Medicine for the Mind

July 28, 2023

Start the meditation with thoughts of goodwill, as we chanted just now. May all beings be happy. Starting with yourself, may I be happy. Then you think of all beings. May they be happy too. For those who are currently suffering, may they be freed from their suffering. For those who are already happy, may they be able to maintain their happiness. And as for things that you can’t go back and change, have some equanimity. That’s just the way things are. You face forward. You want to look at things that you can change. Things where you can have an effect. And primarily that’s going to be in your own mind. Because if we look for happiness outside in the world, sometimes we’re satisfied, sometimes we’re not. Often our hopes can be dashed. Because the world is not necessarily designed to make us happy. In fact, it seems that once you’re born there’s going to be aging, illness, death, over and over and over again. Separation over and over again. Which means that you have to take refuge inside. This doesn’t mean you turn your back on the world, or don’t care about the world. You actually do. The more you’re able to find a source of happiness inside, then the more you’re going to be able to have to offer to others. That’s when you dedicate the merit of the meditation. This is an aspect of the teaching that is not that well known in the West. But we do create an energy by the way we meditate. A good energy. And other beings can pick that up. That can be our gift to them. So when you meditate, it’s a gift to yourself and a gift to others. Think of it that way. So how do you meditate? Once you’ve thought thoughts of goodwill, focus in on your breath. As you breathe in, notice where you feel the breathing. When you breathe out, where do you feel the breathing? It can be anywhere in the body. It’s not just the movement of the air through the nose, but it’s also the rise and fall of the chest, the rise and fall of the abdomen. And as you get more and more sensitive to it, you begin to realize it’s a process that involves the whole body, through all the nerves, all the blood vessels, out to the pores of the skin. But for the time being, focus on the spots that you can see clearly. That now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Then the next question is, is it comfortable? And if you’re not sure, you can try different kinds of breathing. Just tell the mind, “longer breathing,” and the body will respond. For a while. And then you see, how does longer breathing feel? Shorter breathing? Faster? Slower? Heavier? Lighter? It’s like you’re creating a home for the mind inside here right now. And as with any house, you want to adjust it so it does feel like home, a comfortable place to stay. So take some time to notice what breathing feels good right now. As for other issues that are coming through the mind, you don’t have to pay them any attention. If you try to chase them away, you’ve lost the breath. So they can come in, but they can go out, like the sound of the crickets. They’re there, but they don’t have to disturb you. The same with your thoughts. They can come in, they can go. They don’t have to disturb you. If you were to wait until your mind got quiet and then meditate, you could wait until you died. It wouldn’t happen. So you start out with this unquiet mind. And you just hold on to the sensation of the breathing. And the more you pay attention to that, and the less you pay attention to other things, the more the mind will settle down. It may take time. We’ve got a whole hour. When the breathing feels comfortable, there sometimes is a tendency to blur out as you focus on the comfort instead of the breath. So to counteract that tendency, once the breath does feel comfortable, you try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in. The whole body as you breathe out. And if the whole body all at once is too much, you can go through the body section by section first. A good place to start is down around the abdomen. Focus your attention there. Locate that part of the body in your inner awareness. Then watch it for a while as you breathe in, breathe out, to see where rhythm of breathing feels good there. And if there’s any tension or tightness, think of a relaxing tension so that no tension builds up as you breathe in and you’re not holding on to any tension as you breathe out. And after you’ve stayed there for a while, then you can move up. The solar plexus, the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head. Then you can focus on the back of the neck and think of the breath coming in from the back and going down the shoulders and the arms, onto the tips of the fingers. Or going down the spine, down the hips, the legs, out to the tips of the toes. You can go through the body like this 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 nice to be focused on. And focus your attention there. And from there, let it spread to fill the whole body. So you’re aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. This is medicine for the mind. Because the mind is worn away by the events of the world, both in our personal lives. You look in the news. The news is crazy. It’s like the mind is being wounded. So it needs time for a treatment. This is medicine, a good dose of medicine for the mind. If you’re simply aware of the breath in the body, and your awareness is broad, fills the body, but it stays still, that’s healing for the body and healing for the mind. And it’s the kind of medical treatment that requires time. With some illnesses, all you need is a shot in the arm and that takes care of it. But this is the kind of treatment that’s like a rash on your skin. You put a cream on the rash. And you don’t take it off right away. You put the cream there and let it stay. Then it can do its work. And part of the mind is saying, “Well, I want something else. But the mind needs treatment. It needs rest.” This is what refuge is all about. You’ve got a safe place inside. It’s where the mind can recuperate. Because it’s not only the case that the world outside can wound the mind. Our own greed, aversion, delusion, those things can wound the mind as well. So you want to be very careful to maintain this sense of the mind being very still and very expansive right here. And don’t let it follow any other thoughts. If you find that you have dropped the concentration, then as soon as you realize you’ve wandered away, come right back. Re-establish yourself. And don’t be surprised if it happens a lot of times. We’re trying to develop new habits here. But just have a strong sense that what you’re doing is good work. It’s counted as one of the forms of merit, bhunya, which may not be a good translation but a better translation might be “goodness.” It’s the goodness we create by doing things that we know will cause no harm to anyone. And that kind of goodness spreads happiness around. The happiness of the world, which is based on material gain or status, praise, physical pleasures. That creates boundaries. between people. Because when someone gains things of that sort, other people have to lose them. But when you do good things, like being generous, observing the precepts, and especially training your mind, as we’re doing right now, you benefit. The people around you benefit as well. So that kind of goodness, that kind of happiness, erases boundaries. It’s a wise way of finding happiness. The Buddha said that wisdom begins when you ask the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The wisdom lies in the fact that, one, you realize happiness depends on your actions. Two, long-term is possible. And three, it’s better than short-term. And you also realize that if you want your happiness to be long-term, it cannot depend on other people’s suffering. Because if your happiness is making them suffer, they’re not going to stand it. They’ll do what they can to destroy it. So here again, we look for happiness in being generous, being virtuous, and training the mind. What kind of happiness is going to last? It’s a happiness that’s good not only here in the present moment, but when you reflect on how you’ve done good things in the past. The memory is happy too. That’s not the case with a lot of things in the world. They may make you happy for a little while, but then when they go, you miss them. And sometimes you realize that you may have done something unskillful to get them. So the memory can be painful. But the happiness that comes from being generous, virtuous, and from meditating is good in the present, and it’s good in the future. And it’s good when you reflect back on when you’ve done it in the past. So stay right here. Settle in right here. And then if you want to dedicate the merit of your meditation to someone, you have something good to dedicate. Because what is merit? It’s that well-being of the mind that comes when you know you’ve done something good. So in this case, you want to make the mind one. And that raises value. It’s like fruit in the market. If there’s only one mango in the market, it’s going to fetch a high price. If there are lots of mangoes, sometimes they throw them away. So in the same way, when the mind is one, it has high value. And then it becomes a kind of gift you’d be happy to give. And that’s for those to whom you dedicate it. They’ll be happy to receive it.

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