Self-Identity View

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Working with the breath is a way of showing goodwill for yourself. You can make a lot of difference in your life simply by the way you breathe, by the way you pay attention to how you breathe. After all, no one’s forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way, and yet you often allow the process to happen that way. The breath gets constricted, it gets tight. As a result, it feels uncomfortable being in the body, and you actually create a lot of conditions for different kinds of diseases to arise, all because you’re not paying enough attention to the breath. At the same time, when the body’s uncomfortable, the mind’s going to feel uncomfortable in the present moment as well. When the mind’s uncomfortable here, it’s not going to stay here. It’s going to go wandering off. And it’s also going to feel oppressed. It’d be hard to put its finger on why it’s feeling oppressed. In fact, this is why many people get angry about little tiny things in their lives. Something feels wrong and they can’t quite put their finger on it, so they go out and blame other people. But if you can work with the breath in such a way that it creates a better home for the mind here in the present moment, you don’t have that feeling of being oppressed all the time. At the same time, in the course of working with the breath, you learn a lot about the mind as well. Because working with the breath doesn’t mean simply changing the rate, or the texture, or the other physical qualities of the breath. It also means stopping to take a look at your own preconceived notions about the breath. How do you perceive the process of breathing? What does the body have to do in order to have the breath come in, have the breath go out? Or what do you think it has to do? Can you try breathing in other ways? Can you try conceiving of the breath in other ways? In other words, thinking, “Where does the breath come in? Where does it go out? Does it have to be pushed and pulled in and out? Does it have to get squeezed out to go?” Can you breathe out with a sense of fullness even though the breath is going out? These are questions you should learn to ask yourself. Exactly where are you in the midst of this breath? Of course, we all know that the quickest answer is, “Well, there is no me in here.” But look at your assumption about where you are in the breath. Which part of the body is it in? How does it relate to the breath? Where is the breath coming from? Can you think of yourself being totally surrounded by the breath? There’s no lack of breath energy or no lack of resources that you can draw on for your breath energy. It’s coming in and going out all around you. What does that do to the way the breathing feels when you think of it in that way? Can you think of the breath coming in and out your toes, coming in and out your fingers, the back of your hand, the back of the wrist, other parts of the body that you use to hold the body up to maintain your posture? Can you breathe in and out through those parts, using those parts? There’s a lot to play with and a lot to explore. In the course of playing and exploring, as I said, you learn not only about the breath energy in the body but also how the mind affects things, how you perceive things, how your preconceived notions affect your sensation in the present moment. Something as basic as this, as immediate as this, can really be formed for good or for ill by the way you think about it, by the way you perceive it, by the labels you put on things. This gives you a sense of the power the mind has to shape its experience, again, for good or for ill. This is what the five Four Noble Truths are all about. The Buddha could have talked about just the suffering inherent in things that are compounded, but the suffering he really wanted you to focus on was the suffering that comes from your own craving. Compounded things would cover everything—sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations coming in the mind through the senses. Everything you sense is compounded by nature. It’s put together, which means it’s going to be stressful and it’s going to someday have to fall apart. But there’s another layer of stress that you place on top of this, and actually it’s because of that second layer of stress that these other things can cause you to suffer, because that second layer of stress includes craving and clinging. That’s the one we have to watch out for. The main purpose of the meditation is, once you’ve got this sense of being at home here in the present moment, to look at the mind. What is the mind doing to the present moment? In what way does it conceive of the present moment, or perceive or feel the present moment, to create more suffering for itself? That’s what you’ve got to watch out for, because that’s the suffering that’s really oppressive. If we think about what other people do to us, it can wear us down. But why is it wearing us down? It’s because of the way we relate to it. One. Two, because of the way we’re already relating to ourselves. Just take the simple fact of breathing uncomfortably and then thinking in ways that make the present moment uncomfortable and thinking in ways that can create all kinds of unnecessary, pointless suffering for yourself. You’re already weighing yourself down, and then events from outside come along and you feel like you’re going to break. You can’t handle them. That’s because you’re handling too much stuff that you yourself are creating already. This is not saying that people outside don’t misbehave. They do misbehave. But for the sake of getting rid of your own suffering, you’ve got to focus on what you’re doing. And this is good, because it means that it doesn’t depend on other people. You don’t need to please somebody else in order to get to the end of suffering. It’s simply you learning to relate to yourself in a new way. This puts you in a position of power. People like to think that they’d like to live in a world where they weren’t at fault for anything. But if they were in a world where they weren’t at fault for anything, they’d be in a world that they didn’t have