Mental Burdens

December, 2001

Mind has a tendency to latch on to things, thinking that it’s finding things to depend on. The more it latches on, the more it feels that it has supports. But when you look at the things that we latch on to, what are they? The aggregates, form, feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness. There’s nothing really stable or dependable here at all. Instead of being things that we can depend on, they turn into liabilities, they turn into burdens, because we have to look after them so much. Instead of our leaning on them, they lean on us. You don’t have to look too far away. Just look at all the worries you have about the future, your worries, your expectations, your thoughts about the past. These things weigh the mind down, and we have a tendency to carry them around with us all the time. When the mind is weighed down like this, then it doesn’t have any chance to do the good that it should be able to do. It’s like somebody walking down the street with their shoulders all burdened with weights. Someone comes up and says, “Could you lend a hand?” And the person says, “Well, I’ve got to carry all these weights around. I don’t have any strength left.” It’s because of our tendency to burden ourselves with things that we don’t get the good out of life that we should. We don’t get the good out of ourselves that we should. So a lot of the practice is learning how to put these burdens down. True happiness lies in letting go of the burdens. If we can’t put them down permanently, at least we should learn how to put them down temporarily, because it’s not the case that we can go throughout life without thinking about the future at all. We have to make some plans. We have to have our priorities all straightened out. But that’s a lot of what the priorities are, is to figure out what you really have to carry around and what you don’t have to carry around. So basically you try to pare down your load so that it’s as light as possible. There’s that story about a John Lee taking a group of his students out into the forest. They all met at the train station and arrived in Bangkok. A lot of laypeople had brought on several suitcases, with the idea that they were going to have other people carry their suitcases for them. So John Lee saw this, and instead of getting on the train, he just walked down the tracks. Well, only a John walks down the tracks and nobody gets to ride the train. Everybody else has to walk down the tracks, too. Immediately a lot of people started complaining that they had taken so much luggage with them that it was impractical to walk down the tracks. First, John Lee didn’t say anything. He just kept walking and finally said, “Well, if it’s heavy, throw it away.” So one by one the students stopped and went through their luggage and threw away all the stuff that wasn’t really essential. Some of them had to throw their entire suitcases away. By the time they got to the next train station, he looked around, and everybody had a really light load. Then it was time to get on the train. This is a basic lesson we have to take to heart with our own minds. How many loads are we carrying around that are really not necessary? If someone were to come up to you right now and offer you three wishes like they do in those fairy tales, most of us couldn’t think of just three wishes. We’d have so many wishes for this person, that person, this thing, that thing. Which means we just carry a lot of unnecessary garbage around. A couple of years back I received a letter from a monk in Australia. He had 160-some Dharma questions, questions he’d come up with reading the texts. He had doubts about this and doubts about that. He was kind enough to tell me that I didn’t have to answer them all at once. He would let me answer them in installments. Of course, if you have that many questions, you don’t have any real questions. They’re all idle questions. If people have serious questions, they only have one or two big questions they carry around. Those are the people whose questions are worth answering. So I ended up not answering any of his questions. Important things in life really require that you put the unimportant things aside, so that you have only a few burdens. But they’re important. They’re necessary burdens that you carry around with you. And even when you carry them around, there have to be times when you just put them aside. This is what concentration practice is all about. It’s about learning how to put even your important burdens down, your plans for the future, your expectations. Then there comes a time when, in order to learn how to carry them properly, you have to learn how to put them down from time to time. So this is what we do as we sit here. We focus on the breath. No matter how important other thoughts may be, how important your plans may be, how important this, that, the other thing may be, you have to put them aside when you’re focusing on the breath. With the understanding that energy, devotion, and devotion to the present moment will pay off in the future. In other words, if you pay close attention to the present moment, the future will, in many cases, take care of itself. As you focus on the present, you learn a lot of good qualities. You develop a lot of good skills in the mind. Then you’ll have these skills when the time comes to deal with your future plans, your future duties. You’ll carry these skills with you. It’s like going down to the gym. It’s not that you’re strong only in the gym. You develop strength in the gym. When you come out, you’ll use that strength for other things. While you’re in the gym, you don’t