So Little Time

March 16, 2014

When you focus on the breath, you’re focusing on the flow of energy through the body. And you want it to be through the whole body, and to be aware of it through the whole body. It takes some practice. It’s usually easier to focus on one point or small area to begin with, but you want to be able to spread that area. So that you have a sense of you’re fully inhabiting the body. Whatever sense of ease there may be in that spread of energy, that flow of energy, let it spread through the body. So you’re quick at it. You can try to maintain that same sense of really being in your body. And if you sense any tightness or tension or certain seizing up of the energy in the body, usually it relates to either fear or anger or some other strong emotion, you want to be able to breathe right through it, kind of comb out whatever tangles there are in the energy. And you want to make this your default mode. Most of us don’t really live in our bodies, we live in something else. Especially if you have computers or handheld devices or whatever, you live in the screen. You live in the world of the screen. If your thoughts wander off, you’re living in the world of your thoughts, and the body gets abandoned. And you’re really in a position of weakness when that happens. When you’re in the body, you’re in a position of strength, because the mind is always looking for pleasure. That’s why it goes wandering off into those other worlds. But the kind of pleasure that comes through sight, sound, smells, taste, tactile sensations from outside, ideas, really weakens the mind. You get dependent on having to have things just a certain way. And when they’re not a certain way, you get impatient. You want a quick fix. And as the Buddha pointed out, you’re not really going to be able to overcome your attachment to those kinds of pleasures unless you have a higher pleasure, the pleasure that comes from the pleasure of form. Or another place, he calls this pleasure not of the flesh. It’s interesting, you’re in the body, but you’re not going after the baits of sensual pleasure. This helps to strengthen the mind so that when you see a quick fix, you’re not interested. You’ve got something better right here. You can prevent a lot of unskillful behavior this way. And you can make up for some past unskillful behavior too. And the Buddha points out that you don’t have a certain amount of pleasure or pain allotted to you because of good or bad past actions. Unskillful actions lead to pain. Skillful actions lead to pleasure. But the amount isn’t established, especially the amount that you’re going to experience. That’s going to be affected by your state of mind. And there are two things, he said, that have a really good effect on the state of your mind. One is developing the limitless attitudes of goodwill, compassion, empathy, empathetic joy, equanimity. As we chant every evening, every evening, we do that, so it becomes second nature. Not that it’s simply a rote exercise, but it keeps reminding you that you have to have these as your attitudes to expand your mind. The image he gives us of a river full of water. If you have a salt crystal, it could be the size of a fist, say, and you throw that into the river, you can still drink the water in the river. It’s not too salty because there’s so much more water in comparison with the salt. But if all you have is a little tiny cup of water, and you throw a crystal of salt that large into the cup, you can’t drink the water at all. It’s way too salty. In the same way, when your mind is expansive and it’s not just concerned about me, me, me, me, me all the time, but thinking about the well-being of all, taking that larger perspective, then when the pains of past bad karma come in, they don’t affect you so much. That’s one way to train the mind, to protect it from your past bad karma. We all come into life with karmic debts. This is a concept you hear a lot of in Thailand. You don’t hear it much here in America. But Thai people talk about their karmic debt holders, the people they’ve wronged in the past, the people they’ve inconvenienced and placed burdens on in the past. It’s not just the past. In the fact that you’re born, you have to have food, clothing, shelter, medicine. Somebody’s got to provide that. Sometimes lives are even lost in the process just to keep this body going. John Lee says that his first stimulus to get on the path of the practice was thinking about all the karmic debts he had. The question is, how are you going to repay those? There’s a lot of good work that can be done in this lifetime, but we’re not usually concerned about doing good work. We’re more concerned about having nice pleasures. So we frit away our time. There’s so little time, so much to be done, that we end up usually with a worse leisure than we started out with. Because we’re spending so much time running after pleasures. And that’s because of the weakness of the mind. It’s not being fed properly. So you feed the mind, not with sensual pleasures, but with the pleasure of form, the sense of inhabiting the body. When there’s a sense of well-being that comes this way, then it’s a lot easier to think in terms of what you should do, what would be the kind thing to do, what would be the compassionate thing to do. You really can be helpful to yourself and other people this way. So we need to strengthen the mind so that it’s able to do the work that needs to be done. You’re not running after the quick fix all the time. You’re thinking instead more in terms of what kind of action would be the most skillful thing to do right now, what would be the most skillful words to say. Don’t give in to your immediate impulse. Don’t do something you don’t like and immediately lash out. That doesn’t help. If you see some little pleasure you’d like, right away you go for that. Well, that doesn’t help either. We have to learn how to exercise restraint and to direct our energies in the direction that’s most helpful for ourselves, for other people. Years back, I wrote a review for a magazine called “Positive Psychology,” and they sent me a book on positive psychology. They asked me to take a Buddhist look at the book. One thing I found totally lacking throughout the book was any concern about, in your search for happiness, what are the karmic consequences. Just because something is pleasurable doesn’t mean it’s good. Or something pleasurable now doesn’t mean it’s going to be pleasurable in the long run. We’ve got to think about what’s the karmic side. What really struck me, though, was when I sent the review back into the magazine. The editor called back and said he was very surprised that I had chosen karma for the theme. It seemed the most obvious. Yet for a lot of people, it’s not. Even people who say they’re Buddhists here in the West, karma gets shunned off to the side as kind of an embarrassment. But it’s not an embarrassment. It’s what the Buddha’s pointing out. Our minds are active all the time. When we have a body, we use the body all the time. It’s bound to have consequences. So you want to learn how to use your mind and use your body well, because there’s a lot of profit that can come from using these things well. And if you don’t, there’s a lot to be lost by using them poorly. There’s so little time and so much to be done. So you need to strengthen the mind so that it’s in a position that can do the right thing, say the right thing, think the right thing. And having this ability to inhabit the body fully gives you the sense of well-being that you need. So you’re not putting off what needs to be done simply because you say, “Well, I want this little bit of pleasure before.” I do anything else, and that goes to the next bit of pleasure, then the next. That’s a wasted life. Today we had the news of two different people passing away. And in both cases, it was pretty sudden. We knew that they had diseases. But they seemed to be able to put up with the disease. But suddenly it turned for the worse. In both cases, they passed away. And that doesn’t happen just to other people. It happens to everybody. And you never know at what point the conditions you have that you can put up with suddenly get too much to handle. And when that happens, you want to be able to look back on your life and say, “Okay, that time was spent well. Time was spent wisely. Time was spent profitably.” And Jhammahabhua talks about what it would be like if we had a ledger where you could ask yourself, “How did you profit today in terms of the goodness you had done?” Or, “How much did you lose?” For most of us, our ledger is just about the pleasures and pains, things we liked, things we didn’t like. How about your opportunities to do good? At the very least, make sure your mouth is under control so you’re not saying things that are going to be harmful or hurtful. Of course, that means you’ve got to learn how to get your mind under control as well, so it doesn’t rebel against the control. This is why we have this practice of staying with the breath, getting sensitive to the breath energy throughout the body, so there’s this expansive sense of well-being that gives you the food and the medicine you need so the mind has the strength to do what it needs to do, to find a happiness that lasts and doesn’t carry any karmic debts. at all.

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