Inner Baggage

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If you could take a picture of most people’s minds, you’d find them loaded down with all kinds of baggage. There’s a Pali word, upatit, which on an everyday level means your belongings, the things that a person would carry around, especially a wandering person like a nomad, all the belongings they have to haul along with them in order to keep going. On a psychological level, it’s the same sort of thing. We just carry a lot of stuff with us. And the problem is we think a lot of it is necessary. We have to weigh ourselves down. We can’t do without it. One of the Buddha’s most important lessons is that the mind gets along perfectly fine without the baggage. It doesn’t need the stuff. In fact, it’s much better off without it. And he also pointed out that the things we weigh ourselves down with, many times our heaviest burdens, are the things that are absolutely least necessary. So when we come to meditate, it’s a process of learning to look, what are you carrying around with you? Do you have to carry it around? Of course, these are not things that you carry around. They’re thoughts and they’re patterns of behavior that we carry around. And the problem is, in the process of meditation, we’re learning how to unlearn those habits. The question is, is it really necessary to think in a certain way, to act in a certain way, to verbalize your thoughts in a certain way? So we try to strip things down to the bare essentials so we can understand what we’re doing right now that’s weighing ourselves down. And can we learn to unlearn those habits? So the first question when you’re meditating is, what do you really have right here, right now? It’s not much. You’ve got the breath coming in and going out. You’ve got thoughts coming through the mind, feelings, perceptions. And you want to learn to step back and look at these things simply as processes. And a good way to get out of the thoughts is to focus on the breath. This is your anchor because it keeps you in the present moment and it keeps you close to the physical side of things. Because one of the basic ways we have of creating suffering for ourselves is this division we make between the physical and the mental, what they call nama and rupa. I once saw a cartoon of a meditator. First, she’s sitting there perfectly still, and then the word “think” appears across her forehead. In the next frame, there’s “think” in her shoulder, “think” in her stomach, “think” in her knee. And then in the last one, her total body is blotted out by the word “think, think, think, think, think” all over. You see this happening in your meditation. You’re sitting here with the physical sensation of the body, the physical sensation of breathing, and all of a sudden you’re someplace else. You’re in a world composed of thought. Then the field of your experience is suddenly a thought field, whereas previously it was a body field. What you want to learn about is how you switch from one to the other, because it’s basically the same field, but in some ways you experience it as body, other times you experience it as a thought, words, ideas, mental pictures. You want to get close to that process, close to the point where it switches, because that’s where you learn an awful lot of interesting things about the mind. Because it switches through the breath, the breath is the place where you want to set up camp. This is where you’re going to stay. Stay right here with the breathing. Explore the breathing sensations. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? When you breathe out, where do you feel it? What do you feel? What is the sensation like? Try to stay right on that level without putting too much interpretation on top of it. The questions you should ask are, “Is it comfortable?” If it’s not, you can change it. You can change the rhythm of the breathing. You can change the texture of the breathing. You can experiment with how you conceive the breathing. When an in-breath starts, where does it start? Does it start equally in all the cells of your body, or does one part of the body seem to be in charge and drag the other parts along with it? The same with the out-breath. When does the point come when you realize you’ve had enough of an in-breath? What are the signs that let you know when you’ve had enough out-breath? You can think of the breath as the air coming in and out through the nose, or you can think of it as the energy patterns in the body because they’re connected. The way that energy changes in the body is going to pull the air in and let it go out. So you can experiment to see with what level of breathing sensations you want to focus on. Which ones are more comfortable? Which ones are more stable? Which levels of focus are more stable? Looking at this, you can see very simply how the way you relate to the breath can have a big impact on how you experience the breath. If you weigh yourself down with lots of preconceived notions of how the breath has to be, you’re going to cause yourself unnecessary suffering. Not just your feelings in the present moment, but you can do things to your body by the way you breathe, either healthy things or unhealthy things. So there’s a lot to explore right here. And there’s a basic level of sensation. Because how you relate to your breath is going to influence the way you relate to your body as a whole. And right there you begin to see that you have