A Safe Home in the Body

November 8, 2014

Last week we carved some pumpkins. Usually when people try to make their pumpkins scary, they have images of death, ghouls, ghosts, and that kind of thing. This year one of the scary images was a baby. As many of you, Jon, say, we’re all afraid of death, but what we should be afraid of is birth. Because who knows what we’re going to get born into, the places we get born to, the people we get born to. There’s no guarantee that we’re going to be in a safe place, a place of refuge. We’re exposed on all sides, totally helpless. And so it’s a scary prospect. To find a safe place, we have to create it inside. And this is what we do as we meditate. Find a place where the mind is not going to be assailed by anything outside. Or if it is, it has a safe place to go. Because without this safe place, we’re always in a position of fear. I was reading recently that in the same asylums that the most dangerous inmates are the ones who are afraid. The ones who are angry, the ones who have a lot of rage, they’re not as dangerous as the ones who are afraid. It’s the same with our own minds. If we’re afraid, we lash out and we do a lot of really stupid things. We’re dangerous people when we’re afraid. And we can destroy ourselves as easily as we can destroy anyone else. So the Buddha recommends that we find a way of being with our breath, being with our bodies, where we feel at home in here. His word for this is viharadhamma, the quality that creates a sense of home. For a lot of people, being in their bodies is not a very safe place. They’ve learned to have bad associations with them. This is why the Buddha has you think of your internal sense of the body in terms of the four elements, the four properties. The first is to help depersonalize it and to make yourself sensitive to what you’ve got here. In English, we don’t have much of a vocabulary for how the body feels from inside, so it’s useful to borrow the vocabulary from the Pali Canon. The wind property refers to breath and the breath energies in the different parts of the body. The movement of energy, the still energy, is about whatever’s energetic in the body. That’s wind. The fire property is the warmth. The water property, they say, is cohesion. But as Ajaan Fuang would talk about it, it’s a sense of coolness in the body. And there’s finally the earth element, which refers to the sensations of solidity or hardness or heaviness. These are the properties that make up our sense of what they call proprioception, our sense of the body as it’s felt from within. And this is our territory. Nobody else can feel this for us. People can attack the body from outside, but your sense of the body as you feel it from within, as you get more familiar with it, that gives you a place to go. Even when there are pains in different parts of the body, you can focus on the areas that you can soothe and calm with the breath. We do have this tendency to feel pain from within. It’s the same when we’re angry or afraid. We breathe in ways that are really harmful and harsh and can create all kinds of feelings of dis-ease in the body. So we learn how to counteract that by breathing in a soothing way. Notice any cream that’s soothing. This sometimes takes a while for it to do its work. Some people say, “I try to relax and nothing’s happening.” Well, give it some time. Sometimes there’s a question of how to get a sense of the breath energy flowing in the body. If you don’t feel a sense of flow, just try to notice where there are patterns of tension. You can compare the front of the body with the back, or the left with the right. See where one side has more tension than the other. That gives you an idea of what you want the side with more tension to feel like. Try to mirror the sides that have less tension. And as the tension decreases, you will get a greater sense of flow. Again, this may take time. For some of this, this is unfamiliar territory. So it’s going to take a while to get a sense of being familiar with it. And then once you’re familiar with it, having a sense of what you can do with it, how you can increase the warmth when it’s cold outside or the coolness when it’s hot. When you’re feeling dizzy, how do you use the heavier part of the body, the sense of earth, to give yourself a grounding? When you’re feeling manic, how do you use the earth to give yourself a grounding? When you’re feeling depressed, how do you use the breath to lighten yourself? Once you get a sense of these properties, you’ll see that they are part of the body. The word dhatu in Pali refers to something that can be provoked. They’re not just passive, dead matter. They’re qualities that can be brought to life, strengthened. Or if they’re too strong, you can calm them down, because they are active. Earth is the one that’s not active, but the other three are active. And you see that a lot of the activity is sparked by your perceptions. If you hold the perception of warmth in mind and you find a warm spot in the body and they strengthen each other, then you can get that warmth to spread around, get stronger. The same with the cool sensations. There must be one spot in the body that’s cooler than the rest. When you find that spot, focus in. Hold that perception in mind. And the sense of coolness will strengthen, and then you can use it to spread around. I learned this one time when I was on a bus. This was back in the days in Bangkok when the buses did not have air conditioning. I was sitting in a bus and it was in the middle of a traffic jam. It was a really hot day. People were packed in the bus and it was generally pretty miserable and hot and humid. But I found that there was one spot in the body that was down below the lungs that seemed cooler than the rest. So I focused there, and it was like having my own little private air conditioner. That made the experience of being on the bus a lot more tolerable. So as you get to know these properties and you get a sense that they are active and they can be provoked by your perceptions, you’ll learn how to provoke them skillfully. Because otherwise your perceptions are provoking them anyhow, in a pretty random and unskillful way, if we’re not careful. But you can turn this around by bringing knowledge to this process, knowledge to this area of sensation. This is one of the basic principles throughout the whole practice. You look at dependent co-arising, all those factors that can cause suffering, if you approach them with ignorance. It can be turned into the path if you approach them with knowledge. Your breath, which is the bodily sankara. Your perceptions, which are mental sankara. If you do these things deliberately, and with knowledge, they become the basis of right concentration. If you do them with ignorance, they just pile on more and more suffering. So the choice is yours whether to bring knowledge or ignorance to these processes. Our problem is that we tend to be focused on other things—the demands of our jobs, the demands of our families. We don’t have time to really look inside and look at the demands of the mind and trying to find a safe place inside. So take some time to get to know these properties. Gain a sense of how they feel to you. The Buddha’s not talking about something foreign that’s only over there in India. He’s using a vocabulary to apply to what you’ve got right here, right now. So use your imagination a little bit to see if you can figure out which of these properties corresponds to which sensations in the body. And you’ll find that you can gain a lot of benefit from this teaching, but a lot of other benefits that you might not expect. One of the things that really struck me when Ajahn Fuen was teaching people, when I first went over there, was that he talked about people getting a sense that they were out of touch with their bodies. Sometimes when they meditated, they’d find themselves up above the body, looking down at it. They’d find themselves being outside the body or wandering off in a vision and losing their sense of the bodies. He said, “If you find this happening, think of the elements—breath, fire, water, earth—and you’ll find yourself back in the body and you’ll reconnect.” So these teachings are for your safety. Everything the Buddha taught was for your safety. It’s simply a matter of learning how to understand his teachings and see what they refer to. Gain a sense of them in terms of how you experience your own mind, how you experience your own body, and you’ll see that they really are useful tools. So they’re not just foreign concepts, but they’re actually your experience of the body, made clearer to yourself so that you can take advantage of the potentials that the body has to give you a greater sense of well-being, of having a place where you really can feel at home. With a greater sense of security, you’ll be a lot less likely to lose your sense of well-being, cause harm to yourself and harm to others. So you’re gaining some safety from the biggest danger in life, which is your own lack of skill, your own delusion. So bring your knowledge here, bring your awareness here, and learn how to use these perceptions own cut.

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