

Chanting Before Meditation

November 20, 2022

Try to gather your thoughts, gather your attention, right here, right now. There's just your awareness, your body, and the feeling of the breath coming in, going out. Notice where you feel the breath and notice *how* it feels. You can try some long breathing to start out with, and if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't, you can change—make it shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Try to find what rhythm and texture of breathing feels good for the body and is easy for the mind to keep track of—because that's one of the functions of right mindfulness: keeping track of one thing, making that your focal point.

It's focal in the sense that you don't want to get involved in other topics. You want to be with this one topic, but think of it as a broad focus. You're aware of the whole body. The breath may be more prominent in one part than the other, but you're aware of the fact that it can be related to other parts as well.

The other function of right mindfulness is what the Buddha calls putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, which is one of the reasons we have chanting before the meditation to bring our minds away from the concerns of the world, and more to the concerns of the Dhamma.

We start out with reflections on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. In Pali, they're called *sarana*, which can mean refuge, but it can also mean something you remember, something you keep in mind. You try to keep in mind the values they represent, the qualities they represent, because they represent a search for happiness that harms nobody and aims high: for a happiness that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die.

So it's always good to keep that perspective in mind, because the perspective of the world is something else. As far as the world is concerned, the search for happiness is basically how much money you can get so that you can buy things. And on top of that, there are all the messages of the media saying that true happiness is impossible, so find your pleasures where you can. But the Buddha's basically saying, No, true happiness is possible, a deathless happiness is possible.

Don't sell yourself short.

You take the Dhamma as your refuge. If you wanted to order the three refuges—or the three topics to keep in mind—you could start with the Dhamma, because the Buddha said he himself would honor the Dhamma, and, of course, the Sangha honors the Buddha. So, you take the Dhamma as your refuge basically by doing what you're doing right now.

This, as the Buddha says, means the practice of establishing mindfulness. Mindfulness is not just a matter of being aware of what's happening. It also involves remembering that if you notice anything unskillful coming up in the mind, you let it go. You remember what you've learned about how to let it go. If something skillful comes up, you remember to encourage it.

Again, you're learning to think in terms of that framework—the search for a happiness that doesn't die. The word *skillfulness* relates to whatever leads in that direction. *Unskillful* is what leads away, causes harm, puts limits on the mind, puts limits on the happiness you can find.

So keep that perspective, keep that framework in mind.

The chants on the Triple Gem are then followed by the chant reflecting on the requisites. This is something the monks are supposed to do everyday—to reflect on the fact that food, clothing, shelter, and medicine are the things you need to keep alive. You think about how much you really need, and try not to take more than you really need, because these things come with a price.

The food we eat—even if it's vegetarian or vegan food—involves suffering for the people who have to work to farm the food and to get the food here. It takes work to fix it and to clean up afterwards. Clothing requires work. Shelter requires a lot of work. Medicine requires a lot of work. There's a lot of suffering that goes into providing for these things. And when you're born with a human body, it's as if you have this big gaping hole that needs to be stuffed with these things. So you have to ask yourself, "How do I repay those debts?" Well, you repay through the practice.

Then we have the five recollections, starting with recollection on aging, illness, death, and separation. If you stopped with those four, it would be pretty depressing—"I'm subject to aging; subject to illness; subject to death; I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me." But then the Buddha

goes on to that fifth reflection, which is the reflection on your actions.

This is the way out, because when we reflect on the Buddha, we remind ourselves that he showed us that true happiness can be found through human effort, through human actions. So we have to pay careful attention to what we do and we say and we think. And these things come from where? They come from our mind.

So we need to train the mind, because it does have a tendency to go for things that will cause trouble. That's what the next reflection is about: the four Dhamma summaries.

"The world is swept away." The story goes that a king had asked a monk about why he had ordained, and the monk gave these four summaries. He said he'd learned them from the Buddha, and it was because of these facts about the world that he decided to leave home.

The king had been mystified by the fact that this young man had become a monk to begin with, because he came from a wealthy family. He was young, healthy, his relatives were still alive, and the king was of the opinion that people would become monks only if they were suffering from poverty, from a death in the family, or from bad health. But the monk said No. He had these other reasons, and explained them.

The first one—*the world is swept away*. The monk asks the king, "When you were young, were you strong?" The king says, "Yes, very strong." How about now? Well, the king is now 80 years old. He says his strength is all gone. In fact, sometimes he means to put his foot someplace and it goes someplace else. This, basically, is the teaching on *anicca*, or inconstancy.

The world offers no shelter; there's no one in charge. This second summary is a teaching on *dukkha*, or suffering. The monk asks the king, "Do you have a recurring illness?" And the king does—what they called wind illness, which back in those days meant shooting pains going through the body. He says, "Sometimes I'm lying in my bed, filled with pain; my courtiers are standing around, saying, 'Maybe he'll die this time, maybe he'll die this time'" —you can imagine what their motivation is. And the monk says, "Can you order them to share some of that pain so that you don't have to feel all of it?" And the king says, "No, I have to feel all of it myself." That's why there's no one in charge. No one, not even a king, is

really sovereign.

The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. This is the teaching on *anattā*, or not-self. Whatever you have—in terms of material possessions—won't go with you when you die. It's not really yours. All you have is your karma.