a choice. There are lots of different ways you can relate, lots of different ways you can fashion the body, either for good or for ill. And the simple process of learning how to breathe in a less burdensome way begins to take a lot of the weight off the mind. This is not a selfish activity. You’re not doing it just for yourself, but also for the people around you. Because if you’re less burdened, you’re not weighing yourself down. When you’re not weighing yourself down, then you have more strength to help other people with their issues. If you’ve got huge burdens on your shoulders, someone else wants to ask you, “Can you put any package on top of your burdens?” Your immediate reaction is, “Can’t you see I’m already burdened down? How can you put anything more on me?” And even the tiniest of little packages they want you to carry becomes too much. And it seems unreasonable that they would ask for that help, because you’re so obviously weighed down. But the question is, do you have to weigh yourself down? If you learn how not to weigh yourself down, then you do have more strength left over to help other people. So these are lessons you can learn simply by looking at the breath, the way you breathe, the way you relate to the breath. And not just the physical sensation of breathing. It’s the way you focus your attention on the breath and how you evaluate it. That has an impact as well. This is called verbal fabrication. You learn how to ask the right questions of the breath. Focus on it in such a way that you’re not putting too much weight on it, you’re not putting too little pressure on it. It seems just right coming in and going out. Your mind is right there with the breathing, not repressing it, not drifting away, and learning how to evaluate when it’s comfortable and when it’s not. This way you’re affecting not only a relationship to your body, but also a relationship to the whole process of speech, the questions you ask in the mind, the way you evaluate things, the way you think about things, the way you verbalize issues in the mind. You begin to see that there are skillful ways of doing this and unskillful ways of doing it, burdensome ways and unburdensome ways. Ways that help relieve the unnecessary suffering inside. Those are useful ways of thinking, useful ways of directing your thoughts to issues and evaluating them. So this is training not only in how you relate to the body, but also how you relate to your whole power of speech. When you start talking to yourself in good and useful ways, it becomes a lot easier to talk to other people in good and useful ways, too. So again, the quality of your internal relationship to your body and your speech affects how you relate to other people as well. Then there’s the question of how you relate to your feelings and perceptions that go along with the breath. This is called mental fabrication. One of the important lessons here is that you learn to deal with feelings not as ends in and of themselves, but as part of your path. You find that there are some feelings of pleasure that are useful, other feelings of pleasure are not. But the feeling of pleasure that comes from dealing properly with the breath is a very, very useful sense of pleasure. It’s part of the path. Again, you see that there are different ways of perceiving the breath. Some ways of perceiving the breath make it a laborious process. If you’ve got to pull this sensation into that sensation, but there’s another sensation blocking the way, that becomes a real struggle. But then you can ask yourself, “Do you really have to pull things around that way?” How do you conceive of the process of breathing? Can you conceive of it in different ways so that it’s not oppressive? If you find that when you breathe in, you’re pulling things in a way that’s uncomfortable, think of the energy going the exact opposite direction. You don’t have to pull. Breath energy can come in from other parts of the body. Open your mind to that possibility. So what you’re doing is you’re playing with your perceptions and seeing it. The way you label things, the concepts you apply to things, has a big impact on how much you’re causing yourself to suffer. You can change your concepts, and that changes the way you experience your reality. Some of the important lessons relating to feeling and perception have an impact on how you relate to your mental processes as a whole. In other words, if you go grasping after pleasure or pushing pain away, many times you don’t learn the lessons that can come from allowing yourself to be with the pain, say, and watch it. Learn which uncomfortable sensations are actually useful for contemplation and which ones get in the way. Which pleasurable sensations or how different ways of relating to pleasure are helpful and which ways are not. In your ways of perceiving the breath, in your ways of labeling the states of concentration you get into, how can you learn to live with your perceptions in such a way that they don’t cause suffering? When I went to stay with Ajahn Fung, one of the first things he did was to hand me a copy of Ajahn Lee’s Instructions on Breath Meditation, Method Two. He’d arranged to have it printed as a separate little booklet. Towards the end, there was the discussion of jhana, how the breath meditation techniques fit into the classical patterns of jhana, which activities apply to directed thought, evaluation, pleasure, rapture, and singleness of