Good & Independent

December 24, 2024

There’s so much talk about how the world is interconnected and that we should celebrate that fact. The Buddha though was not one of the celebrants. He saw that interconnectedness is basically a process by which we suffer. When you look around you in the world, there’s a lot that you would not want to be connected to. And you realize how interdependent we are. We are in things we can’t really rely on in the world. This is why we have to learn how to become independent. Our goodness has to become independent. Again, you hear a lot of talk about how the idea of an independent self is the source of all evil. But we’re not talking about an independent self. We’re talking about independence. It’s a state that ultimately doesn’t require self. But to get there, you have to develop an independent self, to be independent in your goodness, like we’re doing right now. The conditions of the world could be pushing us to do all kinds of things, but we’ve decided that we want to train our minds. Train them in good qualities. Start out with mindfulness, keeping in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath. And then you’re alert to the breath. How’s it going? Is your mind staying with the breath? If you find that it’s wandering off, bring it back. That’s the quality of ardency. You’re trying to do this well. You’re trying to create a good quality, a good state in the mind. A state where there’s a sense of ease, refreshment, singleness. But the mind can stay with one thing. Alert, mindful, ardent. And put aside all of its concerns with the world. Because as we live in the world, we have to have our independent source of goodness inside. We need goodwill for all beings. We need goodwill for ourselves. And that’s what we start with, goodwill for ourselves. We realize that we’re suffering. There’s stress. There’s suffering in life. We’re borrowing the Buddha’s wisdom to see that it’s coming from our actions. We’re borrowing the Buddha’s wisdom. That’s what confidence is. Conviction is. Seeing that there have been good people in the world, and they’ve left behind a path on how to develop our own goodness. Goodwill is part of that. Because if you have ill will for anyone, it’s going to be very easy to do unskillful things. Around those people. And then, of course, that legacy of that unskillful action is going to be a burden for us in the future. And it’s a burden for us right now. It just doesn’t feel right. There are a lot of people out there in the world who can do a lot of evil. AI is now helping them, so they can do lots and lots of evil. So you need your own genuine intelligence. To find something inside that is independently good. That means having goodwill in your thoughts, goodwill in your words, goodwill in your deeds. This doesn’t mean that you do what other people want, necessarily. After all, their desires for what they may have around you may not be all that skillful. Basically, goodwill for others is realizing that their happiness is going to have to come from their actions, so that you wish that they will see the error of their ways if they’ve been acting in cruel and heartless ways. See the error of their ways and be willing to change. And anything you can do to help them in that direction, you’re happy to do it. Of course, you have to look at your own actions. What do you have to change? Here again, we’re guided by conviction. As the Buddha said, conviction is the proper response to suffering. Our ordinary response is bewilderment and a search. We’re confused by why we suffer. We search for someone who might know a way or two to put an end to that suffering. So we’re trying to convert that bewilderment into conviction. We listen to what the Buddha has to say about why we suffer. He says it’s not because of things outside, it’s because of things inside. The mind, craving, ignorance. So we try to work on these things. So from conviction we go to persistence, energy. We do our best to try to figure out what in the mind is unskillful and what in the mind is skillful. We encourage the things that are skillful, like heedfulness, mindfulness. Goodwill. Concentration. Things that are unskillful, we try to put them aside. Any hindrances that come into the mind, anything that gets in the way of your mind settling down right now. Even a thought about doing good some other time. The time or place for that. You’re trying to work on your concentration. That means developing mindfulness, keeping in mind this quest for what is skillful. And realizing that for the mind to maintain its strength to be skillful, it’s going to have to find some source of nourishment inside. That’s what the concentration is for. Trying to be with the breath in a way that feels really good. Remembering that the breath is not just the air making contact at the nose. It’s the energy that flows through the body that allows the air to come in, the air to go out. And you have to ask yourself, where do you feel that energy? How