Refuge

March 11, 2023

Close your eyes. Think thoughts of goodwill. First for yourself, and then for all beings. It’s a good idea to begin every session with goodwill, and end every session with goodwill. We begin as a way of preparing the mind. You want to clear out any resentments, any ill will, any ill feelings about anybody, anywhere. So you have a clean, expansive place to settle down inside. At the end of the meditation, it’s also good to think thoughts of goodwill. But at that point, it’s more for others. After your mind has been quiet for a while, it has a lot more power. So if you can think of anyone who’s suffering right now, whether you know them well or not, you can dedicate the merit of your meditation to them. You can spread thoughts of goodwill to them, and make that the attitude you carry out of the meditation into the world. Once you’ve established this as your framework, then you’re ready to focus on the breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths to begin with. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. Because when we talk about the breath, it’s not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the feeling of energy that flows from the body. And it’s going to be more pronounced in some spots than in others. But when you get really sensitive to it, you begin to realize that the whole body is involved in the breathing process. When you sit down and meditate like this, you’re giving it space. So the whole body can breathe together. The mind does have a tendency, when it thinks about things, is to create a little powder of tension someplace in the body as a marker. So you can hold that thought in mind. And sometimes you go through the day, and you just keep adding more markers, markers, markers, until the body is all tense and tight. So now you can think of the whole nervous system breathing. And ask yourself, does long breathing feel good? Sometimes it feels good in the beginning, but then not so good as you keep it up so you can change. Make it shorter or shallower. Faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Experiment for a while to see what rhythm and texture of breathing feels good for the body right now. If your thoughts wander off, let them wander, but you don’t have to follow with them. You can come back to the breath. The fact that there’s another thought in the mind doesn’t destroy the breath. It’s just a matter of learning to find the breath more interesting than your thoughts. Because you can think any time you want. But right now it’s time to develop some new skills in the mind. Maybe the skill of staying in the body, fully inhabiting your body. So your awareness and the breath. Fill the body. And fill the body with a sense of well-being. This is where the meditation becomes nourishing. Start following your thoughts away from the breath. Just note the fact, drop the thought, and you’ll be right back to the breath. If it happens 10 times, 100 times, just drop the thought 10 times, 100 times. Each time you come back to the breath, try to reward yourself with a breath that feels especially satisfying. Ask yourself, what parts of the body seem to be starved of good breathing energy? And breathe in a way that gives them the energy they need. We live so much in our visual field that the mind really needs some rest from that field. That’s why we close our eyes. And try to fill the body with our awareness. Otherwise it goes flowing out through your ears, through your eyes, to things outside. And when it extends out far away, from the body, it begins to lose its balance. So to re-establish your equilibrium, come back into the body, back into the body. And thank you for the knowledge of your hands. It’s being in your hands. The knowledge of your feet is in your feet. In other words, you’re not privileging your eyes or your ears. You’re letting each part of the body have its own awareness. If you want, you can go through the body section by section to see how the different parts of the body feel as you breathe in, breathe out. A good place to start is down around the navel. You look at that part of the body in your awareness and watch it for a while as you breathe in, breathe out, to see what rhythm of breathing feels good there. If you sense any tension or tightness in that part of the body, allow it to relax. So no new tension builds up as you breathe in and you don’t hold on. to any tension as you breathe out. And then you can move up the torso, the solar plexus, the middle of the chest, base of the throat. When you get to the head, think of your awareness being centered in the middle of the head. And the breath energy is entering, not only through the nose, but also through the eyes and the ears. In from the back of the head, down from the top of the head, going deep into the brain. And then as you breathe out, think of it radiating out from the head in all directions, working through any patterns of tension you may feel. Back of the neck, jaws, temples, forehead, eyes. And dissolving those patterns of tension away. And then you can go down the back of the neck, down the shoulders, to the arms. Or start at the back of the neck and go down. Both sides of the spine, down to the tailbone. And then from there, continue