certain things shouldn’t be done, because you could always argue, “Well, I was just determined that way.” But we do have these choices. Think of past karma as being raw materials with which you create the present moment. And so right now, create a good one. Breathe calmly in a way that feels really satisfying inside. Because if we’re going to get the mind to settle down so that you can really watch it and understand it, it has to like being here. So ask yourself, what kind of breathing would you like right now? Which parts of the body seem to be tense or tired that could use some good breathing? Because think of the breath not so much as the air coming in and out of the lungs. Find a sense of energy that flows through the body, and you can feel that anywhere. So you make a survey of the body. And if you see that there’s any part that feels starved of breath energy, allow it to participate. Think of the breath going right there as you breathe in. And if you find that you have winded off, come right back. Try to take a matter-of-fact attitude toward this. Some people get really frustrated. They try to settle down, and the mind won’t settle down. But this is something that takes time. There’s no enlightenment button on a computer that you can push. The Buddha would often compare meditation to different skills—skills of carpentry, carpentry techniques. All these skills take time. And think about what is involved in mastering a skill. One, you have to want to do it. And two, you have to stick with it. When things don’t go well, you don’t give up. You pay careful attention to what you’re doing. And if you see that something is not getting good results, you try to figure out why. So there are four qualities—desire, persistence, intent—in other words, looking intently at what you’re doing—and then using your powers of analysis. Try something new. Ajaan Fuhr, my teacher, would say, “Be observant and use your ingenuity.” If something doesn’t work, if the mind is not settling down, what would it like to do that would get it to settle down? If the breath is too subtle to focus on, you can think of the bones in your body. Think of the bones in the tips of your fingers. Where are the tips of your fingers right now? Is there any tension? If there is, start to relax and move up to the bones of the second joint, the third joint, the palms of the hands, the wrists, the forearms, the elbow, the upper arms, the shoulders. Then start down to the toes and work up through the feet, the legs, the pelvis, up the spine. Visualize these bones, one by one by one. Visualize where they are in your body right now, and relax around that spot. Work your way all the way up to the skull, and then think of your awareness covering the whole body. There are lots of ways you can get the mind to be willing to settle down. Because only when it’s settled down can you really see it. Otherwise it’s running around and it’s like a blur. You can pick up bits and snatches, but you don’t see whole sentences. You don’t see whole thoughts. You don’t see the whole connection between something you’ve done and the results of what you’ve done. Most of us have minds like that whirlwind in Dante’s Inferno. The whole beings are in that whirlwind, and they come around every now and then, and a face will show up, and they’ll say a few words, and then they get sucked into the whirlwind again. It’s whatever they’re trying to say. They can’t get the full sentences out, and all you can see of them is just bits and flashes here and there. For most of us, our minds are like that. They’re running around all the time. So what you want is to get the mind to settle down, to be happy, to be here, and then you can watch it. Because the basic principle of the Dhamma is that the reason we suffer in life is not so much because of things happening outside. It’s how we process sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations. So we have to learn how to watch our minds. We have to really understand what they’re doing. One of the best things to do in the beginning is to give them something good to do so that they’re happy to be here and it’s good watching them. You’re developing good qualities in the mind. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. Alertness is the ability to watch what you’re doing. Ardency is the desire to do this well. When you’ve got those three qualities working together, you can apply them to any task and they help the task to go well. But particularly here with the mind, they’re among the skills you need to get to know the mind, get the mind to settle down. Then it’s a place where you can watch it. Any little movement that comes when the mind is still, you can see it. It’s trying to get yourself very, very quiet. Suppose you know there’s a mouse in the walls here in the meditation hall. Well, where is the mouse right now? You have to listen for the noises it makes. For that, you have to get yourself very quiet. So it’s the same with the mind, those little movements of the mind. A little bit of greed here, a little bit of aversion there, delusion, jealousy, fear. You want to catch these things when they’re still weak. Then you can begin to say, “Why does the mind go for them?” We know that some of these, what the Buddha calls defilements, are things we like. Others we don’t think we like, but part of the mind wants to go with them. This is where it’s useful to think of the mind as being like a committee. You’ve got lots of different opinions in there. You have to learn how to make sure that the unskillful opinions don’t take over. That means you strengthen your good intentions, the intention to find a happiness. That’s inside you. That’s not going to harm you. It’s not going to harm anybody else. You’re working on cultivating that intention, working on strengthening that intention. So more and more of this inner committee is on its side. An important way of getting things on its side is to develop a sense of well-being, just being here in the present moment. Don’t be observant. See what the mind likes right now, what kind of breathing, where it feels good to focus your attention. You’ve got lots of choices, so explore them. There’s nobody hovering over you to tell you that you have to breathe like this or you have to focus like that. You’re free to explore. That fact in and of itself can make the meditation really pleasant. It’s something you enjoy doing. The more you enjoy being here, the more likely you are to stay. And the more you stay here, the more you see. The more you see, the more you understand. The more you understand, the more you’ll be able to let go of anything that’s unskillful or harmful in the mind.

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