Independence

July 4, 2022

Today is Independence Day, so let’s look for a little independence in our minds, for our minds. The Buddha’s definition of independence sets the bar pretty high. He talks about those who’ve gained Dhamma-I, entered the stream, that they’re independent of others in the Dhamma. In other words, they’ve seen the Daedalus. They know that what the Buddha said is true. There is a deathless element, a deathless dimension, that is to be found through following the path. Once you’ve seen that, there’s no doubt, and you know what you’ve got to do. Follow the path. Perfect your concentration. Perfect your discernment. But it’s interesting that state of independence is a state in which your virtue is perfect. In the sense that you will never break any of the monastic rules, but the mind will be totally disinclined to break any of the five precepts. So that’s the independence we’re working toward. You start by withdrawing your attention from sight, sound, smells, taste, tactile sensations. As long as you’re looking for happiness in the level of sensuality. And you look at the world around us, and it’s a pretty uncertain place. Institutions that we used to think were rock solid have shown that they’re very, very fragile, depending on the cooperation of many, many people. And when that cooperation goes, everything falls apart. So we’re living in a very risky, very unstable world. So if you want to find happiness that’s solid, you have to look inside. So you work with the breath. The breath of all the elements in the body, of all the properties in the body, is the one most responsive to your acts of attention, acts of perception, the way you perceive the breath—in other words, the labels you apply to it, the pictures you use in your mind as you think about the breath. The breath is very receptive to those things, very responsive to those, more responsive than the other elements or properties in the body. So you focus there. Then Chandraji has you take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths to begin with, because the breath will be getting subtle as you stay with it. So it’s good to energize things in the body. Make sure that you have enough oxygen in the blood. And then work to fill the breath energy throughout the body. It’s not like you’re pumping breath in. And Chandraji talks in terms of activating the breath, because it’s not only the in-and-out breath, but there’s also the breath that flows along the nerves, flows through the blood vessels, out to every pore. You can make a survey as you begin the meditation. You can either start with the head and go down through the body, or you can start with the feet and come up, just very consciously being aware of each part of the body. In the John Lee’s analogy, he says it’s like stringing electric lines through an area and then running a current so you can have light wherever you want it. You want to be fully aware of the body as you breathe in, fully aware of the body as you breathe out, and have a sense that there’s this, what we call, a buzz of energy throughout. That’s what wakes up the breath element. And then connect that with the in-and-out breath. See what way breathing nourishes that whole body. Awareness nourishes that whole body breath. So it’s not a matter of pumping air into something solid, but it’s allowing energy to come in and nourish other energies, allow them to flow together. Because you’re trying to create a sense of well-being based on form rather than sensuality. You’re lifting the level of the mind’s becoming. As long as you’re out in the human world, you’re very much in the level of sensuality. Those are the become-ings you take on. As you sit here being aware of the body from the inside, you lift the level of the mind to the level of form. Even though it’s still becoming, it’s becoming heading in the right direction, using the processes of becoming to get on the path and to create a sense of independence. The way you’re breathing right now doesn’t have to depend on anything. It doesn’t have to depend on anything at all outside. We’re fortunate that we have the right conditions that are conducive right here. It’s quiet. The temperature today is just right—not too cold, not too hot. Those conditions may change. And you want to get so that you can tap into this inner sense of the body, this inner sense of well-being, regardless of the conditions outside. So, as long as you still need good conditions outside to practice and make use of the good conditions you’ve got, they won’t always be here. But work toward a skill that gets more and more independent of things outside. One of the topics we usually talk about on Independence Day is the pursuit of happiness. And, of course, the Buddha has a special take on that. He went for what may be called the noble pursuit of happiness, or the pursuit of noble happiness. In other words, he noted that most people look for happiness in things that will die, things that age, grow ill, die. He himself was going to age, grow ill, die. And he said, “What’s accomplished by looking for that kind of happiness? There’s nothing noble about it at all. The noble pursuit of happiness looks for something that is unaging, has no illness, no death. And it’s totally harmless. All the good things in life come together here—truth, goodness, and happiness. They all come together in this path. We follow truths that are noble. In other words, we recognize that our suffering is not to be blamed on anybody outside. It comes from choices we’re making inside, the way we’re feeding inside. So we take responsibility for our own suffering. It comes from choosing to follow certain desires, certain unskillful desires. But we can choose to follow skillful desires that involve virtue, concentration, discernment, and insight. These are noble things. These are noble truths, because we follow a path that’s harmless, which makes it good as well. These are truths that set us free. It’s a goodness that sets us free. We’re doing this not for the sake of truth, not for the sake of goodness. We’re doing it for the sake of the ultimate happiness. What’s really good about that happiness is that it requires qualities of truth and goodness as well. A couple years back, we were doing the French translation of the book Good Heart, Good Mind into French, and we wanted to find a good French title. So I came up with”Bonheur, Bonté, Happiness, and Goodness.” My French translator consulted his mother, who’s an author, about the title. She liked it, and she said the order of the words was right. It implied that we’re pursuing happiness for the sake of goodness. That’s when I realized we had the words backward. So I ended up with “Bonheur, Bonté, Happiness, and Goodness.” We’re going for true happiness. We’re using goodness, we’re using truth, for the sake of happiness. That happiness is totally harmless, which is why this is not a selfish pursuit. So we gain our independence, not through fighting with other people, declaring victory over anybody else. We’re trying to find victory over the mind that wants to depend on its greed, aversion, and delusion for its happiness, not realizing, of course, that when you depend on those qualities of the mind, you’re a slave to craving. We cleanse the mind, we lift the mind to this harmless happiness. We lift it through truth, we lift it through goodness. But the mind is the reward. The reward is a happiness that’s noble. That’s when you’re really independent. When you find a happiness that has nothing to criticize from any side, as Ajahn Mun used to say, “The goodness that has no drawbacks, that’s true goodness.” But it’s also true happiness. That’s when the mind is really independent.

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