Lightening Our Burdens

December 3, 2003

Take an inventory of your body, just to ground yourself here in the present moment. Where are the different parts of your body right now? And allow yourself to think that they’re all breathing. Some people have problems with this idea, but it’s actually a way of opening up to the present moment. If, subconsciously, we think that the different parts of the body aren’t breathing, we tend to block out the possibility that they can, and that interferes with their participation in the breathing process, which is really not good for the body. At the same time, it’s not good for the mind, because the more fully you can be in the present moment—that means totally immersed in the body, totally aware of the body—the harder it is to leave the present moment. So if you can be aware of the body with a sense of relaxation, go for it. If not, you may have to start at one spot to begin with. Get that one spot comfortable, and then think of that comfortable sensation and compare it with how the rest of the body feels. This way you can pick up on where tension arises, where it passes away. It gives you a standard against which to measure the rest of your experience of the body. Once you see what a good sensation of breathing right here in the present is, then you can compare it with the rest of the body and see how it compares. If there’s a bad sensation or a sensation of no breathing whatsoever, just allow it to rest for a minute. Then open your mind to the possibility that that part of the body could be breathing in the same way, have the same sense of openness and relaxation connected to the breath. Because the more sensitive you are to the body in the present moment, the easier it is to stay here. Not only when you can stay here can you really see the mind, because the mind is constantly creating past and future, and it’s weighing itself down. Think of the burdens we’re carrying around from the past—what this person did, what that person did, old habits we have. It really places a straitjacket on us. When you open up to the present moment, it allows the possibility for new ways of doing things, new ways of reacting, new ways of acting in the present moment, instead of having to fit into old molds. The whole purpose of the training, the whole reason behind the training, is that we can all change. If we couldn’t change, the Buddha would have had no reason to teach anybody. If everything were predetermined, why bother to teach? Just let things go in the same old way they happen. But that’s not the case. It’s because change can happen. The Buddha realized it was useful to practice for change and to teach others for that change as well. Once he had seen the results of the practice, seen what worked and what didn’t work, he taught others. What we’re doing is we’re taking his teachings as guidelines to look into the present moment to see where our possibility for change is. Of course, the big possibility lies right in the area where the mind creates suffering for itself unnecessarily, latching on to things, latching on to particular pleasures, latching on to your desire for sensory pleasures, latching on to your old ways of doing things, latching on to your views, latching on to your ideas about who you are and what you are. All these things, the Buddha said, are ways of clinging. It’s because of this clinging that we cause suffering. So when we get into the present moment, we want to loosen up some of that suffering. Loosen up some of the cause of that suffering. That way we can change. Because it is with the realization that we’re causing the suffering that weighs the mind down more than anything else. It’s not the people outside or things outside, the economy, the environment. It’s the way we take this input into the mind and then use it to weigh ourselves down. So one way of getting a handle on the problem of suffering is to look right there for the issue of clinging. The Buddha lays out all the different factors that lead to suffering in dependent co-arising. Different people find that different factors or different links in the chain are the easy ones to focus on. Clinging, though, is the immediate answer. It goes straight from clinging to suffering. So we’re pretty close to the suffering right there. In fact, in some contexts, he includes the clinging itself under suffering. Once there’s clinging, the rest of the dominoes fall right down. So once the mind settles down and has a good sense of what it’s like to be here in the present moment, turn around and look at the things you cling to in any of those four categories—your desire for sensual pleasures, your views, your habitual ways of doing things, your sense of who you are. Put a question mark next to all those things. Would life be better without those things? Can you try to function without them? See what happens. It’s this way we open ourselves up to the possibility to change. We actually start seeing change happening in our minds. So this is why we’re getting the mind into the present moment. Sometimes we want to jump right there to the analysis, but the question is, is your concentration ready for it? In some instances, you have to put off the questioning. In others, life forces the issues on you. The practice doesn’t get set up in a neat row. First we’re working on virtue, and then working on concentration, and then working on discernment. All the issues come at once. Sometimes we have to make decisions. All the time we have to make decisions with regard to our precepts. Sometimes, though, they’re more pressing, more difficult than other times. Same with concentration. Some days it’s easy for the mind to settle down. Other days it’s going to be hard. Some days the circumstances around us seem to be ideal. Other days you wonder how you could possibly manage to meditate in a place like this. The same with discernment. Some days the issue of suffering doesn’t seem to weigh too heavily on you. Other days it’s right there in your face, and you can’t determine ahead of time how it’s going to happen, what order things are going to come in. So you want to have a good sense of all the tools you have at hand, so that you use them as you need them. So even though really refined discernment may require refined concentration, there’s no reason that you can’t use some rudimentary discernment when your concentration is only rudimentary. After all, it helps loosen things up, helps take off some of that burden, helps loosen some of that clinging. All for the good. So remember that your practice should have all of these elements—virtue, concentration, and each of them helps the others along. One of the constant themes in Ajahn Lee’s teachings, for example, is that you really can’t separate virtue from concentration, from