The One Seat (outdoors)

August 11, 2018

We start with thoughts of goodwill for ourselves and all beings, wishing true happiness for ourselves, wishing true happiness for everyone else. And then we bring the mind to the breath and try to keep it there. These are two ways of bringing strength to the mind. Staying with the breath gives you a good place to have a sense of well-being in the present moment. It gives you an anchor. But the anchor works best if you have a sense of well-being with the breath. So try different ways of breathing right now. What way of breathing feels best? You can try longer or shorter, heavier, lighter, deeper, more shallow, faster, slower. See what kind of breathing feels good for the body. Energizing when you’re feeling tired, relaxing when you’re feeling tense. Remember, the breath is not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the flow of energy in the body. And that you can feel anywhere. In some places it’s more obvious than others. But there is a kind of energy that flows through the nerves, down through the blood vessels. That’s what allows you to know that you’ve got a body here, and you can sense where the different parts are. If the breath weren’t flowing in those parts of the body, you wouldn’t have any feeling there. What you’re doing is you want to make the breath yours. Because all too often, when a strong emotion comes in—fear, anger, greed, whatever—there’ll be a change in the breath, and it’s not going to be a comfortable place for you to stay. It’s almost as if it puts a squeeze on your nerves. The greed has moved in, trying to take over the breath, to force you to act on it. The anger comes in and takes over the breath, to force you to act on it. The same with the fear, whatever the emotion. So you want to reclaim the breath. Think of yourself as being in a house where there’s one chair, and the chair is immovable. And whoever sits in the chair is in charge. The breath is your chair. You’re the chair in the body. So you don’t want anybody else to push you out of the chair. If you’re sitting in the chair, then everybody else who comes in the house has to stand. They can’t settle in the way they might like. You’re the one who settles in. So you have a sense of well-being with the breath, and you can maintain it. The maintaining is the work of mindfulness and alertness. The three qualities go into your concentration. Mindfulness is the ability to remember. Alertness is watching what’s actually happening, particularly what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. And ardency is trying to do this well, figure out how you can stay with the breath and not get knocked off by the different distractions that come by. And it takes time, but it’s an important skill. Because if the mind doesn’t have a sense of belonging right here, where will you belong? After all, this is your body. If some other emotion comes in and takes over, where are you going to stay? You need to provide a good place for yourself to stay, and this is the breath. This is what the breath does. And you try to make it as unshakable as possible. In other words, whatever emotion comes up, breathe through the emotion. Don’t let the emotion take the breath. You have to reclaim your breath. Make sure you’re staying with it, and it’s a good breath to be breathing. You’ll notice when emotions come up, there’ll be tension in different parts of the body. And as you get more sensitive to the breath, you can breathe through that tension. In other words, you fully inhabit the breath, and that allows you to fully inhabit your body. This is your space. This is one of the ways in which learning breath meditation strengthens the mind. You’re not pushed around. And you’ll find as you get to know your mind more and more, as you begin to settle down, good things come up and bad things come up. After all, we all have good and bad karma in our backgrounds. So you want the mind to be in a position where it’s not feeling threatened by either the good or the bad. You learn how to watch these things come and watch them go, and realize that they have power over you only if you let them. And only if you’re occupying a very narrow spot in the body. So you want to fully inhabit your body, all the way down to the toes, all the way down to the fingers, all around. Make this your space. And then spread thoughts of goodwill, both to yourself and to whoever else you may have harmed. Because a lot of times what comes up in the mind is the memory of things you’ve done. Or the realization that there are people out there that you’ve harmed, and in Thai they’re called your karmic debt collectors. You’ve wronged them at some time in the past, and now you want to get back at them. And even if there’s nobody really there, there’s a sense of the mind. There are parts of the mind that are very unfriendly, picked up from past karma. So you want to be in a position where you don’t feel threatened by them. You notice, “Okay, they’re there.” But that’s not the only thing that’s there in the mind. Your mind has its good qualities as well. You don’t want to forget those and learn how to be with them. To be with the breath puts the mind in a position where it can remember all that’s good here as well. And to reinforce that, we spread thoughts