A Refuge in Mindfulness

February 23, 2025

Start with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is a wish for happiness. A happiness that’s true, a happiness that doesn’t change on you. You wish this for yourself, you wish this for others. Because true happiness comes from within. You have to develop the qualities you have inside your mind. Genuine and truth, to be the kind of happiness that doesn’t leave you. Because happiness of this sort comes from within, there’s no conflict between your true happiness and the true happiness of everyone else. Which is why goodwill can be a universal attitude. Start with thoughts of goodwill for yourself, tell yourself may I be happy, may I understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. And then you spread the same thought to others. Start with people who are close to your heart, your family, your very close friends. May they be truly happy too. And then spread that thought out in ever-widening circles to people you know well and like, to people you like even though you don’t know them so well, to people you’re more neutral about, and even to people you don’t like. Remember universal goodwill is called a brahma vihara, a sublime attitude, higher than the typical human attitude. The typical human attitude is you have goodwill for people you like and not for the people you don’t like. But the attitude of a brahma is goodwill for everybody, regardless of what they’ve done. Because basically you’re wishing that if someone’s going to be happy they have to act skillfully. This is the principle of karma. So if you wish for people to be happy, you’re hoping that they create good karma for themselves. If they’re behaving in unskillful ways right now, you’re hoping that they will see the error of their ways and be willing and able to change. Of course you have the same attitude for yourself. If you’ve made mistakes in the past, goodwill for yourself means hoping that you will see the times you’ve made mistakes and you make up your mind not to repeat those mistakes. And that’s an attitude you can have for everybody without hypocrisy. So based on that attitude of wanting to find happiness, you ask yourself, “Who in the world has found happiness?” Well, the Buddha is number one. This is why we take refuge in the Buddha. Not that he’s going to protect us by hovering around us. He’s going to teach us how to behave in ways that we protect ourselves. In other words, we try to develop his qualities in our minds. And those qualities, when we act on them, then protect us. Because when we have his qualities in the mind, we’re not going to do any evil, not going to do anything that’s harmful or hurtful. And one of the ways in which he developed the good qualities of a Buddha was through the practice of mindfulness and concentration. When he compared the path to different aspects of a fortress, concentration is the food for the soldiers and for the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper is mindfulness. When the Buddha taught mindfulness, he taught three qualities. First, you’re mindful to keep a frame of reference in the mind, like the body. Just keep remembering that you’re going to stay with the body. Take one aspect of the body, like the breath. Get to know the way your breathing feels inside the body, because the breath is not the air coming in and out through the nose. The breath is the movement of energy in the body. Where do you feel that movement right now, as you breathe in, as you breathe out? Focus your attention there, and then remember to stay there as best you can. That’s mindfulness, is remembering. Alertness means to watch what you’re doing. Watch the mind, watch the breath, right here in the present moment. See how they get along together. Another quality the Buddha recommended is ardency. We try to do this well, which means that when you’re with the breath, you try to be as sensitive to the breath as you can. What kind of breathing feels good right now? You can experiment, long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, or shallow. See what kind of breathing feels best for you right now. The part about concentration meditation is that you’re allowed to find a topic that the mind enjoys. And one way of creating a sense of well-being in the present moment is by the way you breathe. You can breathe in ways that make you tense and tired, or you can breathe in ways that are soothing, relaxing, when you’re feeling tense, energizing when you’re feeling tired. You have the choice. The breath is a potential. That you can shape. So take advantage of it. If you find yourself wandering away from the breath, then whatever thought pulled you away, just drop it. And you’ll be back at the breath. If it pulls you away again, drop it again. Each time you come back to the breath, reward yourself with a breath that feels really good. Because this sense of well-being that comes from getting the mind at ease with the elements in the body is an important part of the path. As I said, it’s the food for the path. It can feel nourishing, feel refreshing. And in this way, you have three qualities working for you. These are the qualities the Buddha himself developed. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency. You want to make these qualities strong because you’re going to be using them not only here while you focus on your breath, but as you go through the day. Whatever task you have, you’re going to need to be mindful as to what you need to do, alert to what you’re actually doing, and ardent in trying to do it well. That’s how you succeed at anything in life, is by developing those three qualities. Sometimes you hear mindfulness meaning just accepting whatever happens. Well, that’s a quality called equanimity, which the Buddha said is not always skillful, because there are different kinds of equanimity. There’s equanimity that comes when you simply tell yourself, “I’m just not going to react. I’m not going to set up hopes for anything to be better than what it is.” That kind of equanimity can get depressing if you don’t have something inside to nourish yourself, which is why the Buddha recommends that before you go for equanimity, you’re trying to go for well-being. So mindfulness is actually part of a meditation where you actually make changes. The Buddha himself said that when mindfulness is in charge of the mind, if there’s anything skillful that has not yet arisen, you’re mindful to give rise to it. Once it’s there, you’re mindful not to let it fall away. So instead of watching things coming and going, you’re making good things come, and you’re going to prevent them from going. As for unskillful things, if they’re not there yet, you try to prevent them. If they do come, then you try to get rid of them. In that image the Buddha gave of the fortress, where concentration is the food, mindfulness is the gatekeeper. This is a fortress on a frontier, so there’s a possibility that the enemy may come in. So the gatekeeper has to be very alert. Watch who’s coming in, and if any enemies come in, he has to recognize them, and stop them from coming. He doesn’t just sit there watching people coming and going. He has to be proactive. It’s only then that the mind can get into a state of concentration where you can settle in, have a sense of well-being, and see yourself clearly. So you too can be like the gatekeeper, you recognize unskillful qualities when they come, you keep them from coming into the mind. As for skillful qualities, you let them in, nourish them, allow them to grow. So when you develop qualities like this, you’re providing protection for yourself. And so in this way, the Buddha protects you. This is how we take refuge in the Buddha. We try to emulate his good qualities, so that they become our good qualities as well. So we have some time together now to meditate together. So try to provide some protection for your mind. Be mindful to keep the breath in mind, and explore it. We’re talking about the breath being the energy in the body. And if you get very sensitive, you can feel the breath energy in lots of different parts of the body, not only in the nose, or the chest, you can feel it in the abdomen, you can feel it in the neck. You can feel it in your shoulders, your arms, your legs. In fact, the Buddha recommends that when there’s a sense of well-being that comes from the way you breathe, you allow it to spread throughout the whole body like that, so the whole body is breathing together. And this gives you nourishment, a sense of well-being that saturates the whole body. You have the strength to do what you know needs to be done. As we go through life, a lot of times we know what’s right and what’s wrong, but sometimes we just don’t have the strength to do what’s right, or to abandon what’s wrong. So the Buddha’s teaching you good, solid concentration as a way of developing that strength. So unlike the body, which you exercise by moving it around, the mind here gets exercised by trying to be still. But alert, mindful. Ardent in trying to fill the whole body with awareness, fill the whole body with a feeling of refreshment from the breath. And once you have this strength inside, then you can use it for whatever purpose you have. Ideally, if you want to continue having the Buddha as your protector, a refuge in the Buddha, you want to use this strength for good things. So take this time to develop these qualities. And this way, when you take refuge in the Buddha, it’s not just words. You’re taking refuge in his qualities as you sense them in your own mind. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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