A Dhamma Checklist

October 13, 2015

The first verse in the Dhammapada, mano bhumanga ma tamo, “All phenomena are preceded by the heart,” is a passage that gets quoted over and over again. But most people don’t realize that it’s very directly related to dependent-core arising. If you look at dependent-core arising, one of the first things you notice is that prior to sensory contact there’s a lot going on, and it’s all inside. In other words, what we bring to a situation makes a huge difference in whether we’re going to suffer from it or not. We may not be able to change the situation, but we can change whether we’re going to suffer from the good or bad things that happen. One of the checklists that dependent-core arising provides is in the factor of fabrication. If you see that you’re suffering from a situation, you go back and check. In terms of bodily fabrication, verbal, mental. All of them have a mental aspect, though. Even bodily fabrication, the fact that it’s fabrication, there’s an intention there. Bodily fabrication is the way you breathe. There’s an intentional element in how you breathe, and we don’t notice it usually. We do it in ignorance, which is why we suffer, even from the way we breathe. So it’s good to check when you come to a situation. What are you bringing? What loads are you bringing? What burdens are you bringing? What can you let down? How do you change your attitude towards your breath or towards verbal fabrication, which is direct to thought and evaluation? The topics you focus on, the comments and questions you make about those topics. There’s mental fabrication, feeling and perception. Perceptions are the labels and images or words you apply to things. Feelings, of course, are feelings of pleasure or pain. So what load are you bringing? Look first at the bodily fabrication. How do you feel the body from within? This is one of the reasons why we work so much with the breath as we meditate, to get more and more sensitive to this aspect of how we shape our experience of the body, how we can shape it in a good way, so that we’re bringing a sense of well-being into any situation. By the way, we pay attention to the breath energy in the different parts of the body, opening things up. This is an important skill. Last week we had someone visiting, talking about breathing good energy into the body. He said, “Why are you breathing good energy in? Why do you want to let it out?” Well, if you don’t let things out, there’s no room for things to come in. So an essential part of the skill of learning how to work with the breath is to learn how to keep things open, to have a sense of the different channels in the body. Make sure those are open. You’ll find, as we commented this afternoon, that sometimes you open up one channel and it’s like turning the valve open on a pipe full of water. All of a sudden the water goes rushing through the pipe and then it runs into another valve and gets stuck there. It pulls the body out of balance. Well, you open up that valve, if you can locate it. This is one of the reasons why we try to go through the body systematically in the beginning. So you get everything as open as possible and then have a sense that there are places in the body where the energy can go out and it’s good to let the bad energy out. Palms of the hands, the soles of the feet. If you find that you’re doing a lot of work with computers and other things that use your eyesight a lot, think of the energy going out the eyes to release the bad energy. That’s the pressure you may have in the head. Or you can think of the energy flowing out the tailbone. John Fuan, when he was young, used to suffer from a lot of headaches. He found that thinking of energy going out the tailbone, down the spine and out the tailbone, helped relieve the pressure. So different people will find that different spots in the body are good exit points for your energy. So explore that. This becomes a useful skill. As you go through the day, you find that as you encounter other people and deal with their issues, you tend to stuff them into you. They get stuffed inside the body and there’s a sense that you’re holding in an awful lot of stuff. If you hold it in, what are you holding in? There’s a bad energy there. So try to think of it going right through. Think of all the energy channels, all your pores even, totally open. So when negative things are happening, they just go right through. They don’t get stuck inside. Now think of the breath energy here. And this, of course, involves perception. The images you have of how the breath flows in the body. And direct a thought and evaluation about how to improve things. This is one of the ways in which you can use that checklist of different kinds of fabrication to see what you’re carrying into the situation energetically. And then you can check, of course, to see what attitudes you’re carrying in as well. What are you holding onto? What feels threatened? What feels attacked by the situations around you? Is that something you want to hold onto? Having the breath flow so smoothly through the body gives you a much greater chance of being able to look at things, look at these things, in a balanced way. Because otherwise, if all you have to hold onto are your opinions and your views, then you feel as if they got threatened and you have nothing. So you clench up around them and suffer a lot more. But if you can locate yourself in the sense of the body and learn to pull out of these views, then you can look at them as something that has its uses. But you have to know the right time and the right place. Even with things like right view, there are times to be quiet about right view. So you have to know when to hold onto things, when to put them aside. Not in the sense that you abandon them if they’re good, but just realize there’s a time and a place for every kind of view. Particularly when you see that there are battles that have to be fought. You have to choose your battles. You just can’t take on everything all at once. Some issues just have to be put aside. You can tell yourself, “Well, this is for the time being. I’ll deal with whatever’s most important first.” I read once of a woman general in the army who, every morning, would make a list of the ten most important things that had to be done that day. And then she would cross out everything but the first three and focus on those. The purpose of the other seven was that once the first three got taken care of, maybe they might move up the list. But it’s important that you don’t take on too many things at once. That sometimes means that in some cases what you thought was a battle you wanted to win, you just have to put that aside. So take this checklist—bodily fabrication, verbal, mental—and when you see that you’re in a situation where things are difficult and you’re suffering from it, ask yourself again, “Which aspect here can I work with?” Working with the breath is a good place to start. Often it responds most immediately. Sometimes you can’t see precisely what the perception is that’s underlying your issue. But you can have a sense of the breath. The more you meditate on the breath, the more immediate it becomes—your sense of the breath and also your sense of how to work with it. So take this time to work with the breath. Get to know the breath energy in the body. Get to have a sense of when the breath is flowing well, what does it feel like? When it’s not flowing well, what does it feel like? When you feel really tired, like you’re holding something, where can you let it out? What kind of breathing is most soothing? If you’re going to be taking meditation breaks in the day, where do you want to focus your attention? And if your work is something involving a lot of thinking and use of your eyes, allow the breath to nourish the area around the eyes. Tell yourself, “You’re not going to think anything at all. Just let breath work there.” Then ask for your perceptions. A very important perception to hold in mind is the fact that, as the Buddha said, the mind is the forerunner. Don’t let yourself feel hemmed in by events. Think of the mind as an active process that can shape events and not just get confined by them. Have the mind larger than the events. That’s why the Buddha said, as you hold those images in mind of your good will, your mind being as large as the earth, as large as the Ruri Ganges, as being like space. These things envelop everything else. So think of your awareness as enveloping the situation. These factors of fabrication, if you use them with knowledge, can shape the situation so you don’t have to suffer from it, at the very least. And you may find that you also have put yourself in a better position to create less suffering for others as well. So this is one of the reasons why that verse is so well-known. And think about it in these terms, especially in terms of the factor of fabrication. You can take that well-known verse and apply it to any situation in life.

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