The Termite Mound

November 23, 2012

Sometimes the taijans, for shock value, like to say that laypeople have five precepts and monks have four. It turns out that those four precepts are huge. It turns out also that there are four sets of precepts. The first one is the bodhimokkha precepts. That’s 227 right there. And, of course, there are the thousands of other rules that come in the khandagas. So the first set has to do with the rules that you live by. The second precept is restraint of the senses. The third is purity of livelihood. And the fourth is contemplation of the requisites. Actually, these are not precepts only for monks, but they provide a good foundation, a good framework, for lay practice as well. Particularly, restraint of the senses. If you spend the day encouraging your greed, aversion, and delusion in the way that you look at things and listen to things and smell and taste and touch things and think about things, then when you sit down to meditate, it’s like being a janitor. You have to clean up the mess. And all too often the time you have to meditate is not enough to be done with the mess. And you leave meditation and go back to piling in more stuff. At the same time, you’re developing bad habits. And again, these are the habits that you’re trying to fight as you meditate. So restraint of the senses is an important part of the meditation. It’s what carries the meditation from your formal meditation into daily life. Now, it doesn’t mean that you’re putting blinders on yourself. In fact, you’re actually looking at the process of looking and hearing and all the other sensory activities in a larger framework, seeing where it’s coming from and where it’s going. The where it’s coming from is within. When you look, why are you looking? All too often, looking is not just a pure exercise in gaining information. You look for the sake of lust, or you look for the sake of anger. You listen for the sake of lust, you listen for the sake of anger, or greed, or whatever. John Lee makes this point very graphically. He says the mind flows out towards things. And the problem isn’t the things, it’s the flowing out. So the first thing you’ve got to check is your motivation. But even before you check your motivation, you need a good framework, a good post. The image in the canon is of six different animals. You’ve got a crocodile and a monkey and a bird and a hyena. You’ve forgotten what else. You tie a leash to each of the animals. Then you tie the ends of the leashes together. Each of the animals will pull in a different direction. The bird wants to fly up. The monkey wants to go in the forest. The hyena wants to go and chew on a few corpses in the charnel ground. The crocodile wants to go down into the river. There’s a dog that wants to go into a village. Depending on which of the animals is strongest at any one time, all the others get dragged off in that direction. In other words, in your normal way of dealing with the senses, if there’s something really appealing that you’re listening to, that’s where your attention goes. If there’s something really appealing that you’re looking at, sometimes it’s the opposite of appealing, something that really gets you worked up. But you want to get worked up, so you look at that, listen to that, whatever. So you need a post. And the post here is mindfulness of the body, mindfulness immersed in the body, in other words, fully aware inside your body. And that can either refer to being with the breath, contemplating the elements of the body, the thirty-two parts of the body, whatever keeps you firmly grounded right here with a sense of ease, with a sense of well-being. That helps to minimize the desire to go running off. But it doesn’t totally block it out. I was reading a passage today where some teacher was commenting on how if you try to get the breath comfortable, you’re not really opening yourself to reality as it really is in the present moment. You may be having concentration, but you’re not getting any wisdom, he said. That’s a huge misunderstanding. You need to use the fact that you’re fashioning your experience in the direction of the path. And using it skillfully is part of wisdom, it’s part of discernment. So you’re trying to use the sense of ease you can create within the body through the breath. And as you’re going through the day, maybe you can’t stay with each in-and-out breath, but you can stay with the general tone of how your body feels, how the breath energy in the body feels. Keep that healthy. And you’ll find that you’re a lot less inclined to go out after greed, aversion, and delusion. But you’re also putting yourself in an ideal place to see that when the mind goes out, you’re watching it go out, but you’re not going with it. The whole point is to see the seeing process, or the hearing process, as a process, as a flowing out of the mind. And if you jump in with it, that becomes bhava or becoming. And then you go in all kinds of directions. But if you’re staying right here, it’s a different kind of bhava, it’s a different kind of becoming. It’s the becoming that enables you to see things clearly. It’s part of the path. So that’s one side of the process you’re looking at, is the causal side. Why is the mind flowing out after these things? And if you see it’s flowing out for the sake of lust or greed or anger, can you counteract it? If you’re focusing on the attractive side of something that’s giving rise to lust, it’s encouraging lust, feeding lust. Can you look at it in a different way, to encourage the idea of renunciation? This is why we have that contemplation of the 32 parts of the body. No matter how attractive a body is, it’s still got all the things in it. It still has a liver, it still has intestines, it still has blood and pus and urine and feces and all the other things we don’t like about bodies. They’re all there. In fact, the fact that you can look at a body and feel lust is the result of being able to close off your awareness of a lot of things. Not only the things in the body, but all the other issues and narratives that go around lust. They’re all pretty narrow-minded and blind. And so you want to see that. See where all this is coming from. And also see what it’s leading to in the mind when you look in a certain way at what comes up in the mind. You’re looking both for the causes and for the effects in the mind. And if you see that the mind is looking at something in a way that’s giving rise to lust, either look at it in a different way or look away. It’s the same with listening. It’s the same with all the other senses. You’re making it primarily an issue of the mind. So it becomes not six different things you’ve got to keep track of, but there’s the one thing right here. There’s an old image in the commentary. There’s a famous monk who’s quite a scholar, and he’s very proud of his scholarship. Perhaps it’s the Buddha. Perhaps it’s somebody else who calls him “empty scripture.” He begins to realize that that’s all he knows, is the words of the scripture. He doesn’t have any ability of his own. He doesn’t have any real dharma knowledge of his own. So he goes around and asks the different monks to teach him meditation. They all know that he’s extremely proud, and nobody wants to take him on as a student. Finally, he goes to a novice and says, “Please teach me meditation.” So the novice wants to test, “Has this guy really abandoned his pride?” So he says, “Okay, go down and walk into the lake there.” So the monk does. The novice says, “Okay, come out.” The monk comes back out. The novice says, “Go back again, a couple times, just to make sure that he’s really ready to listen.” Again, when the monk passes the test, then the novice teaches him. He says, “There’s a big termite hill, and there’s a civet inside the termite hill, and you want to catch the civet.” Either it’s a civet or it’s a lizard. It’s a long time ago since I read the story. Say it’s a lizard. There’s a lizard inside the termite hill, and you want to catch it. There are six holes in the termite hill. So what you do is you close off five and you wait at the one. That’s how you practice. And it’s an image for a restraint of the senses. You close off your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body. Not in the sense that you don’t sense anything in there, but you don’t let anything go out through those things in the form of greed, aversion, and delusion. You focus on the mind. What is the mind doing? As it directs your listening and looking, and as it gets affected by these things, that’s what you want to watch over. So a restraint of the senses opens your awareness so that you see all the activities of the senses as a process, and particularly how the process affects the mind. This is why it’s such a good foundation for meditation. Everything gathers in at the mind, and then when you’ve got everything under control, then you’re ready to sit down and deal with the mind on its own as you meditate. Much better than if you’d been letting the mind wander all over the place. Developing all kinds of bad habits and bringing all kinds of bad things back with it, and then trying to clean it out afterwards. So close off the five holes and leave the one hole open. Watch for when the lizard comes out. That’s how you provide a framework for the practice as you go through the day. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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