any power over at all. So the fact that we can see our own mistakes means that we’ve got power. We can correct them. What are some of those mistakes? The Buddha talks about fetters, the mind’s ability to tie itself down to this process of wandering around. There are three fetters that are cut by the First Level Awakening—self-identity views, seeing that the body or feelings or perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, that these are yourself. Either that, or that you are in them, or they are in you, or that you possess them. Sometimes people think the Buddha’s teachings on not-self apply only to the five khandhas. He’s pointing out the way people identify with the khandhas, but he’s not denying this larger sense of self in which the five khandhas occur. But if you look carefully at the text, he is calling that sense of self into question as well, because it involves suffering, too. Think of a spacious, cosmic self in which the five khandhas operate. Well, that would be a cause for suffering, too. Any kind of self you related in any way to the five khandhas, when you can cut through that, you’ve released yourself from one of the big fetters. You release yourself not by thinking about it, but by actually touching the deathless. From that perspective, looking back on your old sense of identity, you realize you couldn’t seriously identify with those things anymore. The Buddha said there’s still a residual sense of self, but when you’re asked point-blank, “Is the body you?” From that point on, you would never say yes. Feelings? No. Perceptions? Are they you? No. Thought constructs? Consciousness? No, no, no. You know these things are not you, because you’ve seen what happens when these things are not there, when they don’t impinge on your awareness. In it, it’s not an annihilation. Seeing the deathless also erases your doubts about the proper path of practice. That’s another one of the fetters. We tie ourselves down with, “Is this really true? Is that really true? I don’t dare commit myself.” That kind of attitude. It’s normal that we all have those attitudes as we approach the practice. The Buddha encourages us to test things, not to jump in too quickly, but at the same time, you have to realize that doubt, uncertainty, these things are fetters. The only way you can overcome them is by touching the deathless. At the same time, that experience puts an end to grasping at precepts and practices, saying that simply through adhering to a particular code of behavior or following a particular practice, that in and of itself is what constitutes purity, constitutes the end of suffering. It doesn’t. Certain precepts and certain practices are the way to the end of suffering, but they’re just that, the way. They don’t constitute the actual goal itself. The Buddha is very clear that. The path and goal are related things, but they’re separate things, entirely different order. Two other fetters that can be cut are sensual passion and irritation. It’s interesting that they’re cut at the same time because they’re related. When you desire sounds, smells, tastes, tacts, sensations, and ideas to be a certain way and they’re not a certain way, then you’re going to feel irritated. It’s because you’re looking for your happiness in those things, craving those things, that they can hit you. That’s the actual literal meaning of paticca, which is translated as irritation. You’re getting hit by these things. Basically, you’re setting yourself up. So these are some of the ways we tie ourselves down, create problems for ourselves. As I say, these fetters can be cut only through direct experience of the Deathless, but you can work at chipping away at them in the meantime. After all, they’re tying you down to suffering no matter what, so you don’t have to wait until Awakening to lessen them, weaken them. Realizing that by the way you identify with things, by the way you hold on to certain practices, by the way you desire certain things, by the way you set yourself up for irritation. When you see this dynamic, understand this dynamic, that you can watch for it in your own life. You realize that the problems are not what’s coming in from outside, but it’s how you’re relating to yourself, how you’re relating to what comes in from outside. Again, we don’t like to hear this because we would rather not be at fault for our suffering, but unless you accept responsibility for your suffering, there’s no way you can put an end to it. If you’re totally irresponsible, or totally deny responsibility, one, you’re not going to work for the end of suffering, and two, you’re not going to even believe that you can do it. But this is the good news of the Buddha’s teachings, that the suffering that really weighs us down is something that we can work with, it’s something that we can put an end to. It requires that we stick with it, not allow ourselves to get discouraged. There are going to be ups and downs in the practice. It’s not the case that you simply hear about these things and then can put them totally into practice and it’s simply up, up, up, up, up all the way. Practice has its ups and downs. The fact that you’re going to fall down means, well, there’s still more to learn. So you just turn around and keep learning, learning, learning. Identify yourself as a person who’s willing to learn. As long as we have a sense of self-identity, make it a good one, make it a useful one, a self that’s willing and able to learn, a self that finds joy in doing things skillfully. That sense of self is a healthy one. It gets you on the path and it keeps you there. You can work on letting go of it only when it’s no longer useful. As long as it has its uses, make use of it. This sense of self that’s responsible, this sense of self that is glad to be empowered, that kind of sense of self is important for the path, it’s necessary for the path. You can worry about letting go of it only when you no longer need it. Buddha never has you let go of things that you need. He simply asks you to look very carefully at what you really do need and what you don’t need, what is helpful and what’s not.

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