Inhabiting the Body

August 16, 2008

We start the meditation with thoughts of goodwill, a wish for our own happiness, and a wish for the happiness of all living beings. We do this to remind ourselves of why we’re here. We’re looking for our true happiness. A happiness that’s more than the ordinary. And we’re looking for a happiness that doesn’t place burdens on other beings. If you’re wishing happiness for all beings, it’s got to be a type of happiness where my happiness doesn’t conflict with your happiness, and our happiness doesn’t conflict with the happiness of anyone else. Or we’re looking inside for happiness that doesn’t have to depend on sights or sounds or smells or tastes or tactile sensations or ideas or material objects, relationships, anything where your gain would be somebody else’s loss or someone else’s gain would be your loss. Because, as we’ve seen, that kind of happiness leads to quarrels and wars. And, as the Buddha once said, even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn’t have enough for everyone’s sensual desires. So we’ve got to look inside. That’s the first reason we’re thinking thoughts of goodwill. The second reason is to put ourselves in the right mood to meditate. We’re here to be happy. So even though the meditation may require work and discipline, learn how to meditate and view it as an opportunity, a welcome opportunity, a rare opportunity, to really find some happiness inside. So try not to be grim in the meditation. Do it with a sense of joy and confidence that here’s a simple way to find happiness. It may not be easy, but it’s simple. Simple in the sense that all you have to do is just focus on your breath and keep there. Stay there with the breath. That’s the part that’s not easy. It’s the coming back, coming back, coming back. If you find yourself slipping off, remind yourself you’re here to do this for the sake of happiness, so don’t get upset with yourself. Just note the fact that the mind has slipped off and bring it back. No matter how many times it slips off, just keep bringing it back, bringing it back. Remind yourself that each time you catch it, you’re developing your powers of mindfulness and alertness, and that’s important. So even though the mind may seem slippery, remind yourself that at least it’s better that you’re catching it and bringing it back than just letting it wander all over the place. Then ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel best right now, and see how the body responds. It’s almost as if you say to it, “You can breathe any way you want that would feel good.” And if it doesn’t seem to respond to that, go through the different parts of your body. You can start at the back of the head. You can start at the neck and go down the spine and out the legs. Or you can start at the abdomen, watch that for a while, and start bringing your gaze up the torso, over the head, and then down the back. In each place you focus, ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel really refreshing for this part of the body. Try a couple good long deep in-and-out breaths and see how they feel. If they feel good, keep it up. If they stop feeling good, you can try other rhythms of breathing. Go through the whole body this way. Even out the legs and out the arms to your hands and your feet. Try to keep your hands relaxed as you breathe in and breathe out. Keep your feet relaxed as you breathe in and breathe out. See how long you can keep them relaxed. Each time you breathe in, you may be able to detect little patterns of tension that you missed the first time around. So you keep relaxing, relaxing, relaxing. The purpose of this is to give you a good foundation in the present moment. To show you, one, that there is a form of happiness that doesn’t have to take anything away from anyone else. It’s simply a matter of getting in touch with the potentials you already have. Developing those potentials. It’s as if you had a plot of land that you never planted with anything. And you’re always going around borrowing other people’s vegetables, other people’s fruits that they had grown on their land. And getting in squabbles and getting upset. And you come back and you realize you’ve got your own piece of land right here. You can cultivate this. Then you find that you can grow all the food that you need from within. This is important because you need all the help you can get in dealing with all the issues of the world. And if you can develop this skill of being at ease in your body no matter what, it helps you deal with the issues of the world. It helps you deal with issues outside, and it helps you deal with issues inside. With issues outside, you may have noticed there are times when someone comes to you and is really upset, and you find yourself picking up on that person’s mood. It’s as if the energy of their mood comes and invades your body. So one way of preventing that is to stay inside your body, fully inhabit your body. So you can be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, and keep the whole body as relaxed as possible. Once you can do this while you’re sitting here still, then you try to carry that same skill into other situations. As you’re walking, the whole body is relaxed. As you’re talking with other people, the whole body is relaxed. And then if someone difficult comes up, you can still maintain this sense of relaxed body. Your hands are relaxed, your feet are relaxed, the breath feels good coming in and going out. You’re not picking up on that other person’s mood. You’re not allowing that other person’s mood to invade you. So this is one way that whole-body breathing can help you with outside issues. As for issues inside, as you deal with a breath like this, you’re going to start seeing the movements of the mind in a lot of subtle ways that you hadn’t been able to see before. That in and of itself is important, because the breath gives you a good, solid place to stay still and watch. And the more sensitive you are to the breathing, the more quickly you’ll be able to catch thoughts as they form. Then you can watch them as they form. You’re less likely to get sucked into them. It’s like watching a play from its very beginnings in the rehearsals. If you see a play when everything has been rehearsed and everything is prepared for the public, it’s very easy to get sucked into the story. But if you catch the play at the very beginning of rehearsals, you see how awkward it is, how the actors are having trouble with their lines, and the director still hasn’t figured out how to do things. And at that point, the play doesn’t have any magic. So if you can catch