How to Leave Meditation

November 17, 2021

Because these talks come at the beginning of the meditation session, they’re mostly about how to get the mind to settle down, how to get into concentration. There’s very little about what to do at the end of the session. So for tonight I’d like to talk about that a bit, keep this in mind for the end of the session. The idea is that we’re like someone climbing a ladder to a house. You climb the ladder rung by rung by rung, you get up to the second-story window, and you get inside. And then when the time comes to leave, you just jump out the window. The bell rings. You’re up right away. And it’s as if you’re totally out of concentration. You’ve totally dropped it. There’s a skill to leaving in which you don’t drop it. And you can actually carry at least some of that sense of being centered inside back into the world. The first step as you’re leaving meditation is to stop and think. During the hour, was there any time when the concentration was especially good? The mind was clear, settled, still, bright all around. Where were you focused? What had you been doing? What had you been doing up to that point? If you can remember, try to recreate those conditions next time around. You’ll get a better and better sense of where your spot in the body is, where you tend to settle in and feel most at home. And if you can remember the steps leading there, it’s not just a frustrating experience of trying to recreate the results. You want to know the steps. So you can work on the causes next time around. That’s going to be a skill you have to develop, how to think about successful meditations and then learn a lesson from them that you can apply to succeeding ones. Because sometimes it’s easy to get yourself frustrated. You go back to that spot, you try to recreate the conditions, and it doesn’t work. So instead of getting frustrated, just remind yourself, “Oh, there may have been something you didn’t notice the first time around. Or maybe the mind is in a different state today.” In which case, you put the memories aside and then just pay attention to what you’re doing this time around. The more carefully you observe yourself as you settle in, the more the meditation becomes a skill. That’s the first step. The second step is to remind yourself that you’ve done something meritorious. The word “merit” is something that’s not too popular in Western Buddhism. If I say, “You’ve done some goodness,” getting the mind to settle down, looking for happiness in a way that’s totally harmless, allows the mind to settle in and get some rest, recuperation, so you can face the world from a position of strength. So when you remind yourself that this is meritorious, the next step is to think of dedicating that merit. The merit is usually dedicated to people who have passed away. You can think of specific individuals, your parents, other family members, close friends, teachers, anyone you think might appreciate what you’re doing here. It’s a simple thought in the mind. “May so-and-so know about this, and may they express their appreciation.” Because it’s through their appreciation that they’re going to get that merit. Merit isn’t a package that you can just send to somebody. It’s more like a message. “I’m doing this for you.” And if someone appreciates it, that’s going to be their merit. Now the question is, who’s going to know? They say the hungry ghosts know, and the devas can know, too. Whether the devas feel any need for your merit. There’s a chant that basically says, “If there are those who have passed away who don’t know what I’ve done, don’t know that I’ve dedicated the merit, could the devas please inform them?” Now, devas are pretty fickle. Sometimes they’re helpful, sometimes they’re not. They don’t like being treated as servants. But there was a Brahmin one time who came to see the Buddha and asked him, “This merit that we dedicate to our ancestors, does it actually get to them?” And the Buddha said, “If they’re in an appropriate situation, yes.” And the appropriate situation, he said, was that they were hungry ghosts. And the Brahmin said, “What if I have no relatives who are hungry ghosts?” And the Buddha said, “Don’t worry. Everybody has relatives who are hungry ghosts.” So think back. Back in those days, they counted as relatives anybody who was descended from your great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandparents. Seven generations. So going back and then forward from those grandparents, all the people who were distant cousins, distant aunts, distant uncles. There’s somebody in there who’s a hungry ghost. Dedicate the merit to that person, whoever that person may be. And you just think in your mind, “May you know about this and may you appreciate it.” And then you start thinking about what you’re going to carry into the world as you leave meditation. And the first is thoughts of goodwill. Your mind is like you’re coming from a position inside where there is a sense of well-being. And the best way to maintain that well-being is to wish for the well-being of others. I mentioned the other day that Ajahn Swat spread thoughts of goodwill twice during the meditation, once at the very beginning as a way of clearing the decks, getting the mind in the right mood to sit down and meditate, so not carrying any grudges in from the day. But then when you leave, it’s more for the other people because there should be some more power to your concentration by this time. That’s just a wish. May all beings be happy. Or you can wish for specific people. You know they’re suffering right now. May so-and-so be happy. May so-and-so be well. And it’s good to reflect on what it means to send thoughts of goodwill. Some people actually pick up on the energy of goodwill. I’ve known cases in Thailand where people would ask, “Did you send goodwill my way the other day?” They felt it. In other cases, they would say, “Yes, I did. The radio was turned off.” No matter how much you send a signal, they don’t know it. But remember, the goodwill is primarily a way of getting your mind in the right shape. Because you’re going to be dealing with the world, coming out of concentration. Sometimes you’re a little bit reluctant to get out of concentration. It’s nice and quiet in here. You say, “Why do I have