Self-Hatred

December 22, 2005

We’re meditating to put an end to suffering, and specifically the suffering caused by our own minds, by craving, ignorance, things that come up from within, which means that you have to keep watch within at what’s going on inside. One of the purposes of the meditation is to put you in a good place to watch, so that what you see is undistorted. You see what’s actually there. So it means, one, you have to be steady. Keep the mind continually with the breath. Try to catch it any time it’s going to wander off. This is why we have one object to focus on. If you find one object not enough, give yourself two objects in the present moment so you can focus on the breath and two different parts of the body at the same time. That pretty much ties your hands. You can’t go off anyplace else. You’ve got two things you’ve got to be very watchful about. The important thing is you stay right here in the present moment. Do not go sliding off to the past or sliding off to the future. This is one of the reasons why we try to make the breath as comfortable as possible so you’re less likely to slide. But you also have to develop a full body awareness. So that your gaze is all around, and it’s made more solid. Because one thing that does happen when the breath gets comfortable and your awareness is small, is you tend to drift off. Things get comfortable and easy, and you just let go. You come back a while later and wonder, “Where was I? Was I asleep? Well, not really asleep, but where was I? It’s hard to tell.” Because although the mind may be quiet, it’s not clear. It’s not alert. So to keep it alert, as soon as the breath gets comfortable, think of that sense of comfort spreading out throughout the body, through any channel, any pore, any way it can spread, until you feel that it’s filling the body. You’re almost drowning in good breath energy. Then you try to maintain that. It’s this quality of awareness that allows you to see. It’s steady and it’s all around. This way you can catch any movements of the mind. Because the more you get to know the mind, you realize it’s not just stuff going on in the brain. Little patterns of tension are associated with different parts of the body. Lots has been written about how the body contains a lot of memories. They’ve even been found with organ transplants that sometimes memories of the person from whom the organ comes start popping up in the mind of the person receiving the organ. Things get imprinted there. So when a memory gets stirred up, if you want to really see it happen, you’ve got to be aware of the body all around. That’s the kind of awareness you want to develop. Clear, steady, all-encompassing. The things you see as you develop that kind of awareness get more and more reliable. That’s the method to put you in a good spot to see. Now it’s your choice how much you’re going to admit about what you’re seeing. This is where it’s more than just a technique or just a method. There are values that come in here as well. I noticed that when I spent my first year with Ajahn Fung, after reordaining, I felt frustrated with myself because there were times when I couldn’t focus on the breath. Old issues were popping up from school, from when I was a child, when I was a teenager. It took me a while to realize that some important work was going on because I’d picked up a lot of attitudes from my upbringing. I had to sort through them to see which ones were actually going to be helpful in the meditation and which ones were not. That process of sorting through was an essential part of the meditation itself. Because we have this inbred difficulty looking at our own actions. Precisely what the meditation is, is looking at your own actions. It’s not so much self-purification as action purification. It requires that you see your intentions and the actions and the results. Many times these are things we don’t like to look at. Sometimes it’s just simple dishonesty. But other times we don’t like to look at these things because we don’t know how to handle them. How can you look at your mistakes without getting all tangled up in self-hatred, self-frustration? This is where the right attitudes come in. You look at those instructions the Buddha gave to Rahula. He says, “When you see an action that you’ve done that’s caused harm, you’d feel shame and loathing, but not shame and loathing for yourself, shame and loathing for the action.” That’s an important distinction. Shame in the action means that you realize that you’re a better person than that and you shouldn’t have done it. It doesn’t mean that you’re a bad person. If you don’t feel shame for actions like that, then there’s a problem. But he also says you shouldn’t get tied up in remorse. Notice mistake one. Realize it was a mistake and then resolve not to repeat it. That’s all you can do as a human being immersed in time. You can’t go back and change the action, and you can’t try to compensate for the action by beating yourself up in the present moment. This is where a lot of us have problems. We may have picked up this attitude from our family, from our surroundings. It’s hard to say nowadays what kind of culture America is, but many of us grew up in a guilt culture. Somehow we feel that feelings of guilt are who we really are. It’s where we sense ourselves most intently. There’s a rightness about feeling guilty, about feeling miserable. When we feel well, it doesn’t feel true, it doesn’t feel real. That’s an attitude you’ve got to unlearn. To begin with, it doesn’t mean that you wipe the attitude out. It’s just that you notice when it comes and you try not to identify with it, saying, “Okay, this is a feeling, this is an attitude that’s come up. And exactly how useful is it?” Well, watch it. See it as a process of cause and effect in and of itself. Especially the long string of karma that comes up with it. Comments that come along with that attitude, “I’m a horrible person,” “I’m a miserable person,” “I’m a no-good person,” whatever comes up. Learn how to listen to those voices without siding with them, without believing them. Just notice, “Okay, this is what happens when you cultivate this attitude. This is all the self-destructive stuff that comes along with it.” And it’s not necessarily true. It’s certainly not helpful. And you don’t have to identify with it. And you don’t have to believe your self-deprecating remarks or the remarks of self-hatred any more than you have to believe the overestimation of yourself. In fact, it’s best if you can get ideas of self out of the issue entirely. It’s just a question of action purification, training your actions. Developing your actions in the right direction. If you can see it in that way, the whole issue of you becomes less involved. And all the unskillful thought patterns that go along with this sense of you don’t have to grip you so tightly because you don’t have to grip them. So remember, as we’re meditating, it’s not just a technique. I mean, the technique is important, but also the values that go along with the technique are important to learn as well. And many times this involves unlearning a lot of unskillful values you’ve picked up. This is a problem not just in America where we have a guilt culture. It’s a problem in every culture. After all, we’re learning the culture of the noble ones, which is different from anybody’s culture of any country. So the principle applies all over. Whatever your background is, it’s going to be something you have to unlearn, whether it’s self-hatred or guilt or a tendency to overestimate yourself. Wherever the whole question of self comes in, you have to put up a little question mark. How useful is that particular sense of self right now? Remember, you have lots of different senses of self that you can choose from. Is this the right one to help right now? Or is it better just to let the sense of self go at that point? So you can simply watch actions, intentions, actions, and their results. The closer you can get to seeing things in those terms, the closer you are to the culture of the noble ones. And more likely, the meditation is going to start giving results.

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