on down through the legs, down to the toes. When you’ve reached the toes, you’ve completed your survey of the body. And you can go through the body as many times as you like. Until you’re ready to settle down. Then you can choose any one spot in the body that feels most congenial to stay focused. And then think of your awareness spreading from that spot to fill the whole body. So we’re the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. And let the breath find whatever rhythm feels good. Your main responsibility now would be just to maintain the sense of centered but broad awareness. It creates a sense of well-being inside, alert at the same time that you’re enjoying the pleasure. So you don’t drift out. And then when you can maintain this centered but broad awareness, you’re in a much better position to consider the choices you make in your life. Because we get the mind to settle down. Not just to be with the breath. Not just to soothe the nerves, soothe the body, even though that is an important part of it. But we soothe the body for other purposes. Because when you start thinking about your quest for happiness in life, if you’re feeling miserable inside, you tend to jump at anything. But if you’re feeling well-nourished in the present moment, the body feels good, relaxed. Your awareness is centered, still, stable. You’re in a much better position to pass wise judgment. What’s the best course of action to take in your life? You may have noticed during the chants, we had a chant where you take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. And it’s important to understand what that means. It’s not that we’re asking them to come and help us. It’s more that we’re asking to take them as examples in our lives for a safe and secure way to find happiness. They give us the examples, then we try to internalize those examples and make their qualities the qualities of our own hearts and minds. That’s when we have a real refuge, because it’s right here with us. Otherwise your refuge is with the Buddha who lived, what, 2,600 years ago? The Dhamma that’s in the books, Sangha, people outside of you. And that kind of refuge is not all that secure. It’s when you have the qualities of the Buddha inside you, that’s when your search for happiness doesn’t cause any dangers. We think about the qualities of the Buddha and they basically come down to three. Wisdom, compassion, purity. And it’s good to think about how the Buddha described how you go about developing wisdom, compassion, and purity. With wisdom, he says, wisdom begins with the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” The wisdom there lies in realizing that there are forms of long-term happiness, as opposed to short-term, and that long-term is better than short-term. And that they’re going to depend on your actions, what you do. And particularly we begin to notice there are certain things that you like to do give good results, things you don’t like to do and give bad results. Those are no-brainers. The ones that require more wisdom are the ones where there are things you like to do but are going to give bad results in the long-term, or things you don’t like to do but are going to give good results in the long-term. And so your wisdom there lies in seeing how you can talk yourself into wanting to do the things that give good long-term results, regardless of whether you like the actions or not, and talk yourself out of wanting to do the things that will give bad results in the long-term. Even though you may like doing them. So wisdom for the Buddha is pragmatic. It’s a matter of understanding cause and effect, not out there in the abstract, but in your own mind. What thoughts lead to good results? What thoughts lead to bad results? We tend to look at our thoughts not so much as actions, but more as a little world so we can inhabit. But when you can realize that even your thoughts are activities, and they will have their karmic consequences, so choose them well. Remembering the principle that the Buddha taught, that if you see that there’s a long-term happiness that comes when you abandon a short-term happiness, the wise person abandons the short-term for the sake of the long-term. It’s basically a lesson that every child has to learn, but most of us, even as adults, don’t really learn it. We’d rather have every form of happiness, every form of pleasure we want. But that’s like trying to play chess without losing any of your pieces. To win you have to be willing to sacrifice some of your pieces. Or you can make a comparison with a garden. You plant a garden, you have all kinds of trees and plants that you want in the garden, but you discover if you plant eucalyptus trees they’re going to kill everything else. So certain pleasures you simply have to abandon if you want something of more value. That’s wisdom. Then there’s compassion. Compassion too is related to your quest for happiness. There’s a story in the canon King Pasenadi is in his private quarters with his favorite queen, Mallika, and in a tender moment he turns to her and says, “Mallika, is there anyone you love more than yourself?” You know what he’s thinking, of course. Typical male. He wants her to say, “Yes, your majesty, I love you more than I love