Selves & Not-self

April 1, 2017

We spread thoughts of goodwill at the beginning of the meditation to remind ourselves of why we’re here. We want a happiness that lasts, a happiness that’s blameless, a happiness that’s harmless. We see the way that most people find happiness, and we have been finding happiness for ourselves in the world. We realize that it places a burden on other people, it places a burden on the mind. We want a happiness that’s unburdensome, so we have to look inside. So keep that in mind as you’re meditating. You’re here for true happiness. All too often you hear that you should meditate without any goals. But that’s useful for retreats, when you’re afraid that you’re going to put yourself in a pressure cooker, giving a whole week that you could have gone someplace else, done someplace else. You say, “I want something to show for it.” And so in order to discourage the kind of pressure cooker that you can put yourself into that way, to say, “Don’t have any goals, just be with the present moment.” But if you tackle meditation as a light time project, you’ve got to have reasons for doing it. You’ve got to have goals. Not that you’re going to be focusing on the goal all the time, but it’s good to have in the back of your mind to give yourself a sense of direction, to remind yourself why you’re here. And then you can get to work. The work here is to develop a state of concentration in the mind. Because in the course of the practice, we’re going to have to learn to deny ourselves a lot of the pleasures we’ve had out in the world. And to make up for that, you need a source of pleasure inside. So focus on the breath. Experiment with the breath for a while. As you breathe in, notice where you feel the in-breath. And notice if it feels good. There are ways that you can adjust the breath, make it longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. There are different ways you can picture the breath to yourself. Think of the breath not just as the air coming in and out through the nose, but also as the movement of energy through the body. And that feels like it comes in and goes out in different places. And you begin to notice, as you get more sensitive to it, that sometimes it feels like it flows well and sometimes it doesn’t feel like it’s flowing well. There’ll be islands where the breath energy doesn’t seem to be felt at all. So see what you can do. Picture the breath to yourself in a way that allows the breath to go through areas that you feel are blocked right now. If you tend to get headaches easily, don’t focus up in the head, focus down in the body. Think of the breath energy as it comes in going down. Down the front of the body, down the spine, down the arms, down the legs, out to the fingers and palms of your hands, out to the toes and soles of your feet. Think of yourself being bathed in good breath energy. This becomes then a new source of food for the mind. The mind does like to feed. We’re talking today in the class. We feed on contact. We feed on our thoughts, our intentions. We feed on our consciousness, and particularly with those intentions. There are good intentions and bad ones. And given the kind of food you feed on, you create different identities within the mind. It’s like setting out different kinds of food. If you set out grass, you’ll attract one kind of animal. If you set out meat, you’ll attract another kind of an animal. In Thailand, sometimes when they go to shrines, they set out alcohol. And you wonder what kind of spirits are being attracted by those spirits. Especially when you see the offerings they make of pig heads and other things, you wonder what kind of God would like that kind of stuff. And in the same way, in your own mind, the kind of food you provide for yourself is going to develop certain kinds of committee members in your mind. So you want to nourish the good ones, the ones who are wise, the ones who see far and look for happiness that’s going to be long-term. So you provide them with a happiness that’s perfectly harmless. That’s the way you breathe. You’re not taking anything away from anyone else. You’re just taking the air. And there’s plenty of that. So take advantage of the fact that you have this potential for well-being in the body, this potential for happiness, this potential for a sense of refreshment inside, just by the way you breathe. Then you’ll be able to use this as the mind gets tempted to go for other kinds of pleasures and say, “No, I’ve got something better here.” And when you get good at this, you can just think of the breath and there it is. It’s going to make a nice buzz throughout the body. It feels good. And when you’re tempted to break the precepts, when you’re tempted to send your thoughts out in areas where they shouldn’t be going, you say, “Look, I’ve got something better here. Why am I trying to gain some pleasure out of those things?” In this way, you have a point of comparison. Because when you go back to your old ways, you’re more sensitive to the fact that, yes, a lot of them do have a negative effect on the mind. Whereby gauging certain kinds of thoughts has a negative effect on the body and the mind. Do you really want that? What are you gaining out of this? Exactly which part of the mind are you feeding? With concentration, a sense of well-being with the breath, you’ve got another choice. All too often people are bound up in addictions because of their lack of imagination. They can’t imagine themselves giving up whatever they’re addicted to. But it helps your imagination if you develop new skills and you think, “Well, I can do this. I can do that instead.” Well, here