Web of Pain,The

August 7, 2005

Try to breathe comfortably. Let the breath come in and go out in a way that feels good for the body. Focus on the comfortable sensations related to the breath. These can be anywhere in the body at all. When you emphasize the comfort like this, you find it easier to stay in the present moment. This is to combat a tendency the mind has, which is to focus on the pains. You may have noticed that sitting here and meditating for an hour, a lot of pain seemed to come up in the body. Whereas you can sit still for an hour and watch a movie, watch a TV show, and there doesn’t seem to be much pain at all. Why is that? It’s because your attention is focused outside, away from the pains in the body. As a result, you don’t start knitting together a web of pain. But here you are, sitting with nothing to distract you except for your own thoughts. It’s just you and the body sitting here breathing. You’re going to start noticing. If you want to start noticing, there’s a pain here, there’s a pain there, there’s a little pain in your leg. Part of that pain is based on actual physical conditions. But the way you knit it together, the way you turn it into a web of pain, that’s something that you add. That’s the activity of what they call perception. The Pali word is sannyāsa, the stories you tell, the labels you put on things, the connections you make between different things. This is the natural way the mind functions. It’s so much information. So many bits of sensory information are coming into the brain all the time. The brain has its own filtering mechanism to filter out which sensations are the important ones. Then it tries to make sense out of them, putting them together in various configurations. One big configuration, of course, is pain, disease. Something’s wrong with the body. You’ve got to do something about it. It’s the brain’s early warning system. But here you are with nothing to distract you, and sometimes that early warning system runs amok. What might have been a small pain turns into a large pain, and then it begins to connect with other pains in different parts of the body and has you surrounded. So to prevent that from happening, you have to start out by learning how to focus on the comfortable sensations, the good things in the body. The spots where it feels okay. The spots that you’ve been either trained or hardwired to not pay attention to. You figure if things are okay, you don’t have to worry about them, you don’t have to give them much attention, and you go to places where it hurts. But one of the things you have to learn as a meditator is to learn how to focus on the comfortable sensations and try to connect the comfortable sensations so that you realize there’s an awful lot of the body that’s feeling perfectly fine. And when the different comfortable sensations get connected, that sense of ease can grow. That makes it a lot easier to stay here in the present moment. And then from that perspective, you can look at the pains. But it takes a while to make this perception shift, not only to make it, but also to make it stick. Because it’s so easy to drop the feelings of pleasure when you run into a pain, that you’ve got to keep reminding yourself, keep practicing, come back to the sense of ease or come back to the sense of pleasure, fullness. That’s potentially there in huge parts of the body. This perceptual shift is very important. One, making it easier to stay in the present moment. But two, you begin to realize how much you contribute to your experience of the present by the way you put it all together. So much of the suffering we cause ourselves comes from this. It’s not that you’re totally free to experience the present in any way you want. There are things that come in from your past karma. When there is a disease in the body, you can’t simply wish it away. But you can learn to relate to it in a very different way, a way that doesn’t add to the pain or the stress that’s already there. So this process of playing with your perceptions or manipulating your perceptions is a very important part of the practice, both in helping your concentration and in giving you insight. So many times we think of insight simply as the ability to see things arising and passing away. That’s supposed to do away with our attachment to them. Well, it is important to see things arising and passing away, to realize that you’ve been sticking them together in a particular way through your perceptions. But that’s not enough. You have to also see what you’re adding to these things. Even the perception of arising and passing away—that’s your contribution to the present moment. And as you look more and more deeply into the present moment, you begin to see how much you are putting it together, how much of it is your own construction. If you’ve developed bad perceptual habits in the past, you tend to put it together in a way that causes suffering. You can stitch it together and torment yourself with all kinds of things. As you sit here with a breath, part of the mind says, “Hey, this is a great chance to think about this or think about that.” And you find yourself wandering off into all kinds of torturous thought worlds. That can happen, but it doesn’t have to happen. The reason we play with perceptions in this way is to give yourself the opportunity to see how much you do have a choice in how you experience the present moment. The way you put together feeling and perception, the Buddha calls these citta-saṅkhāra, the factors that fashion the mind, that can create almost any kind of experience. And if you see that you’ve developed habits of creating suffering out of almost any raw material, it’s good to learn some new habits. So you start with a breath, how you focus your attention on the breath and how you evaluate the breath. That’s called verbal fabrication. You can think of the breath, if you want, simply as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but that’s very restrictive. You can also think of it as the energy flow in the body, and that can come in and out anywhere. Open yourself to the possibility that it can come in and out every pore. Think of all the little tiny, tiny muscles covering the body that open and close your pores. Allow them to open, and that will change your experience of the body. As you get more and more sensitive to the breath energy in the body, your evaluation, the power of evaluation, gets more precise, and you can think of new ways of playing with the breath. If you have a headache, you can focus on the breath, say, in the lower back or down in the legs or in the feet or the hands, and it will change your experience of the headache. If you have a backache, you can focus on the energy in the stomach. Allow the breath in the front of the body to flow in and out smoothly, and it will change your experience of the back. There are lots of possibilities here. The more you open yourself up to these possibilities, the more choices you find that you have. The more choices, the less you are a victim of your old habits, the less you regard yourself as a victim of a present that’s totally given. There’s nothing you can do about it. So many times we feel like we have a TV that we’re watching, and there’s only one channel on the TV, so we have to watch whatever comes up. It’s not that way at all. Our experience of the present moment is very interactive. There are lots of choices you can make right now, and learning to see that you do have that freedom, you do have that range of choice, can be very liberating, both in liberating you from the physical pain in the present moment. There can be the potential for pain in the body, but you don’t have to suffer from it. That’s an important lesson. And there can be pain in the mind. Old habits of thinking, old habits of the old narratives that you make of your life. You don’t have to keep saying the old narratives all over again. You can make up new ones. And the fact that they’re made up doesn’t mean that they’re more artificial than the old ones, because the old ones were made up as well. So try to develop a sense of the possibilities of the present moment, just the possibilities of the breath. There’s lots to explore right there, the possibilities of the pleasure that comes from the breath, the things you can do with it, thinking of it, connecting up with different pleasant sensations in different parts of the body. It’s like grassroots networking. When the grassroots get together, they have more and more power. When the pleasant sensations in the body are allowed to connect, they develop more power. So the sense of fullness can surround any potential points of pain and just keep them isolated so that you don’t have to focus on them. They’re there, they’re potential, but you don’t give them your attention, and so they never really develop into the bad pain that they could be. Just this much gives you a lot of insight into the power of the mind, the power of choice you have in the present moment.

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