Helping Others by Helping Yourself

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OK, let’s meditate. HINAM PAWANAKAN You focus on the breath. You’re focusing on the feeling of energy in the body. You can feel that anywhere, as the breath comes in, as the breath goes out. So take a couple of good long deep in and out breaths. To see where the breath is most prominent right now. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change. Make it shorter, or more shallow. Heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good. You’re trying to get your mind in shape. And to deal with the fact that we live in this world of aging, illness, death. We have to train ourselves so that we don’t suffer from these things. And just as we experience these things, the people around us experience them as well. And so there will come times in our lives when we have to help other people who are suffering from aging, illness and death. On the one hand we want to help them with whatever we can, with the medicine, or treatment, treatments for the body. But most importantly we want to help them with the mind. And to help them we first have to know what we’re doing. If you tell them not to worry, you have to learn how not to worry. If you tell them to have thoughts of goodwill all around, you have to learn how to generate thoughts of goodwill all around as well. That way you can talk from experience. And that way your teachings are much more powerful. When we look at the Buddhist descriptions of the things that people can suffer from as they’re dying, a lot of them have to do with worry. A lot of them have to do with recalling incidents from this life where they were wronged by somebody else. Or incidents where there was a lot of happiness and they miss that happiness now. Those are the things that you have to be careful to help them, so they’re not overcome by those thoughts. So with worry, when you find yourself worrying about the future, your future, the future of your family, you have to remind yourself that you really don’t know what’s going to happen in the future. Things can change radically. And too often when we’ve prepared for one specific danger, that’s not the danger that comes, something else comes. Which means that we need to have an all-around approach. Develop the skills that would be useful no matter what happens. When the unexpected happens, what do you need? You need mindfulness to remind yourself of what principles are really important in life. Because when something feels threatened, it’s very easy to fasten on that as being really important. When you begin to forget that there are things that are more important. As the Buddha said, we’re worried about losing our health, losing our family, losing our wealth. But he says those things are not important. The really important things are your right view and your precepts and your virtue. And you realize that those are things that you can maintain. That you’re in control of. You lose your virtue only when you throw it away. You lose your right view when you change your views. So remember that these are the things that are really important. So you want to develop mindfulness and you want to develop alertness so that when something unexpected happens, you can see exactly what’s happening. All too often we have a lot of preconceived notions that get in the way. And alertness, the ability to see what you’re doing while you’re doing it, clearly, correctly, is a huge help. Both in detecting what’s going on around you and then noticing how you’re reacting and whether your reactions really are justified, whether they really are correct. And then finally there’s the quality of ardency. That no matter how bad things may seem, you’re going to keep on trying to do the skillful thing. These are all qualities. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency. That you develop in the meditation. In the Buddha’s description of right mindfulness, which is his recipe for how to get the mind in right concentration. You stay focused on, say, the breath in and of itself. And you put aside all other thoughts. Especially thoughts that would give rise to greed or distress concerning the world. And you do this with these three qualities. Mindful, to keep the breath in mind. Alert, to see what’s actually happening. And then ardent, to do it well. You want to develop these habits. Because these are the habits that will see you through, whatever danger comes. This is a principle you see throughout the Buddhist world. The instructions the Buddha gives for getting the mind into concentration are also instructions that are useful for mastering any skill, for approaching any problem from a useful angle. There’s a series of teachings called the Basis for Success. And as the Buddha describes them, they’re principles for how to get the mind into concentration based either on desire, or persistence, or intent, paying full attention to what you’re doing. Or using your powers of analysis. In Thailand, they’ve taken those principles and they apply them to everything. If you want to succeed in your education, they say, you have to use desire, persistence, intent, and your powers of analysis. There’s even a helicopter repair hangar someplace in Thailand, where they have these four qualities listed on the wall. If you’re going to repair a helicopter, these are the qualities you need. So what you learn as you meditate gets applied all around. Any skill that you’re going to develop requires mindfulness, alertness, ardency, desire, persistence, intent, and using your powers of analysis. So the qualities you’re developing as you meditate are useful not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but also as you go through life in general. And as you get more and more confident in these qualities, more skilled at them, then you realize you have less and less to worry about in the future. There will be problems. There will be challenges. This is part of being a human being. There are the