Separate

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A lot of the evil in the world comes from clinging. You hold on to something and you feel that your happiness has to depend on that. And it’s something that can be taken away from you. And so you do anything you can to make sure it doesn’t get taken away. And this is the source of a lot of conflict in the world. As people’s clinging gets more and more extensive, they feel more and more threatened. Sometimes we’re told that, living in an interconnected world, we should feel safe and secure that the interconnected net is supporting us. But you look at interconnected systems, it’s not the case that they work for the good of everybody involved. And sometimes we’re told that the idea of having a separate self is a source of evil. But having a separate self actually can be a source of strength and a source of goodness. If you realize that you have within you the potential to find something that cannot be taken away from you, and you learn how to cultivate that potential, then you have nothing to fear. Because you’ve got something inside that’s safe. This is why refuge and protection are such strong images in the Buddhist teachings. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, in the sense that we see what good qualities they have, and we try to develop those good qualities within us. We come down to wisdom, compassion, purity. These are all strong images. They are strengths. The wisdom there is to see that, not that things are so much interconnected, although you do see how things are interconnected, but you’re not looking for that. You’re looking for something that’s independent. The Buddha says the essence of discernment is to see things as separate, see things as other. Things that you used to hang on to, things you used to even think were an extension of yourself, really are separate from you. And as long as you feel that you have to depend on them, that’s going to be a scary thought. But when you realize you don’t, that’s one less thing that you have to cling to, one less thing you have to fear. And when you don’t have that fear, then people can’t take advantage of that fear. We see this all around. People are driven by their fears. Unscrupulous leaders. Prey on people’s fears. But if you can make yourself independent, then that’s one less person in the world that can be tempted to do things that are really unskillful. So when you’re meditating, it’s not a selfish activity, even though you are focusing on training yourself. But you’re training yourself to be reliable. So you do want to learn it. To see things as separate. We talked this morning about seeing how your awareness of things is something separate from the things themselves. And that awareness is where you’re going to be looking for that independent source of strength inside. So this is why we focus on our awareness in the present moment, directing it first in the breath, so we can cut away your thoughts of past and future. And get all the mind gathered around one thing. Try to expand the breath, your sense of the breath, so that it fills the whole body. It feels good throughout the whole body. They talk about the oneness of concentration, and it’s one in two ways. One in the sense you have one topic, and two, that one topic fills your awareness. You’re basically blocking out any interest in other things. So you can catch your awareness. And John Fung’s image is not a pretty image, but it makes the point. If you’re trying to catch eels, you don’t just jump down into the mud and try to grab them because they’ll slip off in all sorts of directions. But if you find something they like, and you say, “What eels like is a dead dog.” So you take a dead dog, you put it in a jar, a big jar, you put that down in the mud, and the eels will go into the jar of their own accord. So you create a sense of well-being with the breath, and allow it to fill the whole body. That brings all the different scattered parts of your awareness right here. And when things are gathered together like this, they’ll have to be still for a while. It’s like salad dressing in a bottle. You’ve got the vinegar, you’ve got the oil. And as long as you shake things up a lot, they’re going to stay mixed. But when you let things sit still for a while, things begin to separate out naturally. That’s what we’re trying to do as we meditate. Let your awareness of the breath separate naturally from the breath itself. You’ll have a greater sense of independence. Now this isn’t the goal of the practice. The goal is much more subtle than that. But it gives you a beginning sense that you have something inside that is really valuable, and it’s separate from things outside. The way your concentration works together with your discernment to give you something inside that you can rely on. That’s your compassion and goodwill. The Buddha says you want to make your goodwill as large as the earth, as solid as the earth. In other words, you put your goodwill together with patience and endurance. And the Buddha talks about goodwill as a strength. A mind that’s filled with goodwill is hard to penetrate, hard to attack. It’s interesting because we tend to think of goodwill as being a soft virtue. But he saw it as a strong one, an impermeable one. As he said, outside influences can’t come into your mind when you’re radiating goodwill. Remember, goodwill is