have to think about the other jobs you’re going to have to take care of while you’re outside. You just focus on what you’re doing at that point. It’s the same with meditation. Focus on the breath right now. Be mindful of the breath. Be alert to the breath. Be as persistent and as sensitive as you can be. In other words, sticking with the breath. Persistence while you’re with the breath means that you’re trying to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath is feeling. When it comes in, how does it feel in the different parts of the body? Make a very careful survey. You can devote a whole hour just to that one exercise, going through the body section by section by section until you’ve systematically gone through the whole body, noticing how the breath feels or how breathing feels at that part of the body, and letting go of any tension or tension. Notice any tightness you feel, no matter where it may be in the body, anything that pulls your body out of alignment, pulls you to the right, pulls you to the left, makes you lean forward as you meditate, whatever. Try to get the body in really good posture and relax any patterns of tension that keep you out of good posture. You can work through that. You’ll find that as you stick with it, the results are immediate and visceral. It feels good to work through the breath this way. At the same time, you’re developing your mindfulness. You’re developing your alertness. You’re strengthening both body and mind so that when the time comes that you do have to pick up your ordinary, everyday burdens, you’re a lot stronger. They don’t weigh on you so much. The other side of persistence is if you notice that you’ve slipped off the breath, you come back immediately, no matter how important that distraction may be. It is a distraction. It’s not what you want right now. Have a sense of time and place. There’s a proper time to think about things. There’s a time when you don’t think about things. Most of our minds don’t have that sense of time and place. Whenever a thought appears in the mind, you grab it right then and there. Sometimes you’re afraid you’ll lose it if it’s something good or interesting or enjoyable. But these thoughts, if they come to arise once, they can arise again. And it’s no big deal. You find the more still the mind can be, the better the quality of thought that comes into it. A lot of the time we spend worrying about this, worrying about that. It’s actually getting in the way of our dealing with those problems. A lot of times the best way to deal with a problem is to put it aside for the time being. Strengthen the mind until it’s ready to deal with the problem. Then you come back and things are a lot clearer. You’ve got a much better perspective on things. So, as soon as you notice that your mind has slipped off the breath, just bring it right back, no matter what. One very simple way of gauging your own progress in meditation is to see how much quicker you are to recognize when you’ve lost track of your meditation theme and come right back to it. The quicker you’re able to do this, okay, the better you are as a meditator. That’s one simple yardstick. Because that particular skill is going to be very useful throughout life. Your ability to drop one topic when you realize that it’s not worth thinking about when it’s getting in the way of your own well-being, or even if it is something important, if it’s time just to drop it for the time being and allow the mind to gather its strength, allow it to recover from the way it’s been burdening itself with that thing. So as you meditate, it’s not just an escape from your duties. You’re learning important skills that you’re going to need in order to carry whatever burdens really are necessary. Learn how to carry them well. So you have to be very careful about how you weigh yourself down. Look at all the things that you’ve surrounded yourself with, not only materially but also this concern, that concern, exactly how many of those concerns really are necessary, really are important. You do your best to just drop them if they’re not. Focus on the things that really are important, and then learn how to let go even of those things. Do this from time to time. Make it not just once in a long, long while. Learn how to do it as a regular practice. Every day there should be some time when you can just let all your burdens aside and allow the mind a chance to be on its own. Look after itself and not have to worry about anything else. That way it can carry its necessary burdens a lot more skillfully. Also the fact that it learns how to regard them not as burdens at all, because it has the strength to carry anything. The more it can let go, the stronger it gets. So there are two lessons here. One is learning how to sort out your burdens to see which ones are really necessary and which ones are not. Try to pare things down to the absolute minimum. And the second lesson is how to put even your necessary burdens down. This is what the breath is for, as a place where you can just be in the present moment. Let the future down, let the past down. Just be in the present moment. Ultimately you get to the point where you can even let go of the present moment. Then the mind is totally free. But until you can reach that point, you’ve got to learn how to carry your burdens intelligently. In other words, in knowing when to carry them, when to put them down. How to put them down in a way that’s not just self-indulgent or escapist, but in a way that enables you to carry them more easily the next time you have to pick them up.

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