does it feel? Does it feel good? Do you want an energy that’s nourishing? Calming if you’ve been upset? Energizing if you’ve been tired? Relaxing if you’ve been tense? And if you’re paying a lot of attention, you realize that that energy responds very quickly to thoughts in the mind. You can say, breathe in long and it’ll go long. Breathe in short and it’ll be short. You don’t have to force it. Heavy, light, shallow, deep, fast, slow. This is the power of thought. The breath will change. And then you can think of whatever breath feels good running through the nerves of the body. It may run up against some pains or some patterns of tension. We can think of it permeating these things, going right through them. After all, the breath was there first. Also often we think of the body as being a solid lump and you have to pump the air in. But actually your first experience of the body, your first immediate experience of the body, is through the breath. That’s a priority right now. It can go anywhere in the body. Expand your awareness to fill the body. Expand the breath to flow throughout the body. So you’ve got the breath filling the body. You’ve got a sense of ease filling the body. You’ve got your awareness filling the body. They’re all right here. That’s what nourishes you. That’s what gives you strength. The Buddha’s image of the soldier is the right effort. They need the weapons of teachings in the Dhamma, but they also need nourishment. And the nourishment is in the concentration. And when the mind settles down like this, then it’s a lot easier to discern what’s actually going on. Why is it causing suffering? When blatant suffering comes up, you can see it really clearly. But there are subtle sufferings as well. And the subtle sufferings have subtle causes. Which is why you have to get the mind really quiet. One, simply so you can see them. You’re not running around. It’s like realizing that there are mice in the wall of your house. You can try searching for them by turning on the vacuum cleaner. Well, the vacuum cleaner is going to make so much noise you can’t hear the mice. You don’t know where they are. So you’ve got to turn the vacuum cleaner off. Turn off the TV. Turn off the refrigerator. Turn off everything so it’s really quiet in the house. And you can see where the mice are, or you can hear where the mice are. That’s one reason why we get the mind quiet, for the sake of discernment. Another is that when the mind is really at ease like this, it gets more discerning as to what states of mind are easeful and which ones are a burden. What are you doing that’s burdensome right now? Anything that pulls you away? From this sense of ease. Why would you want to go with it? You may have a habit of going with thoughts like that, but when you’ve got something much better, you can compare them and see that those thoughts have their drawbacks. You can let them go much more easily that way. Ultimately you begin to see that even the concentration itself has stress, a subtle disturbance inside. That’s how the Buddha went through the levels of concentration, noticing where there was a disturbance. What was causing the disturbance? It was usually a perception, activity of the mind. When you drop that activity, the disturbance would go away and you get deeper into concentration. He didn’t have any guides to tell him that he had to do this jhana or that jhana or this whatever. He was feeling his way instinctively through this question of where is the stress? What’s causing it? How can you let it go? How can you let go of the cause? That’s what discernment is all about. So when you develop these qualities, you can unburden the mind. And when the mind is unburdened, it has a lot more strength to do things that really are worthwhile. So this is how you maintain your goodness independently. You strengthen the mind inside. And then when you’re dealing with the world, you realize you have much less need to feed off the goodness of the world. We do try to see the goodness of the world, but as Ajahn Lee once said, “The goodness of the world isn’t true. The truth of the world isn’t really good.” There are a lot of limitations to the goodness outside, but if you can’t see any goodness at all, it’s going to be hard to motivate yourself to want to be good to the world. So you have to look for it. Use that to nourish your path as you go along it, until you reach the point where you really can be totally independent. Your goodness then, as the Buddha said, just becomes a natural ornament of the mind. That’s when it can be reliable. You can rely on yourself, and the world can rely on you. Then you reach a point where you don’t have to rely on the world. Because there’s a goodness that doesn’t have to do with worlds, doesn’t have to do with selves, any of the parameters of becoming. It’s totally beyond. It’s not affected by anything. It’s not dependent on anything. That’s why it’s genuinely good.

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