not saying, “May everybody just be happy doing what they’re doing.” You look at it in terms of the teachings on karma, that people are going to be genuinely happy when they are doing skillful things. So you’re wishing that may all beings be skillful. Of course, that’s something you can’t bring out as an accomplishment. You can’t make other people skillful. But what you’re doing is you’re trying to set your intention in the right direction. What you’re contributing to the world is, if there’s anybody who wants to be skillful, you’re very happy to help. So the Buddha said, make your goodwill radiate out like that. Make the goodwill like the river Ganges. People can try to set fire to the river Ganges, but they just can’t. It’s not the Cuyahoga River in Kulilin back in the 70s, which could set on fire. And did. But the Ganges is cleaner than that, or at least it was in the time of the Buddha. People come with a torch and they try to set it on fire, and they can’t. Otherwise you want your goodwill to be such that it’s not only large, but it’s also cool. And it can’t be provoked. On top of that, the Buddha said, make your goodwill like space. Nobody can write anything on space. You try to take a paintbrush and you wave it around in space, and the paint doesn’t stick, because there’s nothing for it to stick to. You want the words of other people and their actions to slough off your mind in the same way. So you generate thoughts of goodwill. And you find that your mind gets, as the Buddha said, in a state of awareness release. Where again, it has strong concentration. And a sense of being released from ill will, released from thoughts of resentment. And there’s a great sense of freedom that comes with that. So that too is a strength, and that too makes your goodness independent of the goodness of the world. You’re not doing it because you think other people will be good, because you’re wishing them goodwill. You’re doing it because you need it. You want to make sure that your intentions with regard to others are totally pure. They tell stories of people who are subjected to torture. And the worst part of the torture is that the torturer knows something underhanded or dishonest that the person being tortured has done. And they prey on that. That’s the psychological aspect of torture. But if you have goodwill for everybody, then no amount of torture can harm you. At least, they won’t be able to get to you through psychological torture. So again, you’re looking for something good inside that nobody else can take away, that no one else can harm. And that’s when you start trusting yourself and the world. As for purity, the other version, you’re not sure of the Buddha. You look at your actions. You want to make sure that they are in line with your goodwill. They are in line with your wisdom. In other words, you want to make sure that you’re not harming anybody. Because if you harm other people, you’re going to harm yourself. So you look carefully at your actions. Before you do anything, you ask yourself, “What do I intend to do? What do I expect will come about as a result?” If there’s harm that you foresee, well, you don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any harm, you go ahead and do it. While you’re doing it, watch what actual results are coming out. If you see that you’re actually causing harm, you stop. If you don’t see any harm, continue. When you’re done, you look at the long term. And if, again, you didn’t expect to cause any harm, you didn’t see any harm while you’re doing it, but over the long term you saw that it was harmful, then you resolve not to repeat that mistake and you go over and talk with someone else who’s more advanced in the path. Borrow some of their wisdom. But if you don’t see any harm, take joy in that fact. The Dharma is not the sort of teaching that tells you not to have pride in your actions, in your good actions. You should have pride. You should have a good feeling about your good actions. Because what else do we have to withstand the voices in the mind that are very hypercritical? So it’s okay to take joy in the fact that you’re training. But don’t just stop there. Keep on training. That, the Buddha said, is how you become pure. And again, when you’re pure in your actions, you’re very careful. Then there’s no regrets. When there’s no regrets, your mind is, again, more independent. There’s nothing that the world outside can grab hold of to make you suffer. So in independence, there’s freedom. And in that freedom, you’re free from fear. When you’re free from fear, then there are no handles that anybody can get on your mind. So the mind has a strong sense of its separate goodness. It’s not in the least bit evil. It’s the source of goodness in the world. As long as you don’t make your goodness depend on the world, then the world will be able to depend on your goodness. And you can be a positive force. If nothing else, you’re a good example. And you’re not going to be swept up by the waves of fear that people try to transmit across society. So work on the qualities you have inside, the potentials you have inside. Develop a strong concentration, mindfulness, discernment. Because these are the qualities that allow you to have that sense of something that is separate, that no one else can touch. And it’s the most valuable thing in your life.

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