Heedful of Goodness (outdoors)

March 27, 2022

When you sit and meditate, it’s easy to get impatient. You read in the books about people entering jhana, pleasure, rapture. You close your eyes, look at your breath, you don’t see any pleasure, you don’t see any rapture, at least nothing outstanding. But you have to realize you work with what you’ve got and you learn how to look after what you’ve got, and it will have a chance to grow. For instance, with the breath energy in the body, try to breathe in a way that the energy in the nerves, the energy in the blood vessels feels full. One thing you’ve got to be especially careful about is that you don’t squeeze things out as you breathe out. If you’ve breathed in, when the time comes to breathe out, the body will breathe out on its own without you having to squeeze anything. If there’s going to be any effort in the breathing, put it into the in-breath. As for the out-breath, try to maintain that sense of fullness in the body. Any excess breath energy will go away on its own. Here they use the word prakong, which means to hover around and protect. So you try to hover around and protect your breath. In the same way, you’ve got a child who’s just learning how to walk. Hover around the child. You don’t hold on to the child, because you have to wait with the child to learn how to walk on its own. But you’re mindful and alert. So keep your awareness hovering around the breath, protecting it. And although the sense of pleasure that comes from breathing may not seem that much to begin with, if you protect it, don’t squeeze it, don’t ignore it, don’t abandon it. The sense of fullness in the body will grow. The sense of pleasure in the body will grow. It’s like seeing little sprouts on a path. If you don’t recognize what kind of sprout is what kind of plant, you might step on all of them. But it turns out some of those sprouts are little redwood seeds. They may seem awfully small to begin with, but they can become big trees if you look after them. So learn how to recognize the good signs, the things that should be protected in your breath. The sign of the breath is too long, the signs of the breath are too short, well you look for those. Try to find a way of breathing that feels just right, not too long, not too short, not too heavy, not too light, not too deep, not too shallow. The more sensitive you are to the potentials you have right here, the more they’ll grow. So be sensitive and heedful. We usually use the word “heedfulness” with “dangerous.” There’s a passage in the Canon where a king comes to see the Buddha. The Buddha was still young at that point. The king says, “How can you claim to be awakened? You’re just a young monk. I know a lot of old monks who, after many, many years of practice, haven’t gotten anywhere in their awakening. How can you be awakened?” The Buddha said, “There are four things that you shouldn’t be heedless of. One is a small fire. A small fire can turn into a big blaze very quickly. Another is a small snake. It might have lots of poison. The third is a small prince. If you mistreat the small prince, maybe someday he’s going to grow up and be king and then he’ll find time to get revenge. And then finally, a young monk. Sometimes young monks know more than you might think. So there are some dangers you might have to watch out for. But they use the word”don’t be heedless” in Pali also for “don’t underestimate the good that the Buddha can give.” One of the analogies the Buddha gives is of a big water jar. You have water dripping into it, drip by drip by drip. And even though it doesn’t seem like much, eventually it can fill the entire jar. In the same way, you have some goodness to you. Even though it may not seem like much to begin with, if you look after it, if you take care of it, it’ll grow. So try to get a sense of the potentials you have in the body and you have in the mind. And remind yourself that this is good work. As Ajahn Sawat used to say, “Remind yourself you’re doing a high level of work here, looking after your own mind.” And be happy that you have the chance to do this. There are a lot of people in the world who don’t have the chance to sit with their eyes closed for any amount of time. Too many responsibilities, too many difficulties in life. Here you are, sitting with your eyes closed on a nice breezy day under the trees. And here’s your chance not just to rest, but also to learn about your mind and learn about the potentials of the body and the mind. There’s a potential for rapture here, there’s a potential for pleasure, there’s a potential for fullness. The mind has its potentials for stillness. If you pay attention, you’ll see where they are and you’ll learn how to protect them so they can grow. This is an important part of right effort, basically the effort to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful qualities. In developing the skillful qualities, it’s not that you have to create them from scratch. It’s simply a matter of learning to recognize the good potentials you have in your body and mind and learn how to make the most of them. We already have some elements of concentration in our mind. It’s called momentary concentration. If we didn’t have momentary concentration, you couldn’t listen to anybody and understand what they had to say. It’s because you’re able to stick with what they’re saying long enough to get the meaning. The problem with that kind of concentration is that it comes for a loop, bits and pieces, and then disappears. And it comes back again and disappears. You focus it here, you focus it there. And you may think, “Well, this concentration is useless. I need to find something else.” And you throw away what you’ve got. But where are you going to get concentration unless you start with what you’ve got? So you take these moments of momentary concentration and you try to stick them together. That’s what the duty of mindfulness is, as you remember. Keep certain things in mind, like the fact that you’re going to stay with the breath coming in and the breath going out right now. And if the thread breaks, well, you can start sewing things together again right from scratch. And as you sew these moments of momentary concentration together, they become deeper and deeper and more and more satisfying, because the mind is not jumping around. It doesn’t have to tense up to jump. Otherwise, it’s like a cat jumping around the furniture of a room. As soon as it lands, it tenses up and gets ready to jump again. But once it’s found a comfortable place, then it can, as we’ve seen cats do, it’s almost as if it melts into the carpet. So allow your mind to melt into the breath. Protect it with your mindfulness, protect it with your alertness, the quality that watches what you’re doing, sees what’s going on. And then add the quality of right effort, ardency, trying to do this well. Because you want to do it well. If you feel like it’s a chore, use some wisdom to remind yourself that this is something really desirable, getting the mind to settle down. The breath may not seem all that congenial quite yet. The more time you spend with it, the more you get to know it, and you can develop a real friendship. The parts of the mind that seem ready to jump away all the time, can begin to melt into one another. We have a sense of the whole mind gathered right here. It’s when all the different parts of the mind are gathered together that they can give one another strength. You get a sense of the concentration really being solidly based, with a strong connection and a strong sense of well-being. There is that potential here. Just learn how to look after what you’ve got, and it will grow in that direction.

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