Surprise Yourself

November 24, 2011

John Lee places a big emphasis on trying to find the comfortable parts of the body and using them as your foundation. There’s one place where he says, “Think of the pains and aches in the body as being a bunch of fools, and the comfortable parts being wise people.” Who do you want to associate with? You associate with the wise. He compares the aches and pains to rotten spots on the floorboards. If you’re going to lie down on the floor, you want to choose a good, solid spot. Avoid the rotten spots. If you’re going to eat a mango, eat the good part. Don’t go eating the rotten spots. Mindfulness has this tendency to focus on the aches and the pains. This is part of its early warning system. We’re wired to look for the problems. But we don’t have to. We can learn new habits, new ways of relating to the body. Remind yourself that in between the pains there’s a lot of space. There’s a tendency, also, to connect the pains. This is why patterns of tension build up in the body. So try to see if you can cut them. One of the forested giants had the image of going through the body with a big knife and just cutting all the little tendons, all the little connections. Of course, you don’t want to do that. You don’t actually do that with the body, but you do that in the image you have of the body. Because the image you hold in mind plays a huge role in how you actually experience the body. It’s the template into which you fit things. And if the template has you primed to suffer, maybe it’s time to look for a new one. So if you notice a pattern of tension, a pattern of pain someplace, try to see if you can make yourself aware of all the spaces around it. And if it seems to fill the body, remind yourself you can be aware of the area right around the body as well. You don’t have to stay inside the body all the time. There’s an energy field that extends out beyond the skin. Try keeping that in mind. You can ask yourself where you’re located in the body relative to the pains. And see if you can put your awareness on the other side of the pain. Say there’s a pain in your stomach and you feel that you’re up above the pain. Well, see if you can get below the pain. Come at it from the other side. If there’s a lot of pressure, that’s unpleasant. Ask yourself who’s pushing whom here. Maybe you’re pushing up against something. So again, try to get on the other side. You may wonder, what does this have to do with getting rid of greed, aversion, and delusion? Playing with your perceptions like this is both playing and working. An important part of the meditation is not just simply being with things as they are, but understanding connections. And here’s a very important kind of connection. You have a certain image in the mind that you’ve been carrying around, and that affects how you carry your body around. What ways can you change the image, and what effect will that have on the body? This is an important experiment. Remind yourself that if there were nothing but pain in the body, you’d be dead. So there have to be some places in the body where there’s at least a sense of ease, a sense of being okay. And make a point of highlighting those areas, looking for them, highlighting them, allowing them to connect. So they dissolve the strings of tightness or tension that may be holding your habitual sense of the body together. This is one of the reasons why it’s good to practice meditation while you’re sitting still. Because part of our way of holding the body has to do with the way we move it. Right now you don’t have to move it. Let yourself imagine it in different ways and see how that changes the experience of the breath, the experience of how you hold the body. It’s only when you explore things in these ways and keep the mind open to the possibility that there are alternative ways of relating to the body that you begin to see certain things you’ve just simply taken for granted since way before you had even any sense of language. This is why it’s difficult to talk about these things. We don’t have a vocabulary for them, because a lot of our ways of relating to the body are pre-verbal. The ways we relate to pain are pre-verbal. And so the only way to bring them up into your verbal consciousness is to poke at them a little bit. Try a different way of imaging the body to yourself. When you breathe in, where does the energy come in? Where does it go out? Is there any spot in the body that you haven’t imagined the breath energy moving in and out of? Can you think of it coming in and out from all directions? And when it comes in, where does it go? Are there areas of the body that are hungry for breath energy? Play around with these perceptions, because it’s the kind of playing that isn’t pointless. Kurt Vonnegut had an interesting observation. He said, “Basically, scientists are little kids who never stop playing, poking this, trying that, trying this, thinking about new ways of conceiving things, testing their concepts.” That’s what we do as we meditate. So try to revive that attitude of the child who likes to explore things, learn about them. One of the problems of growing up is that we get to the point where we assume we know things that we don’t really know. We’ve learned some ways of making assumptions that seem to be okay, that get us through life, get us through particular problems, but then maybe they become problems themselves. So you have to keep turning around and examining your assumptions, going back, back, back to the basics. And you know you’ve found something important when you find something that surprises you. So always be on the lookout for the surprise. A lot of the really good things in the meditation are unexpected. We read about the different stages of concentration. We read about the different levels of awakening. But these are not things you can clone simply by reading them. You have to explore. And one of the ways you find of testing whether something is genuine or not is by reading the book. It’s to the extent to which it is a surprise. Then we’ve gone from the surprise, then you test it. That’s where you really learn. But it’s a basic rule of thumb that if you haven’t found anything to surprise you yet in your meditation, you’ve still got a lot to learn. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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