your thoughts as they’re forming, they lose that power they normally have to pull you in. So you can simply watch them as processes. So the stillness of the mind that you’re developing helps you there. And the sense of well-being in the body also helps you not get sucked in. Because for so many of us, the reason we go into these thoughts is because we want some pleasure out of them. They have their taste. And we have a hunger for that taste because we want some pleasure right here, right now. We want some entertainment. But if you’ve got this sense of ease in the body, you’ll find that many of those thoughts lose a lot of their appeal. So you’re less likely to get sucked in. Also, being able to tap into this pleasure helps you gauge your thoughts in the sense that you already have this sense of pleasure and ease that you can tap into at any time, and it can fill the whole body. And you may still find yourself thirsting after some other things. Greed and anger and delusion still can move into the mind. You can ask yourself, “What do you want? Where are you going with these thoughts? You’ve got something good right here. What else would you want?” And this way you dig down into the reasons for why the mind keeps wandering off, even when it has a sense of pleasure and well-being. For most of us, our attitude towards pleasure and happiness is, “The more, the better.” We want as many different kinds of pleasure as we can. So we stuff into the mind. But when you begin to see that it’s a question of either/or, that you have to go for one type of pleasure or another, but you can have both, the mind will resist that. When you begin to see that certain kinds of pleasure that come from your thoughts destroy your concentration, the sense of ease and well-being in the body gets mangled, and you realize you’ve got to make a choice. And you can ask, “Which is better? A happiness that doesn’t entangle you, a happiness that doesn’t get you into trouble, or a happiness or pleasure that can lead you to all kinds of unskillful behavior?” And yet when you see the mind still going for those other thoughts, you realize you’ve got to do more than just watch them arise and pass away. You’ve got to dig down into their causes. In the Buddha’s explanation of mindfulness, he talks about watching the phenomenon of origination and the phenomenon of passing away. The word “origination” there doesn’t mean things that just simply arise. It means they arise with a cause, and you’ve got to learn how to see that. Why is it that the mind still hungers after these things? Why does it still fall into those old patterns? Sometimes they’re simply habitual. That’s the way you’ve been doing things ever since you were a little kid. And simply seeing the mind in action and realizing that you have another choice, you can find a sense of well-being simply by being here with the breath, cultivating this skill of learning how to keep the breath energy full and pleasurable in the body. When you realize you have a choice, it’s a lot easier to make the skillful choice. At the same time, you can begin to watch the mind more carefully. How does it leave your state of concentration and go running after those thoughts? To what extent does the thought provoke, say, greed, anger, delusion, or to what extent does greed, anger, and delusion provoke the thought? When the mind has a good foundation like this, it can see this more clearly. It also helps to have the body on your side, both in the sense that you’re more sensitive to what’s going on in the body as you get more sensitive to the breath. So you can sense the little stirrings of thought before they really amount to anything. And because you can use the way of breathing—any way of breathing that’s comfortable, that feels easeful, alert, awake—to dissolve these thoughts and to provide you with this alternative sense of pleasure, so that in saying no to the thoughts you’re not simply doing it through willpower. You’re doing it because you realize you’ve got a better alternative. This is not to say that all thoughts are bad. When the mind is still and with a breath like this, you can get a sense of where your thoughts are going. If it’s going in a good direction, you can go with it. I mean, there are things we do have to think about in the course of the day. But have you ever watched your mind for a long time? Have you realized how few of your thoughts actually are useful thoughts, productive thoughts, necessary thoughts? So many of these thoughts are just the mind spinning around, sending out feelers here and there, places where it can latch on, like a spider sending out the strands from which it makes its web, hoping that the strand will catch on a branch someplace and then it can spin its web. What happens? What do you catch? The spider of the mind. Well, you catch yourself. So it’s good to be able to put the mind in a position where it can choose which thoughts it wants to think and which thoughts it doesn’t want to think, and where it has a good place to rest and gather at the strength when it’s not thinking. This is a really important skill. So as we stay with a breath and develop our powers of mindfulness and alertness, realize we’re not just hanging out here because it’s a nice place to stay for an hour. We’re learning to develop a lot of really essential skills. The good thing, though, is that the work involved, even though in the beginning it may seem frustrating, the mind doesn’t settle down. It keeps going off, going off, going off. If you stick with it long enough and learn to get in touch with the breath, learn how to make the breath more and more comfortable, you’ll find that the sense of a good, secure foundation of the mind will grow. And then the work that you do in the meditation is work in the midst of pleasure. It’s work in the midst of ease, in the midst of a sense of fullness and refreshment. So it’s good work both in the sense that you’re working with a sense of ease and also that you’re developing skills you need so that your happiness is a skillful happiness. It takes nothing away from anyone else, and you find that this garden you have as you cultivate it inside ends up producing more vegetables than you could possibly eat, so you can hand them out to your neighbors. In other words, when you have a sense of well-being that comes from within, the people around you will begin to pick up on it as well. So it’s in this way that, as you’re practicing meditation, you’re developing the happiness of all beings that you encounter. So make it a habit to work on this skill every day.

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