With Reference to the World

July 13, 2006

The body in and of itself. Feelings in and of themselves. The mind in and of itself. Mental qualities in and of themselves. Notice the “in and of itself” or “in and of themselves” here. That’s the important point of what we’re trying to focus on here. Take the body, for instance. Just try to be with the sensation of the body you’ve got right here, right now, without referring it to anything else. The problem is that we have a tendency to refer it to the world in lots of different ways. Then, when we refer it to the world, we start getting lost in the world. You’d think you’d be sitting here just by yourself, focusing on the breath, but you bring lots of worlds with you. We have this weird ability, as soon as there’s a little stirring in this body-mind complex we’ve got here, we can switch it into an entirely different world. It can be the world of the past, the world of the future, someplace far away. It’s like the function key. You can type a “Q” or an “S,” and it comes out just a “Q” or an “S.” But you press the function key, and all of a sudden the “Q” becomes “Quit,” the “S” becomes “Save.” It does entirely different things. It’s the same with the sensations in the body. There’s a little stirring in the breath, and the mind latches onto it and doesn’t look at it simply as a stirring. The breath becomes a basis for a thought world, and then it turns into something totally different. So one of the tasks as a meditator is to learn how not to switch over into the world that way. To learn various ways of keeping yourself with the body, with the breath, in and of itself. As the Buddha said in the basic formula for the path to enlightenment, “If you don’t write mindfulness, it’s subduing greed and distress with reference to the world.” It’s not simply the case that these thought worlds arise, but lots of emotions, lots of reactions arise along with them. And that’s what gets us involved in them. We want something, we get upset about something. Those are the two main reactions, both of them based on delusion. One of the ways is to reflect on how the Buddha defined the world. It simply cites, smelts, textual sensations, ideas. In other words, he says, “Don’t assume that there’s any reality out there. Don’t assume that there’s no reality out there. Just notice exactly how you know about the world. Where did you pick up this information about the world?” It’s just through your senses. And you know how unreliable your senses are. So think about that the next time you get involved in a particular narrative that pulls you away, especially if it has to do with the past. Remind yourself, “Okay, what was it that you learned this narrative from?” And it was from pretty unreliable sources, things that just come and go. And that helps to dissolve a lot of the narratives and a lot of the reactions you have around that world. Another way is to reflect on that thought world in terms of that chant we had just now. The world is swept away. Whatever thought world you might have, it’s not going to last very long. And the world outside is not going to last very long. It keeps changing, changing, changing. The world offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. There’s aging and there’s illness, and it’s all pretty random. There’s no one designing what’s going on in the world. There’s no one designer saying, “We’re going to have a big, huge, worldwide, universal-wide world, and we’re going to come to a really nice conclusion.” It’s lots of individual people trying to find their way. That’s what creates the world that we’ve experienced. Everybody’s looking for happiness, and mostly looking for happiness in very unskillful ways. So there’s no guarantee that it’s going to come to a nice end or a good end, or that it’s going to grow in a good direction. After all, look at human life. Whoever designed the human body, whoever designed the body, if there was a designer, was pretty malicious. Just as you begin to grow up so that you can function, then it starts aging on you. Everything can so easily fall apart, can so easily misfunction. And even if you live a relatively healthy life, just thinking, “Today is my father’s birthday. He lived to be eighty-seven, and for eighty years his body worked very well. And then those last seven years, everything just broke down, and his ending was pretty miserable. He developed Parkinson’s disease, Parkinson’s dementia.” What kind of compassionate intelligence would design that to be the pattern of human life? There’s really nobody in charge out there. So these thought worlds you create, even if they were to be able to come true, they basically break down. The world is nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. This is the teaching on not-self. No matter what you amass as your material goods, your intelligence, all the things you tend to identify with, you have to leave them. This applies to the world outside, the physical world, the world of this lifetime, and also all the thought worlds. You can create wonderful thought worlds, but they all leave. Whatever thought you might have had as a possession within that thought world that you could hold on to, it goes too. Finally, these worlds are all a