to deal with the world? The world is a mess.” Well, you tell yourself, “I’m bringing something good into the world.” That’s the difference between thoughts of merit, dedicating merit, and thoughts of goodwill. With dedicating merit, once you’ve dedicated the merit, that’s the end of it. You’ve done your job. Jon Fuehring had a student, a woman who was psychic in some ways. And one of the reasons she was psychic was that she could see hungry ghosts. When it first happened to her, it was unnerving, because they were hiding out in strange places, under stairways, in doorways. And looking pretty miserable. She went back and asked Jon Fuehring how she could turn it off. He said, “Well, here you’re in a position where you can help them. Ask them what they did to be reborn as hungry ghosts.” Which for her was a good lesson, because she tended to dabble a little bit in white magic. And people who dabble in magic tend to think that they have a way around karma. But the lesson she learned was that you can’t escape your karma. He said, “Ask them what they’ve done, and then dedicate the merit of your meditation to them.” In many cases, they would change. They’d brighten up, get a new set of clothes, and then disappear from wherever they were, go on to a better rebirth. But there were other cases that didn’t. And after she’d gotten used to seeing them improve, it got her frustrated that some of these hungry ghosts would not improve. So she went to complain to Jon Fuehring about that. It seems to be constant. People complain to their teachers about their meditation. Even when they get psychic powers, they still complain. But at any rate, he told her, “Look, your job is simply to dedicate merit. You don’t have to follow up with a survey to see who benefits and who doesn’t. It’s their karma. You do your job. And it’s up to them to be able to appreciate the merit and express their appreciation.” Expressing it means simply having thoughts of assenting and liking what you’ve done. Some people are in a position where they can’t. But once you’ve dedicated merit, that’s the end of your responsibility. With goodwill, though, it’s not. If you really have goodwill for others, then you have to carry that attitude into your thoughts and your words and your deeds after you’ve left. So remember that. Set that intention. Coming out of meditation, you want to be a good influence in the world. You don’t want to do anything that harms anybody, either yourself or other people. So again, it’s pretty simple. There’s not much of it in terms of a ceremony. Just think, “May all beings be happy.” Or you can repeat the phrases that we have at the end of the chant. “May they be free from animosity, free from oppression, free from trouble. May they look after themselves with ease.” That’s the phrase that reminds you that their happiness is ultimately going to have to depend on them. But at the same time, you want to do what you can to be a good influence. So with goodwill, there’s still some responsibility as you leave the meditation. Unlike dedicating merit, where once you’ve dedicated merit, that’s the end of the issue. And then, after you’ve dedicated thoughts of goodwill, you remind yourself that even though you’re going to be opening your eyes and dealing with the visual field, which tends to squeeze your sense of the body as felt from within off to a little corner, you can still maintain that enlarged sense of the body. Don’t let it get squeezed. And try to be as sensitive as you can to how the breath energy feels in the body as you get up, as you move around. Otherwise, you don’t fully leave the meditation. You’ve worked hard to clean things up inside. Breathe through the different patterns of tension in the different parts of the body. Focus on the parts of the body that you can make pleasant first. Then think of that good energy, that full energy, spreading through the areas where there’s tension, where there’s pain, so you don’t feel like there’s a wall around the pain. And then you notice what perceptions are helpful to maintain that sense of openness inside. Perceptions that calm the mind down. Well, hold those perceptions in mind as much as you can when you leave. It’s not like the world outside is going to demand one hundred percent of your attention. You can still reserve part of your attention for how you feel from within. Sometimes your work will be a little bit much, especially work that involves a lot of thinking. But try to stay in touch as much as you can with how the breath energy feels in the body. And at the very least, have a sense of openness. Have one spot in the body that’s your most sensitive spot, and try to keep that wide open. You’ll notice it’ll tend to tense up more quickly than other parts of the body. So if you can keep it open, patterns of tension will have a place to land and grow. And this makes it a lot easier to maintain mindfulness and alertness as you go through the day. Because you’ve got a good center inside. This way, when the time comes to meditate again, you sit down and you’re right there. It’s like you’ve had your mind on a short leash all that time. So it doesn’t have the long leash that can get wound around all kinds of things—trees and lampposts and benches and people. If you let your mind have a long leash like that, you have to spend a lot of the time during your next session unwinding the leash. So things will settle down. But if things are on a short leash, you’re right there. You settle down. Pop, there you are. So when you’re leaving meditation, remember that it is a skill. I remember when I first read about the skills of meditation, they talked about a skill in leaving. I thought, “Well, that’s the easiest one of them. You just drop out.” That’s not what they meant. You don’t drop out. You try to carry the meditation with you, like a bowl full of good food. You don’t want it to drip. You don’t want it to drop. Carry it in a balanced way. That way, when the time comes to meditate again, the food will still be there and you can continue eating. This way, if you know how to leave meditation, it becomes more and more of a skill, and it has more and more of an influence on your life, which is precisely what we want the meditation to do.

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