Happiness Without Borders

July 3, 2019

Try to establish your mind with the breath. Often it’s good to start with some good long, deep in-and-out breaths to air out the body and air out the mind. A lot of thoughts have been going through the mind in the course of the day, and they leave their traces in the mind, and they leave their traces in the mind. So you want to sweep them out. As long as long-breathing feels good, keep it up. If it begins to feel tiresome, then you can shorten the breath, make it more shallow, faster, slower, heavier, lighter, in line with what the body seems to need right now. This way, both the body and the mind benefit from your meditation. The little patterns of tension that build up in the course of the day get to be relaxed, dissolved away. The mind has a good place to stay. At the same time, it’s not simply resting. It’s also alert. This is something you have to watch out for. As you get the breath more comfortable, if you focus on the comfort and forget about the breath, you drift off. You can get into a state that Ajaan Lee calls delusion concentration, where you’re quiet but you don’t really know where you are, or you have a vague idea, but things aren’t really clear. It’s clear inside. That requires that we make up our mind at the very beginning that we’re going to stay with the breath as much as we can. And as soon as we realize we’ve left the breath, we come right back. So in this way, as you’re resting, you’re also developing good qualities in the mind. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency. Mindfulness, keeping the breath in mind. Keeping in mind whatever techniques you’ve learned from the past that will be useful right now. Alert to see what’s actually going on, particularly what you’re doing right now. Then arden is trying to do it well. So even though the mind is getting still, it’s not simply resting. It’s exercising these qualities. Because you’re going to need these qualities. The whole point of the meditation is to gain some insight into what you’re doing that’s creating unnecessary suffering. So you want to really be alert to what you’re doing and mindful to keep that issue in mind. Otherwise, the mind drifts off into other issues and you don’t see it in action. Ardency is when you keep coming back, coming back. This quality of ardency is the opposite of apathy. Apathy is when you don’t really care. You simply do what you want without thinking about the consequences. Ardency is heedfulness in action. Heedfulness, as the Buddha said, is the root of all skillful qualities in the mind. When you realize that what you do is going to make a difference, you better do it well. Of course, you’re not the only one who benefits from this. This is an aspect of all the Buddhist teachings. The one that he does encourage is to look for happiness. There are so many teachings out there that say, “Don’t look for your own happiness. It’s selfish. It’s narrow-minded. Put the happiness of others first.” But the Buddha says happiness doesn’t work that way. True happiness spreads around without boundaries. When you’re generous, you benefit. The people who receive your generosity benefit as well. When you’re virtuous, when you decide not to engage in unskillful behavior, the fact that you’re not killing or stealing, as the Buddha said, may seem like the other people are benefiting. And they are. But the real beneficiary is you. If you really want to harm other people, you get them to break the precepts. If you want to help them, you get them to learn how not to break the precepts. But the goodness, the happiness that comes from these actions, that spreads around. The same with the meditation. You get your mind clearer. You have a greater sense of well-being inside. You can feed off of that. You have less of a need to lean on other people. So we’re doing this for our good and for the good of others. Because we’re looking for happiness that does spread around, a happiness that doesn’t cause any harm to anyone, that I can actively benefit from. The same goes with the principle of developing thoughts of goodwill. As you’re here meditating on the breath, getting the breath comfortable inside, you’re showing goodwill for yourself. When you have goodwill for yourself in this way, then it’s a lot easier to have goodwill for others. And even though we’re thinking thoughts of goodwill for others, when we’re thinking thoughts of goodwill for others, the attention seems to be focused out there. Again, the benefits are going to come back in. Because if you really do have goodwill for other people, and it’s not just a nice idea of the time being that you’re sitting here and then you forget about it, if you really do cultivate goodwill, then when you meet up with difficult people, you’re a lot less likely to harm them. And in so doing, you’re a lot less likely to harm yourself. So the benefits of the practice spread around. You might call it the science of happiness. There are so many ways of looking for happiness in the world, and so many of them are harmful to the point where that’s one of the reasons why people say, “Don’t look for happiness, you cause harm.” But the Buddha had more insight than that. He said, “If you really are wise enough in the way you look for happiness, you can find happiness in ways that don’t cause any harm. You gain a sense of satisfaction.” And it turns out that the happiness that doesn’t cause harm also goes a lot deeper into the mind. It’s not just the happiness of pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. There’s a sense of well-being. There’s a sense of inner worth that comes when you know that your actions are good. You can develop happiness and goodness at the same time. And you can take pride in being what might be called a good agent, in other words, someone who acts well. All too often we get the idea that the Buddha said, “There are actions, but there’s no agent.” He never said that. You are responsible for your actions. He said that we have our own actions. We’re the owners of our actions. And so you want to be a good owner of good actions. There’s a sense of self-esteem that goes with that. That’s a lot deeper than any fleeting sensual pleasure. The sense of satisfaction that comes from a job well done. So try to do this job well, and the benefits will spread around.

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