slave to craving. There’s never enough. They come from craving to begin with. Craving determines the way they’re going to go. The image I give in the text is of a king who’s ruling over a prosperous land. You’d think he’d be happy, but someone comes from the East and says, “There’s a kingdom off to the East that’s also prosperous and wealthy, and given your forces, you could probably defeat the king there and take that kingdom as yours.” What does the king do? He sends his army out to defeat that kingdom. Then someone comes from the South with the same news, so he goes out to conquer the South, the West, the North. Finally, someone comes from across the ocean and says, “There’s a prosperous kingdom on the other side of the ocean.” Well, the king said he’d be ready to send his army over there, too. That was 2,600 years ago. Things haven’t changed. There’s just never a sense of enough. People keep trying to amass all this stuff, in spite of the fact that it’s all swept away. There’s no one in charge. You have nothing of your own in these worlds. Reflect on this when the mind starts getting involved in thought worlds, especially thoughts of the past. There’s really nothing you can do about that past. There’s so much that we would like to go back and change. But no matter how much you run the movies of the past over and over again, they never change. It was like those of you who were alive in 1963, when they kept running the movie they had of Kennedy’s assassination. This fascination of watching it happen over and over and over again, thinking, “Maybe this time he’ll miss.” But he never missed. Or September 11th, “Maybe this time the planes will miss.” Well, they didn’t miss. No matter how much you rerun the movies of the past, you can’t change them. So there should come a point where you realize you’re getting nothing out of that. Then come back to the present, here with the breath in and of itself. Learn to appreciate this quality you’ve got right here. There’s this energy flowing in and out of the body all the time. There’s an energy that stays in the body all the time. Actually, it’s the energy in the body that creates the breath. We often focus on the breath as something coming in from the outside, but basically it’s a movement of energy into the inside of the body. There are lots of ways you can relate to it. You can ignore it and just let it run on its own, or let it be pushed around by all these thought worlds you’re trying to create. Or you can give it a chance to be healthy, nourishing. Learn to explore it. See what good it can do for the body. There are different ways of focusing on the breath. You can think of the breath, as I said, as something coming in and out, or as something that’s simply there in the body, like a solid energy that radiates out from different centers in the body. You might try the center of the diaphragm, the center of the chest. Allow it to feel full and nourishing, and see what that does. You’ll find that it gives the mind a lot better food than the world that it was creating for itself. So develop an interest in the present moment. Develop an interest here in the breath in and of itself. Learn to explore it to see what advantages you can get from this energy that you’ve been ignoring all along. This is one way of helping to pull you out of those worlds. Worlds of the past, worlds of the future, outside worlds of the present. You realize you’ve been feeding on them, and the food is pretty bad. Learn to feed on what you’ve got right here, right now, if you learn how to develop it. You’ll get lots of nourishment that you wouldn’t have imagined otherwise. The problem is that we have this field here. The soil is good. You’ve got everything you need to plant plants, but you don’t plant plants here. You go plant them off in somebody else’s field. Or you plant them in an imaginary field, or a remembered field, or an anticipated field. Any farmer that tried to do that would get into trouble. Either that or he’d have nothing at all to show for his efforts. You take the field that you’ve got. It’s a good field. Learn how to cultivate it. If you’re going to inhabit a world, inhabit the world of the body in and of itself, the breath in and of itself. This way you can pull yourself out of those other worlds. Develop a sense of seclusion here. It’s not a seclusion where you’re feeling cut off from all the things you need. Everything you need is right here. Learn how to enjoy being alone right here with the potentials of the present moment. Otherwise, you’ve got a crowd in your head all the time, the crowd of all those thoughts of the past, all those thoughts of the future, and your companion cravering, craving, whispering into your ear. Learn how to get a sense of being secluded from them, having some time to really be alone, have some real solitude, alone with a sense of fullness that you can develop from the breath. That way you really get to be here, to enjoy being here, having a sense of belonging here. Because you really pay attention to what’s here and the potential of what’s here. Learn how to cultivate it so it becomes a field where you can eat all you need from the produce that you create.

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