universal challenges of aging, illness, and death, and all the other little challenges that come from our own past karma. But if you have these tools, you can approach them with skill, and at the very least learn how not to suffer from them. When you miss the pleasures of the past, the Buddha says those pleasures are gone. And if you try to hold on to them, try to get them back again, they’ll slip through your fingers again. And John Fuhring once made the comment, all the things in life that we really want, especially in terms of sensual pleasures, we’ve had them before. We want them because we miss them. He says think about that for a bit. If you think about it, you get a strong sense of dismay. Because if you struggle and struggle and get them back again, then you’re going to lose them again, and miss them again, and go back and back and back and forth. The solution there is to provide a sense of well-being right here and now. By the way you breathe, by the way you allow the mind to settle down, and find some rest. Then you realize what you’ve got here, the sense of well-being, is what you miss from those past circumstances. And now you’ve got it in a way that’s skillful, in a way that you can learn to develop at any time, in any situation. So that’s how you overcome thoughts of nostalgia. As for thoughts of what you might really say is revenge, realizing that people have wronged you in the past, suddenly those thoughts will come bursting into your mind. You have to realize that you don’t know when this back and forth between you and those other people actually started. It could have gone many lifetimes ago. And who knows what the score is. When you have a game and you’re keeping a score, there’s a beginning point and an end point, and everything is determined by how you play in between those two points. But say if it were a basketball game, and you counted down all the times you scored a shot in that basketball game, but all the other times before then, what would the score be? And you’re thinking about that over many lifetimes, and it’s impossible to keep score. So as the Buddha said, when you’ve been wronged by somebody, the best way to end the back and forth is to make sure you don’t wrong the other person in return. And then you spread lots of goodwill. The same as when you realize you have wronged somebody else, lots of goodwill, so you don’t repeat that mistake. And so you don’t keep this back and forth. You keep the back and forth going. These are some of the ways that you can pull your mind away from unskillful thoughts right now, and as you go through the day, as you go through life, and as you approach your own death. Because you certainly don’t want thoughts of revenge coming up then. You don’t want thoughts of nostalgia. You don’t want doubts and worries to cloud your mind. You want to be confident in your mind’s ability to take care of itself, no matter what. In the beginning of life, we depend on strength of the body, strength of the mind working together. But as you get older, you begin to realize strength of the body is going to go. And all too many people, as the strength of the body goes, they let the strength of their mind go as well. They get weaker and weaker, more and more easily upset. But it doesn’t have to be that way. Strength of the mind can be independent. This is what we’re working on as we meditate. Independent strengths of mind. And we’ve developed those strengths within us. Then when other people are facing aging, illness and death, we’re able to help them, because we’re speaking from experience. They’ll be facing the fact that there are fewer and fewer things they can do. This is one of the frustrations of aging. Things you used to be able to do, you can’t do anymore. And the body fails you here, fails you there, doesn’t give any warning ahead of time, doesn’t ask permission. Which part of the body are you willing to have go first? Which part of the body are you willing to do without? Which part of the body are you okay as it grows weaker? It will just grow weaker on its own. It gets to choose. But if you’ve made your mind strong, then you don’t have to suffer from that. The same with the people around you, as they’re facing aging, illness and death. You want to emphasize to them that there’s so many things they can do. And to focus on what they can do rather than what they can’t. That’s why people who are on the deathbed, you want to make sure that they avoid thoughts of worry, and they develop as much goodwill as they can. Thoughts of worry, thoughts of nostalgia, you have to help them let those thoughts go. This is how you care for them. And the thoughts of goodwill, they cover whatever other hindrances there might be in their mind. So at the very least they go with goodwill in mind. Think of the Buddha’s example of the bandits who pinned you down and are sawing you into little pieces with a saw. The Buddha says even in a case like that, you need to have goodwill for them and for the whole universe. That way you go safely. If you go with thoughts of revenge, you’ve lost twice. You’ve lost your body and you’ve lost your goodness. But if you’re going to lose your body, make sure you don’t lose your goodness. These are the thoughts you want to keep in mind and thoughts you want to encourage in other people. As the Buddha said, you should protect your goodwill for all beings as a mother would protect her only child with her life. In other words, realize that your goodness is more important than your life. Because you’re going to get another life back again. But if you throw away your goodness, it’s hard to get it back. So these are the thoughts you should encourage in yourself and thoughts you should encourage in others. That way we can face the inconsistencies and the uncertainties of the world, knowing that we have the skills we need to keep ourselves safe, to protect our genuine valuables, i.e. the good qualities of our minds.

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