What We Notice

January, 2002

Years back, there was a nature documentary that showed the way the world looks to animals with different kinds of eyes. And some of the reptiles were very interesting. They didn’t see objects. They saw movement. The nerve endings in their eyes are designed in such a way that all they see is movement and change. They don’t see the objects, actually, that change. In a way, our minds are just like that. We tend to see only the movement, only the change, both outside and inside. The things that are consistently there, the things that are there for a long time, we don’t notice. We’re more taken with the change. This is the cause of a problem when things change in ways that we don’t like. The mind tends to reflect its objects, reflect its moods. It’s interesting that in Thai the word for “mental object” is the same word for “mood,” the things you focus on, the things you feed on. Literally, the word for “object” in Pali is aramana, which means “support,” where your mind takes as a resting spot. It can rest comfortably or it can rest uncomfortably. What we’re trying to do as meditators is to find supports for the mind that are more consistent, that are not so subject to change, so that our moods don’t go up and down. If there is a rise and a fall in our moods, there’s also part of the mind that doesn’t change along with them. It just watches. It stays in equanimity. It’s not a sort of a beige, dull tone, but it’s just a really solid sense that you’re not totally immersed in these things. Your whole mind isn’t, as they use the word in Pali, “stained” by them. The way that water is stained by dye. So know that already there in the mind is a part that just doesn’t go up and down with the objects. An important part of the meditation is learning how to ferret it out. But to find that part, we have to work at being consistent ourselves, because only by being really still can you see the other things that are still. As long as you’re moving around, up and down, in and out, you have no idea what moves and what doesn’t move. It’s all movement. That’s all you know about your own mind. It’s the way it moves. The problem is that you don’t even see that much clearly, because there seem to be no fixed points in the mind. Everything is relative. Everything is moving. As soon as there’s a flow someplace in the mind, you go along with the flow. Then it’s hard to tell what’s moving and what’s not moving, or what’s moving because of what. So you have to make a fixed reference for yourself. This is why the basis for concentration practice is mindfulness. Establishing a frame of reference for yourself and then keeping it in mind. The body or feelings. The states of mind or mental events, mental qualities. You want to create one frame and just stay in terms of that one frame. We usually start out with the body. The breath is the main topic. Then everything else you want to relate to the body. If a feeling comes in, how does it affect the breath? How do you feel it in the body? Mental states come and go. Mental qualities come and go. How do you feel them in the body? What’s the physical? You’ll sense it if you really notice the breath, if you stay solidly with the breath. Don’t get taken off out of that frame of reference. If you keep moving around, you don’t see any one thing clearly. It’s your ability to stay calm, stay on an even keel, even though storms come and go. Cold fronts, warm fronts come and go. If you move around with them, then there’s no real knowledge of exactly what’s coming from what direction. So try to stay with the body. Stay with the breath. At the very least, stay with just that sense of having a body because it’s there all the time. We’re very good at blocking it out so we can think of other things. So we’re learning now not to block it, to notice that point where the mind consciously or, well, not consciously, but intentionally ignores the sense of the body so it can focus on other objects, other things, thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, anything but right now. Create a foundation for yourself right here. Once you can see that you can stay steadily with the body, then you work on the factors of concentration so you can be in the whole body. It’s almost as if when the mind is going to go off to the past or future, it has to narrow itself down to a little point. It’s like the road to the past or future is like this little tiny tunnel or a tiny tube. So the mind has to get very small so it can fit into those things. Your awareness has to get small so it can fit into those things. So you can block it by just being consciously aware of the whole. The whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Even if things are still in the body, just have that sense of whole body stillness. This grounds you even more solidly in the present moment. So those little thoughts of when the mind goes out to grab hold of something, it flows here, it flows there. You can catch them, see them as they’re happening, because you are no longer in the flow. You’re no longer in the movement. There’s part of you that’s just watching. Just aware. The part that we tend to ignore, but it’s the part that we really want to play up now, emphasize now. So when your physical feelings get good, you’re not carried away. When they get bad, you’re not put in a bad mood. There has to be this kind of even keel throughout. That’s what saves you from being a slave to your moods, helps pull you out of them. It’s the consistency of your frame of reference, the consistency of your ability to stay grounded in the body, that’s going to make all the difference. Even though you’re not totally released from suffering, at least you’re released from a lot of the problems that the mind tends to create for itself when it identifies with this thought, identifies with that thought, gets totally immersed in a certain state of being. Negative, tired, grumpy moods, and from there, even stronger bad moods. You know that there’s a part of the mind that just doesn’t get involved with those, that just watches them come, watches them go. Instead of being caught up in the movement or seeing only the movement, you want to see the part that doesn’t move. Stay in touch with that. That helps you keep your bearings. Keep grounded no matter what happens. You’re not blown away. Sometimes the winds have changed your channel. Sometimes they reach hurricane force. But if you’re solidly grounded, it doesn’t matter. You can see them just as the storms passing through. But there’s a part of you that’s untouched by the storms. It’s only when you have that kind of solidity that you can really trust yourself, not to harm yourself, not to harm others. Because you see that the storms aren’t worth getting involved with. They come and they go. And if you get involved with them, you end up doing and saying and thinking things that you later regret. So you step back. You really emphasize what’s observing all this coming and going. The potential for the awareness is there. It’s just that we tend to block it out. So in getting the mind to settle down, we’re opening up to a part of our awareness that’s been hidden, that’s been obscured. We take that and put it aside. We look at it as our grounding, so we can see more clearly and understand where our suffering comes from. Because only when you really understand it, only when you really see it happening, that’s when you’re freed from it. Too many times we know we’re suffering, but we don’t exactly see the process happening. So all of a sudden it seems like it sneaks up on us. It’s because we’ve learned how to obscure the beginning stages. So what we’re doing is opening up to them by being more solid, so that even the most subtle movements in the mind don’t go unnoticed. So make sure that this frame of reference is as solid as you can make it. You’ve got the body here as you anchor. If the body, in and of itself, is your frame of reference, that’s where you stay. It’s usually a lot easier to get started here than getting involved in feelings or mind states in and of themselves, because it’s so easy, without this kind of anchor, just to get blown away. When you stay with the body, there’s something that keeps you from moving with the thoughts. It gives you a place to step out of your thoughts, to see them from another side. It’s like moving into a different culture, learning the language, learning their ways of looking at things, and then coming back and looking at your old ways of looking at things as an outsider. It doesn’t quite have the same reality that it used to have before. It’s not as compelling as it used to be, because you realize there’s another way of looking at them. So step into the body as if it were a new culture. Get to know it. Get to know its language. Get to know its ways. So you can settle down and feel at home here as well.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/0201n2b2%20What%20We%20Notice.mp3>