Mange in the Mind

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The life of a meditation monk is a wandering life. But if you look at the outside, it doesn’t seem like we’re doing all that much wandering. Venerable Mahaprabhu makes the point that the place to wander, the place to explore, is not so much the outside. It’s what’s going on inside your own body and mind. For most of us, that’s terra incognita, a land we don’t know. Like those old maps of the North American continent, with big white spaces in the middle. They knew the coast, but they didn’t know the interior. That’s the way it is with most of us. We know the surface of our lives, but we don’t know what’s going on inside. When you’re meditating, this is what you want to explore. As the Buddha said, the world and the end of the world, suffering and the end of suffering, can all be found right here. So that should capture your interest right there. This is where suffering comes from. It’s inside, right here. And the end of suffering can be found here as well. Just that thought should make you want to explore, because you could spend your life going to the other side of the mountain. But the question is, can you go to the other side of the mountain? Does the other side of the mountain cause you suffering? Is the end of suffering going to be found on the other side of the mountain? Well, no. It’s just like the bear. It goes over the mountain to see what he could see. And what does he see on the other side of the mountain? That’s it. Is the dirt on the other side of the mountain different from the dirt over here? Are the rocks over there different from the rocks here? The first month I came back here to the States to settle down in Vatmeta. A group of laypeople had organized a trip for the monks to go up to Yellowstone. I didn’t go along. Ajahn Sawat went with a couple of the other monks who were visiting from Thailand. When he came back, I asked him if there was anything on the trip that had impressed him. He said, “Well, I just didn’t see anything new. It was all inconstancy all over again. Things are inconstant. Things are stressful. Things are not-self. Rocks change. Water changes.” And when you look out to the other side of the mountain, that’s all you see. It doesn’t really teach you any lessons that you can’t learn by looking inside. When you look inside, then you see something else, though. You see the intentions of the mind, the activity of the mind, because that’s where the suffering comes from. It doesn’t come from your body, although the mind can create a lot of suffering around the body. The body gets sick and you get upset. The body starts growing old and you get upset. The body is getting ready to die. You feel abandoned. You feel betrayed. It’s not like the body made a pact with you. It didn’t sign an agreement that it was going to look after you and respond to all the good things you do for it. It just does its own body thing. It develops for a while, and then it starts falling apart. The body is not suffering. It’s the mind that’s suffering around the body. This is why we explore the body. We go through all the parts of the body, like the chant just now, one by one by one. What’s in there is something that’s really worth sacrificing everything else for. There’s nothing there. Each part has a function. That’s what it’s good for. It’s good for functioning a certain way. Then the question is, what are you going to do with this functioning body? You could get attached to it, but that creates suffering. This is why we have the chant on the thirty-two parts. It’s to remind yourself not to get too obsessed with the body, not to think that the body in and of itself is going to provide you with true happiness. But this doesn’t mean the body is a bad thing that you’ve got to put away, do away with. You learn to use it as a tool. When you sit in meditation, the body will help you sit. When you walk, the body will help you walk. It’ll give you something to contemplate. It’ll give you a foundation for the mind as you settle down. Then you find that there’s a potential for a rapture right here, just the way you breathe, the way you approach the breath. The way you approach your experience of having a body. You can pull things this way and that and drag them here, drag them there. That doesn’t create rapture. Allow the body to be still, really still as you breathe in. Allow there to be the least amount of fabrication possible as you breathe in and breathe out. See what happens. You find that the body has a potential. For creating a sense of fullness, a sense of rapture. Again, you can’t take that as an end in and of itself, but it’s part of the path. Then you start exploring other things as well. All the themes that the Buddha talked about, both in terms of the qualities you want to develop as a meditator, are right here, and the things you want to contemplate are right here. You want to see the Four Noble Truths. You can see them right here in the way the mind relates to the body. You want to see the Three Characteristics. You can find them right here as well. In Jhammahabhava’s analogy of the body as a city, with all these streets and buildings, all these four-way intersections in the Four Noble Truths, and the three-way intersections, the Three Characteristics, everything you need to know is right here, and all the tools you need for the knowing. To help you know, they’re right here as well. It’s just that we haven’t spent enough time exploring the body. We’re distracted by things outside. All the pretty things of the world. It’s weird about how if you spend a lot of money, you can go here, you can go there. You can see those spectacular mountains at the southern tip of South America. You can see the fjords of Norway. Because it costs so much money to go there, we think it must be amazing. But when you go there, what do you see? You see rock, you see water, and it’s in different shapes, but it’s still rock and it’s still water. If by going there you could put an end to suffering, it would be worth going. But that kind of exploring doesn’t put an end to the itch in the mind. We tend to be like the mangy dog. The mangy dog lies down next to a tree and its skin itches. It blames the tree, so it goes off to a wall and lies down next to the wall. Then its skin still itches, so it blames the wall. Everywhere it goes, its skin itches, so it blames wherever it’s been. Of course, the problem is not with the tree or the wall or the bush or anything that lies next to it. The problem is in its skin. So it takes its mange wherever it goes and it’s going to itch wherever it goes. We’ve got mange in our own minds. So if we’re going to cure the problem, we have to cure it right here. A big cause for the mange is just this, how we relate to our own bodies. So try to explore here. Get to know your inside territory. Once you know your inside territory, then if you have any need to go someplace else outside, you’re taking good things along with you. You’re taking all the concentration and discernment and mindfulness that you’ve been developing inside. That goes with you. All the potential for insight goes with you as well. Because you’ve done your inner exploration first. So if you’re going to wander, if you’re going to travel, wander and travel here on the body. Because that’s the kind of wandering that actually takes you someplace. It has a goal. It’s the kind of exploration that actually comes to an end when you come to the end. If you come to the end of suffering, you’ve really accomplished something. If you wander the world, well, what do you accomplish? I know someone who spent his whole life, ever since he got out of college, wandering around the world. We get postcards from him every now and then. A bicycle trip through India, a bicycle trip through Laos, Scandinavia, Eastern Europe. But it never comes to an end. While he’s on one trip, he’s planning the next trip. It’s a case of just running away from what’s inside the mind. No matter where you go, you can’t run away from that. So you might as well turn around and deal with what’s inside the mind. Cure the mange. Understand what causes it. Explore that issue. What’s that issue? That issue has been explored and dealt with and you can go wherever you want with no problem at all.

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