In Memoriam

January 31, 2022

In the beginning steps of meditation, you start with thoughts of goodwill. I wish for happiness, your own happiness, your own true happiness, and then the happiness of others. Because true happiness has to come from within. The happiness of the world that depends on things outside, people outside, is not just dependable. After all, things come and go. People are born, they pass away. As the Buddha said, all this is normal. That’s the way of the world. And if our happiness depends on things going up and down like that, it’s not going to be reliable. So we have to look within. And the good thing about true happiness is that your true happiness doesn’t depend on having to conflict with anyone else’s. We each look within and find the resources inside that can be turned into true happiness, in spite of the ways of the world. When you think about your motivation in this way, then you can turn your attention inside. Focus on the breath. What do you have right here right now? You’ve got the body breathing, you’ve got the mind thinking and aware. Try to focus your attention on the breath. Think about the breath and notice how it feels. Try a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths to start out with. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change. Because the breath is totally yours, it’s totally free. You can breathe any way you like. And the way you breathe has an impact on the mind. So you can calm the mind down. Or you can energize it. Whatever needs to be done right now. You can breathe in ways that are energizing, you can breathe in ways that are calming. Think of the breath as a whole body process. Your whole body is breathing. As for any thoughts that may come into the mind right now, just let them go. Just think about the breath. Be aware of the breath. Remind yourself you’re doing something really good here. Think of the ways that people find happiness in the world. There are a lot of harmful ways, but this is something that’s totally harmless. And when you do something harmless like this, your happiness is safe. And it’s something you can share. We’ve met tonight because Patrick passed away yesterday. We want to do some good to dedicate to him. First we think about the good that he’s done for us. He’s done a lot of good for a lot of people in a lot of places. Here at the monastery, he’s always been a very willing and helpful person to have around, cheerfully taking on jobs. Any jobs we had for him to do, he was happy to do them. And if we didn’t have jobs for him to do, he’d find jobs on his own. He’s just a good, solid person. It’s always sad when people like that have to pass, but everybody has to pass at some point. But we want to remind ourselves that the goodness he did really was good. And we’ll miss him. So we want to express our thoughts about him, our appreciation of him, and think of what we can carry from him as a good example. Because as we live in this world, we have to keep on living. And it’s important to realize that when people die, when good people die, they don’t take goodness with them. They take their own personal goodness with them. The fact of goodness still exists in the world. We can think about this for two purposes. One is for our own, and one is for the purpose of the people who’ve passed away. We do good and dedicate it to them. It’s part of their merit. The fact that they have a good influence on us, they’re a good example, lives on in the goodness that we do. And it reflects back on them. This is why it’s traditional in Buddhist countries to make merit when someone has passed away. There are three activities that are considered to be meritorious. One is generosity, when you give freely. The second is virtue, when you hold to principles in your behavior not to harm anybody. And the third is to develop thoughts of goodwill, goodwill all around. Ordinarily we can very easily have goodwill for people we love, people who’ve done good things for us. But if we want to be able to trust ourselves so that we act skillfully in the world, we have to have goodwill for everybody. So it’s called metta bhavana, the development of goodwill. What do you think about people you like, people you don’t like, people you know, people you don’t know? And not just people, living beings of all kinds. Express the wish. May they be happy. How are they going to be happy? It’ll have to be through their own actions. We can make them smile, but for them to be really happy inside depends on their own skill. This was the Buddha’s insight on the night of his awakening. We suffer or we’re happy depending on our own actions. So we look at ourselves to be secure in our own actions. In our own future, we have to act on goodwill to all, regardless of what they’ve done. And then we hope that others will have goodwill, too, because that will lead to their long-term welfare and happiness. And that’s a wish you can have for anybody, even people who have behaved really poorly in the past. You want to think about ways in which they can be skillful. And if there’s any way that you can be helpful to them in that direction, you’re happy to do it. When you think in these terms, you have no animosity for anybody. You recognize there are people who misbehave, but you have no animosity for them. You lift the level of your mind. These are called brahma viharas. The brahmas are beings that live in the highest level of the heavens, and they’ve developed these attitudes. Goodwill for all, compassion for all who are suffering, empathetic joy, joy for all who are already happy, and equanimity for cases where you want people to be happy, but you don’t see them doing anything in that direction and there’s nothing you can do for them. You have equanimity, not because you’re indifferent, but because you know that you have only so much strength, so much of your own inner resources. So you want to focus on areas where you can make a difference. So you focus your goodwill and your actions on areas where you really can be helpful. You develop these qualities in your mind. You’re creating a mind state that has value, that can settle down with itself and be at peace with itself. This is what we do for our own sake. As for the sake of those who passed on, there’s no way we can talk to them right now. But there is a current of the mind that goes out. The mind has its own energy, and we can direct that to people who’ve passed away. Because they haven’t gone anywhere. Well, they’ve gone someplace else, but they haven’t disappeared. They’ve just gone to a new place. And it’s through these currents of the mind that we can contact one another. We may not be conscious of the contact, but there is an energy that goes. And you want to spread this energy out to the whole world. That’s the good thing about generosity, virtue, and the development of goodwill. These are things that make you happy, but they make other people happy, too. These are ways of looking for happiness that erase boundaries. Most people in the world look for their happiness in terms of material gain, status, praise, physical pleasures. But that kind of happiness creates boundaries, because the more you gain, someone else is going to have to lose. Or somebody else gains, you lose. And there’s a very clear sense of those who have and those who don’t have. This is why people are fighting all the time. The image the Buddha gave us of fish in a dwindling stream. The water is drying up and the fish are trying to survive, and they fight over that little bit of water that’s left. Of course, they all end up dying when the stream finally gets dry, and they’ve created a lot of karma among themselves in the meantime. When you’re looking for happiness in terms of the pleasures of the world, there’s never a sense of enough. As he said, it could rain gold coins and we wouldn’t have even enough for one person’s sensual desires to be totally satisfied. We look for happiness in a new way, in a way that’s totally harmless. It’s a cool happiness. It’s not flashing, but it’s steady and it’s reliable. And as we look for happiness in that way, our minds become steady and reliable, and the energy they give off that gets sent into the world becomes a steady, reliable energy that we can dedicate to others. So we dedicate the merit we’re making tonight to Patrick. We think of him and hope that he approves of the merit that we’re making for him. That can be his comfort, and it can be comfort for us, too. As I said, this is a kind of goodness that spreads around. It embraces boundaries. So even when you’re just sitting here focusing on your breath, thinking thoughts of goodwill, you’re not the only one who benefits. Anyone who receives the current of your mind will benefit as well. And then we take these attitudes out into the world—a mind that’s been developed, a mind that’s been trained. And again, we benefit from the fact that we’re acting in skillful ways because it is because of our lack of skill that we suffer. And, of course, the people around us benefit, too. We don’t impose our greed, aversion, and delusion on them as much as we did before. So this is a goodness that knows no bounds. It’s a wealth that, the more you create, the greater its value. It’s not like the currencies of the world. The more you print money, the less the value of the money. But with this kind of goodness, the more you create, it just becomes more and more abundant. It reminds us that in spite of the fact that aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal, there is a goodness of the mind that doesn’t die. And that’s what brings us together.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2022/220131_In_Memoriam.mp3>