

Light Merit

November 1, 2009

Today was a day of heavy merit, the kind of merit that takes a lot of you physically, and in some cases emotionally, dealing with lots of people. Now it's time for some light merit. All you have to do is watch your breath. But before you do that, you have to dedicate today's merit to everybody. It's a way of spreading goodwill. After all, what is merit? It's happiness, the kind of happiness that comes from doing good. When you do merit, you're not thinking that may only this person or may only that person benefit from it. You want everybody to benefit. Just hold that thought in mind: May all beings benefit from today's merit.

That right there is some light merit.

And now you can think even less. Whatever you're thinking, just think about the breath. Notice how it feels as it comes in, how it feels as it goes out. Ask yourself: What kind of breathing would feel really good right now? There's a pleasure that comes from breathing in this way. That's light merit. So is the realization you have no other responsibilities at this moment. That doesn't mean you're being irresponsible. It means you're looking after an important part of what you need in order to be responsible: strength of mind, well-being in the mind. We wouldn't have been able to handle today's crowd if we didn't have some sense of well-being already.

Of course, today's crowd was nothing compared to a lot of the issues we're going to face in life down the road: Aging is going to creep up on us, illness, death, separation—all those things we don't like to think about. Not thinking about them doesn't make them go away, though. So you prepare, knowing that there is that part of the mind that doesn't have to suffer from these things, and you're going to dig around inside to find it. To dig around, you have to stay in the present moment. And to stay in the present moment, you need an anchor. Otherwise, the mind drifts off into the past, drifts off into the future—and it drifts very quickly. You need something to keep yourself continually anchored right here.

So you stay with the breath and get interested in the breath. See what ways the breath can create a sense of well-being in the body, a sense of well-being in the mind. For the time being, that's all you have to worry about: just the present moment. This is a really good practice, cutting off thoughts of past, cutting off thoughts of future. Because there will come times when thoughts of past, thoughts of future really cause a lot of suffering. You may notice when someone is

getting really old and they know that if they think about the future, there's just death. So they don't want to think about it. They turn around and think a lot about the past. And that might stir up who knows what: incidents in the past, things they did that they feel ashamed of, that they regret.

So, one, if you're going to think about the future or the past, think in a way that's actually useful. Remind yourself that you can prepare for aging, illness, and death. At the same time, as you do good things in life, you'll have good things to look back on. When you have that kind of confidence with regard to the past, with regard to the future, then when you're settling down in the present moment, it's a different kind of settling down. You're not trying to run away from anything. You know simply that it's actually better to be here. It's okay to think about the future, okay to think about the past, but it's even better to sit here.

So instead of putting blinders on yourself, you're simply settling in, in the area where the real work has to be done in understanding what is your mind is doing, how it's shaping its experience, in what ways it's shaping things in a skillful way, in what ways it's doing it in an unskillful way. You can tackle that right here, realizing that you do have the choice. Even though you may have some past bad karma that's ripening right now, you don't have to suffer from it.

What kind of past bad karma might you have? Well, there are pains in your body. The body, as the Buddha said, is old karma. You're carrying a lot of old karma around you right here: the aches and pains from today's work, or other aches and pains that go deeper than that. But you don't have to suffer from them. You can stay with the breath. Each breath coming in, going out, is a new breath. Maybe your last breath was uncomfortable but the next one doesn't have to be.

Think of the breath going throughout the body, surrounding the body. There's a breath energy that surrounds the body, and sometimes you can sense it when you get really still and the mind gets really sensitive. That kind of breath energy can get tensed up, too, even though it doesn't have anything directly to do with the muscles. It can be tense; it can be tight. There may be major gaps there. So you work with them. Get a sense of energy that surrounds the body, suffuses the body, that feels good, feels comforting, feels soothing. You can focus on that. You don't have to focus on the pains.

This is an important lesson: that whatever's coming up in the present moment, you don't have to suffer from it if you have the right attitude. If you have the right perceptions, the right insights into what's going on, you can release yourself from that suffering. Even if it's just a temporary release, it's an important lesson, an important skill, so that whatever comes up, you're not weighing yourself down unnecessarily.

You get to be like a good cook. Good cooks can take even slightly spoiled food and make something good out of it. It's the unskillful cooks who can make good food only with really best ingredients. The really clever ones can take—well, look at cheese. What is cheese? Moldy milk. Fish sauce: the liquid that comes out decomposing fish. Yet people can make really good food out of these things.

It's the same with the past karma you're carrying around. Sometimes the body is tired, sometimes there's pain, but you don't have to suffer from that. The mind can be light; the mind can be fresh. As you work with the breath, you find with each new breath that there is a possibility for good energy coming into the body, bad energy flowing out. It's a good symbol for what the mind can do, because the mind does not have to be a slave to what was done in the past. It doesn't have to carry around past burdens. It can let them go. And as you're not weighing yourself down, the mind begins to rise up. Light. Free. And happy.

So try to bring a sense of lightness to the meditation—lightness in the breath, lightness in your attention, a light touch in your skill, shaping a sense of well-being in the present moment. You'll find that even though heavy merit is a necessary part of life, light merit is where it really gets good.