From Goodwill to Purity

January 14, 2018

We meditate out of goodwill—goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for others. And you remember, the purpose of goodwill is to make sure that your intentions are skillful. In other words, you spread goodwill to others, not because you think they deserve it. But because you need it. You need to keep watch over your intentions. And if there are people out there for whom you feel ill-will, it’s very easy to act in very unskillful ways, and that becomes your own karma. You’ve harmed them, you’ve harmed yourself. Nothing good comes of it. You’ve harmed everybody, regardless of whether you like them or not. And you can trust your actions more. But still, there’s room for unskillful intentions to come in if you’re not meditating. In other words, you really have to be able to see your mind clearly to know what’s going on. That’s where we focus on the present. Right here, right now, right at the breath. Because that’s the closest you can get to the mind. There’s the breath coming in and going out. And standing right here, you can see events going on in the body, and you also can see events going on in the mind. And you can catch your intentions a lot more clearly. And you can also catch the views that go behind them, your motivation, the perceptions that lie behind the views. There are many layers in here. But don’t think that the teaching on karma has nothing to do with meditation. It actually has everything to do with meditation. Because meditation itself is an action. That’s what karma means, action. And it’s an intentional action. But it’s an intentional action whose focus is right here, so you can see the qualities of the action itself. When we’re acting on the world, we’re concerned about how it has an influence on other people and how it’s affecting the world at large. And so our intentions tend to flow out. But when you’re meditating, the intentions stay right here. They circle back in on the present moment, so you can see them very clearly. They don’t go too far, or don’t go too far away. So right now you have the intention to stay with the breath. That’s a skillful intention, and you want to maintain it. And as you try to maintain it, you’ll see that other things will come in. Either lapses of mindfulness or other opinions about what you might be doing right now. And you want to catch them. You want to see them in time. The common problem when you’re starting out meditating is that you’re meditating on the breath and somehow you find yourself someplace else. And you don’t know what happened in the meantime. So you come back. The coming back is the good part. Then not knowing what happened in the meantime, that’s the bad part. That’s the part you’re trying to overcome. Because it’s in that big blind spot that unskillful intentions come in and they can take over your actions. So you come back to the breath and make up your mind that the next time you go, you want to know what’s happening. And you find that you get quicker and quicker and quicker at catching the mind and seeing the various stages. A little perception comes to mind. It’s just an image. It’s about thinking about something else. And then it disappears. Then it comes back again, and then it comes more and more frequently. And you become a threshold where you go with it. You make up your mind to go. But there’s that part of the mind that’s embarrassed about changing its intention so it’ll block things. That’s why there’s that moment of not knowing, that moment of forgetfulness. So we work on our mindfulness to remember. Each time we breathe in, each time we breathe out, we want to remember this is why we’re here. We want to watch the mind. It’s almost like you’re watching a suspect. Where’s the suspect going? Who are his friends? What is he planning to do? The police have to follow him. And if the suspect knows that it’s being followed, it’ll behave. But if the police step back a little bit, sometimes the suspect will think, “Well, nobody’s watching me.” That’s when you get to see it. So often it’ll be kind of out of the corner of your eye when you begin to catch the mind doing something, thinking something that pulls you away. So bit by bit you begin to see how much you are fashioning the present moment through your intentions. It’s not totally random. I mean, there was a kind of randomness to our ideas, but there’s also an element to which we’re shaping things. You see this in the way we look at the world. They’re talking about how much the brain has to adjust for the scattered images coming in through the eyes, sounds coming in through the ears, and trying to interpret and make sense out of it until everything seems seamless. Well, even more so in the mind. We try to make sense about what’s going on in the mind, even though the mind is pretty senseless about a lot of things. But our way of making sense out of it sometimes means that we turn a blind eye to certain things that are going on. When you’re meditating, you’ve got to make sure that that eye is not blind, that you actually see what’s going on in the mind. If there are discontinuities, random shifts, then the element of intention that goes behind all this, that’s the karma right now. The Buddha calls it sankara in other places. He equates sankara with intention and intention with karma. They’re all pretty much the same thing. It’s how you shape things in the present moment. If we notice that the way we’re shaping things is causing suffering, you want to turn around and look at that. You want to see what’s going on. What are you missing? Where’s the ignorance in here? To see that, you have to get very, very quiet and be very patient. Again, the police can’t know when the suspect is going to attempt his robbery or whatever, but they’re there, ready. They figure, “Okay, this is the suspect. We’ve got to watch it.” So they’re much better prepared to catch him when it finally happens. But they have to be patient in the meantime. The suspect may take weeks and weeks and weeks to make up his mind, to finish his plans. In the same way, the insights are coming into the mind when you see things happening that you didn’t see before. You can’t determine ahead of time that it’s going to take one hour or two hours or this many days or that many days. You have to learn how to be right here. As the policemen are watching the suspect, they have to make sure that they’re comfortable. Not too comfortable. If they’re too comfortable, they fall asleep. But comfortable enough. So you work with the breath. You have a sense of ease in the body that spreads around. You feel like you’re sitting here, bathed in a good breath. You feel the energy. Some people wonder about spreading the breath. I had a question tonight from someone on the phone. When you spread the breath, should there be pressure in the spot where you’re spreading it? You’re not supposed to put pressure on things. You’re supposed to think of things opening up, places where there are blockages. You want to open them up. First visualize they’re opening up. Do you actually get a sense that, yes, things are flowing better? You don’t have to push things. If you push things, you’re basically pushing the blood in the body, and then you can get headaches very easily that way. But allow things to open up so there’s a sense of ease and there are no blockages and no barriers to the ease moving around. That helps to minimize the sense of tedium that can sometimes come when you’re just sitting here, watching the breath. You’re waiting for something to happen, and it’s not yet happening. You just have to have confidence that you’re in the right spot. You know the suspects. What is the mind doing? What is it saying to itself? That’s a big factor right there. What are the perceptions behind what it’s saying to itself? Where are they coming from? You want to catch those. You want to catch the mind telling itself to do something that you know is unskillful. Then you know you’re on the right track. Here again, the sense of ease that comes with meditation makes it easier to see the mind when it’s misbehaving like that one. But you’re here not to punish it, you’re here to train it to realize that unskillful thinking is going to lead to suffering down the line. Remember the goodwill they were motivated by. We’re doing this for the sake of genuine happiness. It takes work, it takes time, it takes patience. But all of that is an expression of your goodwill. So goodwill is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling, but it’s being very careful about what you do. Having patience, having a sense of persistence, because you know this is something good that you’re doing here. When the texts talk about the three qualities of the Buddha, there’s wisdom, compassion, and purity. Wisdom comes from trying to figure out what you can do to lead to long-term welfare and happiness, and compassion motivates that. But then there’s the purity. And the way purity is developed is that you look at what you’re doing, figure out what’s going wrong, and then you adjust it. That’s the process by which you check, are your intentions only good or are they also skillful? The skillful ones give good results, and that’s what we’re looking for. You learn by trial and error. You learn by doing it again and again and again to minimize the errors. But once the mind understands why it’s causing suffering—unnecessary suffering for itself—then you’re freed from that particular kind of suffering. You see that you don’t have to do that. So when we have the chant, “May I be happy, may all beings be happy,” meditating is how we carry that wish out. So it’s effective both in inside and out.

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