it is, a pleasure that you can tap into when you need it. It soothes the body and soothes the mind. In the process of doing that, you gain a lot of insight into your own mind, if you’re inquisitive. I mean, there are some people who will do the concentration and just like to stay there with a nice sense of ease and well-being, and they’re happy to hang out. But if you’re more inquisitive, you begin to start asking questions around it. How can you carry this into your daily life? How can distractions come up? How can you cut through them? How can you use these skills to cut through the distraction? In so doing, you begin to notice things in the mind that you didn’t notice before. Again, it’s some of these committee members, because the distractions outside are not nearly as destructive as the ones that come from within. And you’ve probably got these old members in the committee that date back to your childhood, your teenage years, when your idea of happiness was pretty crude, and your sense of your skills was pretty crude as well. And they still hang on. And they go unnoticed. And as a result, they can exert a lot of power over the mind. But as you begin to resist their power, on the one hand, you see that they like having their power, and they don’t want to be pushed around. They’ll push back. But you have to stick with it and watch them for a while until you can see exactly where their weaknesses are. Because they are based on some pretty crude ideas of what happiness is and how it can be attained. And now you’ve got something better. You’ve got an alternative here. And in the practice you’re getting, developing this concentration, this fabrication in the mind. You’ve got bodily fabrication, which is the breath. You’ve got verbal fabrication, which is the way you talk to yourself. And then you’ve got mental fabrication, the perceptions you hold in mind, together with the feelings of ease or pain that go along with them. And you find that as you put these things together in the right way, you’ve got a state of concentration. Talk to yourself about the breath in a way that makes the breath more comfortable. Hold perceptions in mind that allow the breath to flow throughout the body. This makes you more sensitive to those processes as they’re happening. And then you begin to notice how you do them as you go through the day. When a certain emotion comes in, like anger, then you change the way you breathe. As long as the way you breathe keeps going in an angry kind of way, it’s going to stoke the anger. But what if you breathed in a more calming way? You’ve got the choice. This is what the meditation is doing for you. It’s giving you more choices. And you can talk to yourself about the anger in a different way as well. You can hold different perceptions in your mind about the person you’re angry about, about your position vis-a-vis that other person, in which you can take apart an unskillful mind state and put it in a better one in its place. This may sound artificial, but then none of those mind states are the real you. They’re just habitual yous in there. And they’ve held power for a long time. One of the whole purposes of meditation is to change the balance of power inside. So with the breath as your ally, and with your understanding of the mind that comes from dealing with the breath, you have some good weapons, you have some good tools to remake the way you make choices, remake the way you engage in the world. So it gets closer and closer to that idea of a happiness that really is blameless. And you find that the blameless happiness is the kind that goes deep into the mind. There’s no sense of conflict. There’s no denial of what you had to do in order to get it, because there’s nothing you have to deny. It’s all good stuff that we’re doing here. So remember, we’re meditating to make a change. And the kind of happiness we like, the kind of happiness we’re looking for, and the kind of happiness that’s going to enjoy that happiness. Ultimately, we get to a point where we don’t need this sense of self. Because what is the sense of self aside from something you hold on to for the purpose of happiness? You have a sense of your own competence in being able to find happiness, and you have a sense of you as being the consumer that’s going to enjoy the happiness. And every kind of happiness that’s fabricated has to have a purpose. You have both of these senses of you in there. But when you find something that’s not fabricated, you don’t need these anymore. That’s when you let go. That’s the meaning of the Buddha’s teaching on not-self. He didn’t say there is no self or there’s no separate self. He just said self is useful up to a point, and different selves inside these different members of the committee are useful up to a point. Some committee members are totally useless. You want to learn how to put those aside. But you’re trying to strengthen the good ones. Until they deliver you to a happiness that doesn’t need a self to do it and doesn’t need a self to consume it, that’s when you can really let go. And that’s the happiness we’re looking for. Happiness that doesn’t need to feed. It’s just there. And nothing in time and space can touch it. There are all things we have to give up in order to find that. It’s all a sign of goodwill for ourselves, that we really mean ourselves well. And in meaning ourselves well in this way, we mean well for everybody. This is the happiness that you don’t take away from anybody else and doesn’t oppress anybody else. That’s why it’s really ideal. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2017/170401_Selves_&_Not-self.mp3>