of goodwill. As the Buddha said, when you realize you’ve harmed people in the past, you can’t go back and change what you’ve done. And just feeling a lot of regret over what you’ve done is not going to solve the problem either. You have to simply make up your mind to realize that, yes, that was a mistake. And resolve not to repeat it. And then spread thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill to yourself so you’re not beating yourself up over the mistake. Goodwill to others, both to prevent you from doing something unskillful in the future. Because if you really have goodwill for all beings, you’re not going to want to harm them. But you have to remember that. That’s why the Buddha says goodwill is a form of mindfulness, something you want to keep in mind all the time. At the same time, as you enlarge your mind so it can encompass all beings and wish all beings well, it’s like turning your mind into a large river. Someone can throw a lump of salt in the large river and you can still drink the water because there’s so much more water than there is salt. As opposed to a narrow mind that doesn’t have goodwill for all. That’s like a little cup. You put that same lump of salt in the cup and it’s too salty to drink. The salt there stands for the bad things you’ve done in the past. And so you protect yourself from that by extending goodwill to everybody. You enlarge your mind as you do that. It’s the enlarged mind that has strength, the mind that can feel the whole body, be alert to the whole body, as you stay with the breath. And the mind can think thoughts of goodwill for everybody. And what does it mean to have goodwill for everyone? It doesn’t mean you like them. And it doesn’t mean you hope they’re going to be happy willy-nilly. Because where is their happiness going to come from? It has to come from their actions. Just as your happiness has to come from your actions. So what you’re wishing is that you hope that all beings will understand the causes for true happiness and be able to act on them. When you think about it, that’s something you can wish for everyone. Even people who’ve been very cruel, who’ve been very harsh, who’ve been very stupid. If they could only change their ways, that’s what you’re wishing. This also means that having goodwill for everyone doesn’t mean you let everybody push you around. Because you realize that if they push you around in unfair ways, it’s not good for them either. So goodwill means basically that you don’t want to harm anybody. And you will be happy to see them act in skillful ways. You don’t have ill-will for them. You don’t want to see them suffer. And we don’t have any ill-will for them, for other beings. It’s as if you protect yourself. Because the things that can do most damage to you are the intentions that are unskillful that you decide to go with. You run away from them. You run along with them. That’s the biggest danger in life. And so when you have the breath, feeling comfortable, your sense of awareness fills the whole body with a sense of ease. You have goodwill for all beings. There’s nobody out there that you’d like to see suffer. And why would you want to act on unskillful intentions? You can see clearly as they arise in the mind. They put a squeeze on you already, even before you’ve acted on them. And they lead you to do things that you’re later going to regret. And the only reason we go for things like that to begin with is when we’re feeling weak, threatened, unsure of ourselves. But when you have a sense of belonging here with the breath, and you remember that your intentions wish nobody any ill, you’re no longer weak, no longer threatened. You have the strength to do what you know is right. It’ll be good for you and good for the people around you. The Buddha doesn’t ask you to sacrifice your happiness for anyone else’s happiness. He says if you really know how to look for happiness, it doesn’t harm anybody. And genuine help to other people is not going to harm your happiness either. So learning how to have goodwill for all beings, learning how to be on good terms with your breath, good terms with the breath energy throughout the body, these are the things that give strength to the mind. And they’re your protection, both from things outside and, more importantly, from things inside. So try to work on these foundations. When the foundations are solid, when this one chair in your house is immovable and you’re sitting in the chair and you’re not going to be budged, then everything you do based on that is going to be well-based. And things that are well-based bring no harm to anyone at all. Like a building that’s got a good foundation, it’s not going to collapse. So give your goodness a good foundation like this, too, so it doesn’t collapse either. In our society, it’s unfortunate we don’t think too much about goodness. I did a search on Amazon one time for goodness, and all I got was books on cookies and cakes. But genuine goodness inside is a quality of the heart, and it’s a strength, because it’s not pushed around by greed, aversion, and delusion. And if you have the goodness of the breath combined with the goodness of goodwill, you’re not going to get pushed around by anything unskillful either.

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