Being Good to Yourself

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As you’re sitting here right now, there are lots of places where you could focus your attention. Try finding a spot in the body that feels comfortable, that feels at ease, that at the very least is not tense or in pain. The mind does have a tendency to search all of its senses for that spot. So it’s to see where there’s pain and focus there, and to ignore the parts that are not crying for attention. But when you’re meditating, you have to learn how to turn off that tendency. Find a part of the body that feels at ease. And notice when you breathe in, does the way you breathe allow that to stay at ease, or is it putting pressure on it? If it’s putting pressure, see if you can breathe in enough. Find another way, a way that doesn’t put any pressure, that allows that ease to remain. And to remain all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, so that there’s a sense that the in-and-out breathing doesn’t have any negative impact on it. And then see if you can breathe in a way that has a positive impact, allows for some more fullness in that part. So that the fullness can begin to spread. And again, you don’t want to force it in any places where it’s not willing to go easily. You can think of it as cool water seeping through the body, or melted butter, or melted chocolate, whatever appeals to you. Create a sense of fullness and ease. And you’re learning some important lessons on where pleasure can be found. And how you can find a pleasure that has no harmful effects on anybody. You look at most of the ways that people in the world are looking for pleasure, and a lot of them are very abusive. They cause a lot of harm to themselves, harm to other people. And it’s not the case that the harm is immediately apparent. Sometimes you hear people say, “Well, when you begin to get mindful, then you will know instinctively when something is right and wrong, because it feels right or feels wrong.” That’s sometimes the case, and sometimes not. There are a lot of things that feel good and seem to be okay and that have a negative impact down the line. You’ve probably seen those chocolates, dove chocolates, that have little bits of dove wisdom inside the wrappers. And a lot of it’s about indulging your desire for more chocolate. You can see where that’s coming from. But it plays into a way of thinking that a lot of people have, that when you’re kind to yourself, you basically indulge your sensual pleasures. That’s being good to yourself, that’s giving yourself a little present. But is that being kind to yourself? Is that being good to yourself? When you’re thinking about happy people, people who love themselves, think about Ajahn Mun, think about Ajahn Mahaprabhu, all the great ajahns who made lots of sacrifices. They took their happiness really seriously. They weren’t in it just for the quick indulgence. They wanted a happiness that lasted. Those are the people who are really good to themselves. Many times, being good to yourself involves doing things that are unpleasant to begin with, but will yield good results down the line. A lot of good things are going to go against your greed, against your anger, against your delusion, against your envy, your lust, whatever. And you have to be willing to go against them. If you try to go with the flow, they’re going to take you down that river the Buddha described that has lots of whirlpools and crocodiles and other things that are either going to, as he said, give you death or death-like pain. So just because something feels good doesn’t mean that it is good. And being good to yourself doesn’t mean that you’re always indulging yourself or giving yourself little indulgences now and then. Like that chant we had just now on the parts of the body. There are a lot of people who resist that. There are a lot of theories or arguments to say why we shouldn’t be doing that chant. But they miss the point that it’s actually a way of being kind to yourself. If you go around with a really negative body image, an unhealthy one, say, “Other people have really good bodies, really beautiful bodies, and mine is not.” This is a good antidote, because you begin to realize everybody has those same body parts, no matter how nicely wrapped the skin is. Or if, on the other hand, you have pride about your race, pride about your gender, this is a good antidote. Because that kind of pride doesn’t really help anything at all. As the Buddha said, when you really look at what’s in the body and what comes oozing out of the body in everybody’s bodies, the idea that you would use any feature of your body to exalt yourself and disparage others, you say, “What is that but foolishness?” And when you recognize that it’s foolishness, you’ve done something really good for yourself. You’ve helped to liberate your mind from some really painful burdens. There are lots of contemplations, contemplation of aging, illness, and death, or those four Dhamma summaries that we chanted just now. The world is swept away. It does not endure. It helps you to look at what most people regard as the accomplishments of their lives. When you look at what you’ve attained and you look at what other people have been able to build, you may wonder, “What do I have to show for my life?” Well, if you’re looking outside, you’re looking in the wrong place. Everything is going to get swept away. What endures is the quality of mind that you’ve been developing. And if you’ve been learning patience, you’ve been good to yourself. If you’ve been learning endurance, you’ve been good to yourself. If you’ve learned kindness, equanimity. If you’ve learned to be truthful, all of these qualities, you’ve been good to yourself. That’s what it means to be good to yourself. It’s to train the mind in qualities it can depend on so it can be its own mainstay. It doesn’t have to go around leaning on chocolate or new purchases. I heard that story one time about a woman who was trying to park her car. She rammed into the car, either in front of her or behind her, I’ve forgotten which. And she was really upset. So to calm herself down, even before she went to call the police, she went into a nearby store and bought something. That was her way of being good to herself. Which is sad. I mean, there are so many better ways that you can be good to yourself that don’t cost any money. They may not be good for the economy, but here we’re not living to make the economy good. We want to choose what we want out of our lives. If you want true happiness, okay, be good to yourself. Look at where you’ve got greed. Look at where you’ve got aversion. Look at where you’ve got delusion. See what you can do to uproot those qualities. Either in their blatant forms or their more subtle forms. And if you’re wondering where you’re going to find a sense of well-being or where you’re going to find any pleasure or nourishment in the midst of all this, because you used to be going around feeding on your greed, feeding on your anger, feeding on your delusion, well, learn how to feed on your breath. Learn how to feed on the potentials for pleasure and fullness and well-being that are there in the body. So many of us are like people who have a good plot of land. And yet they don’t do anything to develop it. They go stealing things from other people’s land, moving in on other people’s land, and just going to other people’s houses and asking for happiness. As the John Lee would say, the four properties of your body are like a good four acres here. So cultivate them. What can you do with the breath energy? What can you do with the fire and the wind? When do you emphasize the solid sensations in the body? Say you’re feeling dizzy or lightheaded, think of earth. When you’re cold, think of the warmth in the body. When you’re too hot, there are cool sensations in the body that you can focus on. When the body feels heavy, you’re feeling depressed, try to think of lightning and it with the breath. These potentials are there. It’s simply a matter of learning how to recognize them and then learn how to play with them, learn how to adjust them. So you can walk around with a sense of fullness and even rapture, and nobody else has to know. It doesn’t have to depend on anything outside. You can be walking around in the world when things are going really crazy, like they are now, and you don’t have to suffer. It doesn’t mean that you’re hard-hearted or just going out for yourself. But if you can go around with a sense of well-being in spite of all the ups and downs of the world outside, one, you’re not going to be running around trying to snatch things away from other people. And two, you can become a refuge for them, the ones who respect and sense and appreciate the solidity that you’re able to develop. So this is a really effective way of being good to yourself, without the bad side effects that come from being self-indulgent. It’s important that you see the difference.

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