preoccupation, and so on up the list. What was interesting is that even though the book was very explicit about what was involved in jhana practice, what the different levels were, Ajahn Fung himself very rarely talked about it. He would mention jhana from time to time, but he’d never guarantee that you had reached, say, the first jhana or the second jhana. What he was more interested in was asking you how you were perceiving the breath. If it was a helpful way of perception, he would encourage it. If it was not, he might suggest another way of thinking about the breath. That was what we talked about. And of course it was the most useful thing to talk about. If you said, “Well, is this the first jhana? Is that the second jhana?” What were you doing? You were asking him to take responsibility for labeling what was going on in your mind. He didn’t want to encourage that. What he did want to encourage was teaching you how to evaluate what was going on in the mind in terms of what you were directly experiencing. As for whether it was this level of jhana or that level of jhana, what you learned after a while was that the labels you put on these things had to be post-it labels. This seemed to fit in, but you didn’t know 100% for sure, and you couldn’t ask him to take responsibility for guaranteeing whether it was 100% sure or not. So it made you more responsible for learning how to evaluate your own mind, looking at your own mind, and dealing with the fact that you might be mistaken. If things seem to be going well, you stick with it for a while to explore that. How well were they really going? If it turned out the landscape of your mind was not quite where you thought it was, well, you can take the post-it level off of this state and put it on to another state. Who was being responsible? You were being responsible. This was an important part of the training. Instead of turning you into the sort of student who was always running to the teacher to ask for confirmation, he taught you to take responsibility for what was going on in your own mind, for evaluating it and learning to be ingenious in exploring things, testing things. That way, it wasn’t just a question of attaining a particular state, but turning you into the kind of person you could rely on yourself for evaluating what you were doing and what the results were and how you might improve it. That was the important lesson of the practice. You could take those skills and apply them to your whole life, the way you relate to your physical actions, the way you relate to your speech, the way you relate to your thinking. You’ll become more capable of evaluating things on your own, of learning to be more and more skillful in detecting where you’re creating burdens for yourself and learning how to shed those burdens so that your quality of your inner relationship would have its own natural impact on your outside relationships as well. You relate to yourself more skillfully. You’re more responsible in how you relate to yourself. You’re more responsible in how you relate to other people—more sensitive, more skillful. So it all builds on stripping things down to the bare essentials. See how you’re relating to the physical processes in the body, like the breath, verbal processes, like directed thought and evaluation, and mental processes, like the way you relate to perceptions and feelings. When you take care of your inner work like this, you become more sensitive to the external burdens that you take on. You see more clearly how you can let them go. So this is something we can’t abandon. Sometimes our attention gets distracted outside. This issue seems more important, that issue seems more important, your security, your life, your job, whatever. And you neglect the inner work that needs to be done so that those outer issues don’t become burdens and that you’re not creating all these unnecessary inner burdens as well, which means that you can stand up straighter, walk around with fewer and fewer burdens on your shoulders. You find it easier to live with yourself, the people around you find it easier to live with you as well. They get more out of being with you because you take responsibility inside yourself and don’t neglect the inner work that needs to be done. So always keep your main focus centered right here. This is what makes all the difference in life—these inner relationships, body, speech, mind. Once these skills are mastered, then you can go wherever you like. There are no burdens on your shoulders. You’re not placing unnecessary burdens on other people either, because you keep your prime focus right here. And it’s in this way that they say, “Wherever you go, there you are.” Most people, wherever they go, don’t even know where they go, because their attention keeps going out, out, out, further and further away. What you do is you bring it in right here. Once your center stays here, then you’re always here, always at home, because you’re not lugging things around. You don’t have any baggage. You don’t need the baggage because you’re already here. It’s like the difference between carrying things around and having them in your house and staying inside your house. If you leave the house, you have to wrap things up and carry them around. But if you stay inside the house right here all the time, everything is right there at your fingertips. You don’t need to carry a thing.

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