A Blameless Well-being

March 31, 2018

Remind yourself each time you sit down to meditate that this is a good thing you’re doing. You’re expanding your range of the ways in which you can find happiness. In particular, you’re developing a skill in an area that’s blameless. You’re finding happiness that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. That’s pretty rare in this world. So many of the pleasures that we pursue involve getting something from someone else. In the best conditions, they’re happy to give whatever you want from them. In the worst, you take it. But it’s rare that there’s a happiness that doesn’t take anything from anyone at all. And at the same time, it clears your mind. So many of the pleasures in the world are intoxicating. You hold on to them. And part of the intoxication is related to the fact that they do cause harm to somebody else. You don’t want to think about that. Hence, you block that out of your mind. But here with a pleasure that doesn’t harm anybody, you can look around and see what’s going on in your mind, your pursuit for pleasure. Then you realize that many times you were going for a particular pleasure because it was all you were capable of. But now that you’ve got an expanded range, you can be a little bit more discerning. There’s that famous short story by Hawthorne. A group of old people are sitting around and bemoaning their wasted youth. They say, “We spent all our time in frivolous activities, and gosh, if only we could have our youth back again, we’d do so much good with it. Now we’re too old to have much strength.” Well, they take this drink which has an elixir. They don’t realize it. And all of a sudden they have strength again, and they seem young again. And they make all the same stupid mistakes that they made when they were young before. In other words, they didn’t learn anything, because that was all they knew. And this is something we have to watch out for, because when we die we do have another chance to take another body, to get young again. But you have to ask yourself, “How much of that do you really want? Do you want to go through the same things over and over again?” We’re talking today about the process of becoming in which you have a desire. And around that desire coalesces a sense of the world and a sense of yourself. And all too often we focus on the things we want without looking into the worlds that they require. We don’t look at the fine print or at some of the downsides of those worlds. So we keep going back to the same old things over and over again without looking at the whole picture. As the Buddha said, if you don’t have the pleasure that comes from a mind that’s concentrated, then no matter how much you see the drawbacks of your old sensual pleasures, you’re going to just keep going back. Here’s an opportunity to step out and, at the very least, go for something that’s clearer, less harmful, and gives you a chance to look into your own mind. As you’re focusing on the breath, you begin to see things about the mind. What does it mean to focus? Can you focus without getting tense? And when you choose to focus on something, why do you do that? Can you focus on the sensation of the breathing in a large part of the body and not tense up around it? Can you have a sense of ease that comes with the breath and not destroy it by trying to clamp onto it? To what extent is the tensing up in the body necessary to get concentrated on something? I was reading a book on Chinese medicine one time, and they were saying that mental work takes three times as much out of you as physical work. Because to hold an idea in mind, we tend to tense up someplace in the body to make sure that we don’t forget. It’s like having a little marker in the body that keeps us anchored to that thought. And you have lots of thoughts that are connected. You have lots of little tense anchors here and there. So no wonder at the end of a day where you’re thinking a lot, you’re going to be exhausted. So we’re practicing thinking about the breath, being aware of the breath, but not tensing up around it. And as a distraction forms in the mind, you begin to see what are the stages by which the mind goes for something else. Because these are areas of becoming as well, these little distractions in the mind. A random thought, a random desire, comes up and a little world forms around that. Or sometimes it’s just a stirring in the area where the mind and the body meet. At that point it’s too early to tell whether it’s physical or mental. But we decide that it’s a thought. And then we say, “It’s a thought about x.” Well, why did you make that decision? What made you want to think about x? And what are the processes by which you create that thought? As you can see, as you try to keep the mind with the breath. In fact, the intention to stay with the breath is what gives you an anchor so you can observe these things. Otherwise you just flow from one thought into the next and into the next. Sometimes you’re sitting around thinking about nothing in particular at all, and you find that your thoughts wander around in very strange ways. If you stop to think about it, all too often we don’t. We just wander from one thing to the next. Here, when you have an anchor, you know because the mind is leaving the spot that you’ve intended to stay with. You have something to compare. So you can see the process of what the Thayagines call the currents of the mind as they flow out to a particular object. In this way you get to know your mind a lot better. You can catch it when it’s lying to itself. In that way you get better control over it. You learn how not to listen to the lies, or not believe the lies. So you’re working on a kind of well-being that’s not just the pleasure. It gives you insight into the workings of your mind. And it gives you some control so you don’t go running after things that you shouldn’t have. You should know better. This quality of mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. The Buddha says it’s a protection, it’s a refuge. Because otherwise we go grabbing at whatever attracts our attention, good or bad, without thinking about the consequences. Or thinking about a few consequences, but not the whole picture. But if you learn how to see through the processes of the mind, and this is what concentration helps a lot with, and you are good at remembering the lessons you’ve learned, then you’re less and less likely to get fooled. Because the things of the world fool us only when we’re ready to be fooled. As they say, “Con men can fool you.” Fool people who are greedy. If you’re not greedy, they can’t fool you. It’s the same with the mind. If you learn how to develop an attitude that you don’t want to fall for the old tricks of the mind, and you’re a little bit wary about your old mind, then you’re less likely to get fooled. Particularly as you use the concentration to gain a sense of the other pleasures you can go for, the other things you can go for. And sometimes it’s not just a pleasure. We dress it up as saying, “This is my duty. This is what a good person does.” But all too often we take on responsibilities that cover up some idea of the pleasure we’re going to get from them. Years back, I remember hearing a Dhamma teacher say he didn’t want to be reborn in a world where there was no suffering, because he wouldn’t be able to engage in his compassion. And when you think about that, that’s pretty heartless. You want to have people suffering. So you can be compassionate. So you have to think about some of the things that you think are noble but actually would require somebody else to be suffering. So the stillness of the mind enables you to look at some of the common things that we go for, for whatever reason. And you can begin to see the way the mind dresses things up. And you can see right through it. And you see the advantage of having a well-being that really is blameless, that doesn’t take anything away from anyone at all. And the fact that we’re getting the mind concentrated requires that we do have a body, and the body is relatively healthy and strong, which means, of course, that we have to eat. So it’s only a waystation, not a thing. And that happiness that really is totally harmless, when you find that dimension in the mind that doesn’t change at all, that’s not dependent on anything, and it’s not causing anything, that can be found through concentration too. And you realize the advantage of that. It’s wise in the sense that it really is worth the effort that goes into it. And it’s compassionate, both for you and others. As you go for that, you’re taking yourself out of the feeding chain. And at the same time, you’re showing other people that this is possible. This is something human beings can do. So in this way, it’s a responsible well-being that you’re looking for, one that’s wise and compassionate. Wisdom and compassion are tools to help us see that this is the best thing that human beings can find, and one of the best gifts they can give to others. So as we practice, we’re refining our sense of what it means to have true well-being and the ways in which it’s found. We can also wean ourselves off of some of the old ways in which we looked for well-being that carried some harm in their wake. It’s our old attachments. They really are like addictions. As we’re saying today, the problem with addictions is that you go for your old habits because you can’t think of anything else, or you don’t think you’re capable of anything else, or you don’t think the world has other opportunities. And what we’re learning here is that there are other opportunities, and you are capable of them. So whatever old pleasures you were addicted to, whatever old ideas you were addicted to, you can outgrow that addiction. And letting those ideas go, you give them freedom and you gain freedom as well.

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