Sorting Out Your Thinking

January 21, 2018

Those passages at the end of the evening chant, the ones that we do in translation, are chants that we repeat day after day after day. So they work their way into your brain so that they become among the committee members, among the voices in your mind, to remind you when your thoughts are ranging off course. They’re going nowhere. The chant on the body is to remind you that whatever care you have for the body, concerns you have for the body, it’s all going to end in aging, illness, and death, one way or another. What’s that going to leave you with? It’s going to leave you with a mind, with your karma. That’s the point of the next chant, the one on aging, illness, and death, separation. It’s all you’ve got left is your karma. Where does your karma come from? It comes from the mind. That’s what the mind takes with it. Other stuff gets left behind. And finally, the chants on goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, those are all for you today. You’ve got to deal with events of the world, reminding yourself that if you have ill will for other people, it’s not going to be a good thing. The proper attitude is one of goodwill for everyone, even people who are doing horrible things. After all, goodwill means you hope that they will see the error of their ways, change their behavior, and act in ways that lead to true happiness, which would make the world a better place. Equanimity there is to remind you that it’s not all that likely. That that will actually happen. In which case, you have to just let things take their course and focus on the areas where you can make a difference. So we have these reflections every evening to help you have weapons to deal with thoughts that are wandering away from the breath. Because as you sit down and meditate, all kinds of thoughts are going to come up in the mind. Thinking itself is not bad. After all, part of right concentration is direct thought and evaluation. You want to keep your thoughts with the breath, evaluate how things are going, what you can do to improve things. What is getting to the fact is that you finally get to the point where you realize that some of your thoughts are skillful and some of them are not. And how do you know? By their results. Now, can you be sure about their results? You have to get the mind quiet. But that’s the beginning of discernment, is seeing distinctions like that and then realizing that these distinctions make a difference. They’re not just idle comparisons. Some things you want to encourage, some things you want to discourage in the mind. And learning how to tell which is which, that’s the beginning of discernment. It’s directly related to the principle of karma. In fact, all our meditation is related to that and thinking itself as a kind of karma. So when you find your thoughts going off in the wrong direction, these other thoughts, the thoughts that we carry in from the chants, are meant to help you battle them off to realize that you’ve lost your perspective. You’re in a world of becoming that’s going to break apart. It’s going to burst like a bubble. It’s not going to leave you much, except if the bubble is stained, it’s going to leave a stain. So you’ve got to be careful. Because we find our thoughts all too interesting. We live in a culture that prizes people who have new and interesting, creative thoughts. And we tend to identify ourselves very strongly with our thinking. We have to learn to see our thinking as dealing in issues that are going to lead, eventually, to aging, illness, and death. In other words, nowhere we really want to go. There are so many rewards in the meantime, though, for our thinking, either material rewards or psychological rewards, that it takes a lot of contrary thinking to change the balance of power inside the mind. So these chants, take them seriously. They are a part of the meditation. And John Lee, when he’s discussing various ways of getting the mind to settle down, starts out with different ways of thinking that lead to sanghvega, a sense of dismay, a sense of even terror, over the fact that you’ve devoted your life to things that are going to lead to dissolution, lead to disappointment. And you’ve put so much energy into them that it’s time to step back and say, “Enough.” And start looking for a way out. This is what the meditation provides. So the thinking that leads you to the breath keeps you with the breath. That’s useful thinking. But anything else right now is not welcome. It’s not needed. Learn to have that sense of sanghvega. As John Lee said, if you don’t have that sense of sanghvega, it’s really hard for the mind to settle down. You’ve got your technique and the breath is comfortable for a while, but then you decide, “Okay, that’s enough.” Now you’re back to business. You’re old business. The whole purpose of concentration is to lead you to a point where you can’t do the sermon that tells you, “I don’t want to go back to the old business anymore. I want something better, something more solid, something of essence.” There’s a teaching that’s been floating around Buddhist circles for a while about corelessness, that there’s no core to us. The Buddha never said that. There is a core. The core is release. This is something of real value. And where is it to be found? It’s to be found in the mind. And how do we get there? We get there using the breath, using our topics of concentration, to lead us to something better than aging, illness, and death. Because that chant we had on aging, illness, and death, saying, “I am subject to these things,” is only part of the sutra where the Buddha recommends this reflection. It goes on to say, “Everybody, man, woman, child, ordained, or not, anywhere in the universe, is subject to aging, illness, and death, separation. And we’re all owners of our actions. That’s what we have left when everything else dissolves. It’s the results of our actions. The results of the actions they, too, eventually dissolve. But it is possible to follow a path of action that leads to the end of action, something that doesn’t dissolve. So the reflection that this applies to everybody is meant to give rise to samvega. No matter where you go, you die from this lifetime, go to another lifetime, no matter how good it is, it’s going to end. You’re going to be back where you started, or sometimes worse than where you started. So thinking about these things helps put your thoughts into perspective, the thoughts that you’re so solicitous of and so concerned for, so interested in. It’s like following a bad news story. You keep wanting to know,”What’s the latest? What’s the latest? What’s the latest that’s going on?” Then comes a point when you realize, even when you know what’s the latest going on, there’s very little you can do to stop it. It doesn’t provide that much of essence to your life. The same thing applies to your own thoughts. Very few thoughts really have any relationship to any essence at all. They’re just going to float by, influenced by forces. Many of which we don’t know. The news we get has been filtered for us. Looking back on our education, you realize how much of what you learned in school actually turned out not to be true. If you had a good schooling, you were taught how to think and how to evaluate new information. But a lot of the information that they gave you at the time, it turns out, was based on faulty research, faulty thinking. And yet a lot of these ideas are still sloshing around in our minds. So try to get a sense of samvega over your thinking, over your feelings, over all the other stuff that’s sloshing around in the mind, that keeps bubbling up in the mind, so you can focus your thinking on something that really is of essence, really is of value. So these chants, don’t just go through them to get the moment. Think about what they’re saying and the perspective they give on your thinking, both as you go through the day and especially as you’re sitting here meditating, so you can begin to get a better handle on this power we have of creating thoughts. Learn how to pick the ones that we’ve fabricated that are going to be useful and throw out the ones that are not. So that thinking, instead of being a hindrance, actually becomes one of the factors for awakening. Things that are fabricated but lead to something unfabricated, things that appear and disappear, lead to something that doesn’t appear at all. Something disappears just there.

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