discernment. He talks about concentration as developing inner virtues in the mind. He talks of discernment as a way of developing the normalcy of the mind, normalcy of the mind being another translation for sila, or virtue. And then he goes through all the various changes, seeing how discernment is another expression of virtue, virtue is another expression of discernment. They’re different facets of the same thing. Different applications of the same principle. And when you see them all as connected in this way, it helps bring the whole of the practice together. So as we’re sitting here getting our minds to calm down, we’re showing restraint, which is an aspect of virtue. We’re also working on our intention, which is also an important aspect of virtue—the intention not to harm. Underlying all these practices is basic goodwill—goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for the people around us. We see our own suffering and we’d like to put an end to it. We see other people’s suffering and we feel a sense of sympathy for them. We don’t want to contribute to their sufferings, either. So even from the very beginning, the whole issue of suffering and the end of suffering is right there. So we practice virtue as a way of putting an end to suffering, some of the grosser forms of suffering that we cause ourselves and other people. And then we practice concentration to work on more subtle ones. The sense of weight, the sense of suffering that comes from allowing our minds to calm down, to wind through unskillful thoughts and sensual desires. When we bring the mind down, we find immediately there’s a sense of lightness. When the Buddha talks about the sense of pleasure that comes from getting the mind absorbed, in the first level, it’s simply the pleasure that comes from being secluded from unskillful thoughts and sensual desires. Simply by lifting those things from the mind or getting the mind away from those things, there’s an immediate sense of well-being. It’s amazing how our society keeps pushing the idea that it’s by satisfying our sensual desires that we’re going to find true happiness. It keeps dangling them in front of us. The other day I was reading a book, or reading about a book, saying that the pursuit of happiness, in which this author defined it as the pursuit of material things, is the American way. It’s what makes America strong. It’s the pursuit. Never talk about the finding. We keep chasing, chasing, chasing, and that’s what keeps the economy going around. It’s also what keeps our minds spinning around all the time. And all they keep promising us, true happiness, it just doesn’t happen. But they also get us to believe that a mind that’s separated from sensual desire is somehow twisted or unhealthy. And as a result, the part of the mind that would thrive when the weight of sensual desire gets lifted just doesn’t get a chance to thrive. It’s the one that gets twisted, strange, squeezed out. But the Buddha pointed out that simply by secluding your mind from those desires, secluding your mind from unskillful thoughts, immediately creates a sense of openness. Then as that sense of absorption gets to develop, then the sense of pleasure that comes, say, from the second level of jhana comes from a sense of oneness. As the mind becomes one with the breath, your sense of awareness gets expanded and becomes one with your expanded sense of the body. So we’re directly working here on lessening the sense of weight, lessening the sense of stress and suffering in our lives through the practice of concentration. It’s right here. It’s not that we have to wait until the end of the path where stress and suffering get lifted. As we go through the various levels of concentration, there are many passages in the Canon. At each level of concentration, there’s a greater sense of ease as you lift away one of the factors from the previous level. There’s a greater sense of openness, a greater sense of lightness. So even though that may not be the absolute end of suffering, it’s the beginning. It’s part of the practice of showing goodwill for yourself and for the people around you. As your mind gets less burdened down, you’re less inclined to place burdens on other people. The same with discernment, as you begin to work through the various things that you’re clinging to. Simply the act of perceiving what’s going on lightens the mind. Things that used to be a mystery, things that used to be difficult to understand, why you’re suffering, what’s the problem, you begin to see it. That in and of itself means the mind has less of a need to go around searching outside. As the Buddha once said, the two reactions to suffering are one, a sense of bewilderment, and two, a sense of search. The bewilderment and the search, they too form stress and suffering. They weigh down the mind. As you begin to see through the process, you’re not bewildered. You don’t have to search. That lightens the burdens on the mind right there. Then when release comes so much, the mind is better. That’s what the whole path is all about. The end of suffering, release, is something radically different. It’s a whole different order of cessation. In the other cases, it’s something that’s eased for a while, and then if the mind loses its mindfulness, loses its alertness, it goes back. But with release, the things that are cut are cut. The types of suffering that the mind has been imposing on itself go for good. The image in the Canon is of someone removing the skin from the carcass of a cow. It’s not a pretty image, but it’s very effective for showing that the cutting is radical, cutting through all the sinews and connective tissues. They say, “Even if you put the skin right back on the cow, would you say it was connected as before?” Well, no. So as the Buddha said, the teachings come down to suffering and the end of suffering. The path we’re practicing here is making ourselves more and more sensitive to the kinds of suffering we cause for ourselves and for the people around us, and also showing us the way that we can put an end to them. Before we put an end to them, we lighten them. So there’s a unity to the practice in all the various teachings. It’s important to reflect as we go on the path, which of the facets are we lacking in our path. Whichever one seems to be lacking, you work on that. And you find that as you do that, you strengthen the other elements of the path as well, because they’re all reinforcing, mutually reinforcing. So even as you’re working on getting the mind to be still right here, remember, there’s an element of discernment that goes into that as well. There’s an element of virtue that goes into that as well. And as they all work together, and make the path strong.

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