So, the king's been made to reflect on the fact of aging, illness, and death, and then the monk asks him—to illustrate the principle that *the world is insatiable, a slave to craving*: “If there were a kingdom to the east that was weak but wealthy, would you try to conquer it?” The king says, “Yes, of course.” “If there were a kingdom to the south that was weak and wealthy, would you try to conquer that?” “Yes.” Here he is, 80 years old, can't even put his foot in the right place, and still he's insatiable. “How about a kingdom to the west, a kingdom to the north?” “Yes, yes.” “A kingdom on the other side of the ocean?” “I'd go for that one, too.”

This reflection is to make you think—this is the way the world is. These things are inconstant, stressful, not-self, full of aging, illness, and death, and yet we keep coming back to them, again and again and again, because we don't think we can find anything better.

So again, these are good topics to think about before you meditate. If you're going to look for happiness out in the world, it's going to get canceled. You've got to look inside. And as you look inside, you then develop the four brahmaviharas—the four sublime attitudes.

You start with goodwill, and that starts with goodwill for yourself. If you really have goodwill for yourself, if you really want yourself to be happy, you've got to practice. After all, our normal tendency is to go for things that age, grow ill, and die. And if you go for those things, are you really showing goodwill for yourself?

We really care about our true happiness. We all want to be happy, and you'd think that people would take their happiness seriously. And yet, they're so casual about how they think about, “Well, this might be good, or that might be good,” or you see somebody who has something you don't have, and it just strikes your fancy.

So you start with the principle of genuine goodwill for yourself, and then you extend it to others. You realize that, in your search for happiness, if your happiness causes other people to suffer, it's not going to last. Other people will do

what they can to destroy it. So you want to find happiness in a way that harms no one.

Then you feel compassion for those who are suffering. This is how goodwill feels when you see someone who's suffering—you feel compassion. Empathetic joy for those who are already happy. This is a test for your goodwill. You say, "May all beings be happy, may all beings be happy," but then you see somebody who is happy, and if you're jealous or resentful of their happiness, something's wrong. But if you can be happy for other people's happiness—even when they're doing things better than you can or they're at a higher level than you are in terms of their wealth, health, how far they've gotten in their practice, you can still be happy for them—then that's free happiness: finding joy in other people's joy.

But then you realize, their karma is their karma, your karma is your karma. No matter how much goodwill or compassion you have for others, there's only so much you can do for them. You develop equanimity for things you can't change so that you can give energy to your real responsibility: You've got to focus on your actions.

This, again, is how to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. You're not distressed about other people's suffering. You're not greedy for the happiness they have. You realize you've got to look inside. Again, it all comes down to your actions. That's what the reflection on equanimity is all about—all beings are owners of their actions, just as you're the owner of your actions.

So these thoughts are meant to focus you inside and to clear away all the reasons you might have for letting your mind wander out to things outside. We think about the basic principles of where true happiness lies, and we think about the people who, in the past, have set good examples. Then we reflect on how our desire for happiness in the world leads again and again and again to disappointment.

If you're going to find a happiness you can rely on, you've got to look inside. Develop the qualities you have inside that the Buddha and the Sangha developed. Because, as the Buddha said, it was because of his resolution, his ardency, and his heedfulness that he was able to gain awakening. Well, these are qualities we have, too. Maybe not as strong as his, but he worked on developing them. It wasn't that he was some divine being who had these things magically. He had to work on

developing them. So if he can do it, we can do it as well: That's an attitude he encourages, by the way.

Some people think that it's ironic that Buddhism, with its teachings on not-self, contains some of the earliest spiritual autobiographies in the world. In fact, probably the earliest autobiographies, period: the Buddha's autobiography as he describes his quest for awakening. But he's basically setting out a template. He's showing: This is how it's done. This is how he came to the truth; this is how he found the right path; and these are the results he got. He tells his story to encourage you to follow the same path as well.

So these reflections are meant to bring your mind to want to settle down in the present moment, and to be disinclined to let your thoughts spread out into the world. You've got work that needs to be done, right here, right now. And it's good work: developing your mindfulness, developing your alertness, developing your ardent wish to do this skillfully.

So these are thoughts that induce you to put a lot of your thoughts about the outside world aside, and focus on thinking about your breath, thinking about your mind as it relates to the breath right now: how to breathe in a way that the mind and the breath fit together well, so that you feel at home right here.

When you feel at home, then it's very easy to watch what's going on in the mind. You follow what the Buddha says is mindfulness as a governing principle. If there are good qualities that are not here yet, you give rise to them. You remember that. If there are good qualities already there, then you remember to maintain them. You don't just watch them come and go.

After all, you do have goodwill for yourself, and this is how goodwill is expressed—by developing as much skill as you can in how you relate to your mind, both as it gets expressed in your words and deeds outside, and also how it relates to itself. When you clear up all the ignorance you have about your own mind here in the present moment, then you've cleared up the big problem in life.

When the Buddha taught his four noble truths, he wasn't just saying, "Here are some curious facts you might find interesting." He was saying, "This is the most important issue to deal with—how to put an end to your suffering. And this is how it's done." That's because once you've put an end to the suffering you cause for yourself, there's nothing else that can weigh the mind down.