myself.” And as for Hollywood, that’s what she’d say. But this is the Pali Canon, and Mallika is no fool. She says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself.” “How about you? Anybody you love more than yourself?” The king has to admit that no, there’s nobody he loves more than himself. So that’s the end of that scene. He goes down from the palace, sees the Buddha, tells the Buddha what had happened. The Buddha says, “You know, she’s right. You can search the world over and not find anyone that you love more than yourself.” In the same way, everybody else loves him or herself. Just as fiercely. So the conclusion the Buddha draws from that is not that it’s a dog-eat-dog world, but that you should never harm anybody or do harm to anyone else. Because if your happiness requires that they suffer or that they inflict suffering on other people, they’re not going to want it. They’re not going to like it. They’re going to do what they can to destroy your happiness. So if you really want happiness, you have to have compassion. Think about other people’s well-being as well. So compassion, too, comes from a wise way of looking for happiness. And then finally there’s purity. Another story in the Canon. The Buddha’s son, Rahula, was ordained as a novice. And one day the Buddha went to see him. And apparently Rahula, that’s the son, had told a lie that day. Because the first thing the Buddha talks about is a lie. So anyone who tells a lie without any sense of shame is totally empty of goodness. Their goodness is thrown away. Their goodness is overturned. He uses a water dipper to illustrate his points. Then he reminds Rahula, “You should tell yourself all the time, I will not tell a lie. Even in jest.” So that establishes the principle of truthfulness. The Buddha once said what he was looking for in a student was the student to be truthful and observant. So after establishing the principle of truthfulness, he then talks about how to be observant. And this is where he teaches how to purify your actions. He says, “Before you do something, ask yourself this action that I plan to do. Will it cause harm to me, to other people, or to both?” This could be an action in thought, or word, or deed. And if you foresee any harm, you don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any harm, go ahead and do it. In other words, act only on good intentions. Because if the good intentions backfire, they’re a lot easier to examine and learn from. Then if you act on an intention you know was banned, there’s a tendency to see what’s hiding. But then the next stage is, while you’re doing the action, look to see, is there any harm coming about as a result of this action? And if you do see harm, stop. If you don’t foresee any, see any harm happening, go ahead and continue with the action. Then when you’re done, you’re still not done. You reflect on it. This action that I did, did it cause harm to anyone? And if you see that over the long term it actually did cause harm, then you talk it over with someone who’s more advanced in the path. And resolve not to repeat that mistake. If it didn’t cause any harm, take joy in the fact that your training is progressing, and continue in your training. This, the Buddha said, is how you purify your actions. In other words, you set up compassion as your intention. You don’t want to harm anybody. And then you actually look. Because sometimes good intentions don’t have good results. Because there’s some delusion in the goodness. But the way you learn is through trial and error. So basically, the Buddha’s teaching, this is how you learn from your actions. Try to act only on the intentions that you already think are good. Then if any harm comes about as a result of those actions, you can further refine your understanding of what really is good, what really is skillful. That’s how you develop purity. So, wisdom, compassion, purity. All revolve around looking for happiness in a wise way. The Buddha never said that the pursuit of your own happiness is a bad thing. He says if you do it well, it’s also conducive to the happiness of others. It’s never a question of are you going to be skillful in your own choices, or are you going to be skillful for the sake of others. You’re skillful for the sake both of yourself and for others. You take responsibility for your actions. And you do look for happiness in a way that spreads the happiness around. So many times in this world, people are looking for happiness in terms of material gain, status, praise, fame, pleasures. Or wherever you have those things, you have people who have material loss, loss of status, criticism, pain. So if you look for happiness in those things, it creates divisions. Some people gain, some people lose. But if you look for happiness in ways that develop your wisdom, compassion, and purity, and this starts with being generous, being virtuous, i.e. holding to the precepts, and developing attitudes of goodwill, then nobody loses. And that kind of happiness erases the barriers that are put up by their pursuit of material gain or status. It’s by finding happiness in a wise way that we erase the barriers among us. And our happiness is actually good for the world.

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