Body, Feelings, Mind, Dhamma (outdoors)

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When you meditate, you start out with thoughts of goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. Goodwill is a wish for true happiness. And the good thing about true happiness is that it comes from within, which means that your true happiness doesn’t have to conflict with anyone else’s. So you can wish true happiness for yourself and for other people with no conflict. But at the same time, you have to remember, where does true happiness come from? It comes from actions. So when you’re wishing for your own true happiness, you’re wishing, “May I understand the causes for true happiness and be able to act on them.” Which means you realize that simply the wish is not going to be enough. You have to train yourself. At the same time, when you’re wishing true happiness for others, “May they understand the causes for true happiness and be able to act on them.” This is a wish you can have for anybody. You can think of even the people who have done a lot of evil in the world. If they could understand the causes for true happiness and act on them, that would be the end of the evil. So this is a thought you can have for everybody without hypocrisy, without being sentimental and overly idealistic. Now the question of whether they will or will not be willing to act on the causes of true happiness or even to understand them, that’s up to them. But at the very least, you want to make sure that none of your thoughts or words or deeds get in the way of their finding true happiness in that way. And at the same time, when you realize, “My true happiness has to depend on my actions,” you ask yourself then, “Where do my actions come from? They come from my mind. My mind needs to be trained.” So thoughts of goodwill bring you right to the meditation on the breath. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths and notice where you feel the breathing in the body. And by breathing here, I mean the flow of energy in the body, not necessarily the air at the nose, but the energy anywhere in the body. Where is it most prominent? Focus your attention there and then ask yourself, “Is it comfortable?” If long breathing is comfortable, keep it up. If it’s not, you can change. You can experiment with different rhythms of breathing, shorter, even longer, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, to find what feels good right now. And you may find that what feels good will feel good for a while and then not so good. Well, you can still change. Try to stay on top of the needs of the body so that when you’re tired, you can breathe in a way that’s energizing. When you’re tense, you can breathe in a way that’s relaxing. You want to find a place for the mind to stay here with a sense of well-being right here, right now. Because everything you’re going to need to know is right here, right now. So try to create a sense of well-being right here. It makes it easier to stay and gives you a greater sense that you really belong here. This is home. And this should be your default setting, being right here in the present moment, instead of wandering around all over the place. The one problem that comes when the breath is comfortable, of course, is that sometimes you drop the breath to go for the comfort. Then you lose your foundation. You get into what’s called delusion concentration, where you’re still. And you know you’re still, but you’re not really sure where you are. Sometimes you come out of this and you wonder, “Was I awake? Was I asleep?” You were there, but you were not properly focused. So the next step is to get a sense of work to do with that comfort that comes up. So you don’t just wallow in it. This is why the Buddha has you spread that sense of comfort around. As he says, try to get the sense of comfort to spread throughout the whole body. And John Lee gives some good examples of how to do that. Think of the breath taking that sense of comfort down your back, out your legs, down your shoulders, out your arms, from the chest going down to the heart, down to the large intestine. You can also do it in your head. Think of the breath energy coming in and out through your eyes or ears. So you develop a sense of your awareness filling the body, the sense of ease filling the body, the breath filling the body. So you have body, feeling, mind, the first three frames of reference all together, covering the same territory. Then you take that fourth frame of reference and use that to make adjustments to make sure that this sense of all three interpenetrating one another stays solid and well-established. For instance, there are the hindrances. You try to notice when a hindrance comes up in the mind so that you can get rid of it. Things like sensual desire, your desire to have certain sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, in whatever combination you like. There’s ill will when you’d like to see somebody suffer, sleepiness when you get drowsy, start losing focus, restlessness and anxiety when you start worrying about things, and uncertainty when you start having doubts about yourself, doubts about your practice. All these things get in the way. As the Buddha said, when they arise, the first thing to notice is that they’ve arisen and that they’re hindrances. Our problem is that we don’t see them as hindrances. Sensual desire comes up and we find it attractive, we want to go with it. Ill will comes up and we try to figure out how our ill will is justified, saying that person really does deserve to suffer, it’ll really like to see them suffer, maybe that would serve them right, that kind of thinking. Sleepiness comes up and you say, “Ah, it’s a sign I’ve got to stop.” Anxiety comes up, restlessness comes up, and you say, “I’ve really got to worry about that. If I don’t worry about it, I’m being irresponsible.” Uncertainty comes up and you say, “This really is something nobody really knows anything about. Who can prove this?” Those thoughts destroy you, and yet you side with them. So the first thing to do is recognize that this is a hindrance, this is an obstacle in my path. When sensual desire comes up, you have to try to look for the unattractive side of whatever it is you desire, whether it’s desire through lust or desire through greed. You’ve got to see if there’s a downside to this, both to the object and to the desire itself. As for ill will, you have to remind yourself that nobody necessarily benefits from the suffering of other people. Too often when people suffer, they just want to get revenge. They don’t change their ways, they don’t see the light. Things just get worse. And sleepiness comes up. You have to test it first to see, “Is the body really tired? Is the mind really tired? Or is it just playing tricks on me, getting bored or trying to hide something that might come up in the meditation?” So you have to test it. Change the way you breathe, change the object of your meditation. If the breath is getting too soothing and too drifting, you can change over to think about the different parts of your body. Where are all your bones right now? Where are all your muscles right now? Where is your skin right now? Think of all the different parts of the body you’ve got. Make an inventory. See if that wakes you up. As for anxiety or worry, remember that you don’t know what’s going to happen in the future, but you do know that whatever happens, you’re going to need more mindfulness, more alertness, more ardency, so you can come up with a solution on the spot. Where are you going to get those qualities? You get them from meditation. So instead of feeling obligated to worry, you should be more feeling obligated to meditate. As for uncertainty, you can be uncertain about everything. It’s possible to doubt everything in the world. But if you doubt everything, where are you going to get it? What’s the advantage? If you at least take the principles of karma as a working hypothesis, that gives you something to hold on to, some reason to try to be ardent and actually get something out of your actions. Because if you don’t believe that your actions give results, then why bother putting an effort into being good? And if you don’t put an effort into being good, then where are you going to get goodness? Even though the Buddha never tried to prove the principles of karma to anybody, he said, “Look, this is much better for you. At the very least, you’re giving yourself a chance.” In other words, you recognize a hindrance as a hindrance and you work around it. That way you can get more firmly back with body, feeling, and mind all penetrating one another throughout the body. Throughout the range of your awareness. Those are dhammas on the unskillful side. On the skillful side, you’ve got the factors for awakening, starting with mindfulness. The mind tends to be aware in just little bits and pieces, and mindfulness is what stitches everything together. It’s what remembers why you’re here, where you are, what you should be doing. If you can’t remember that much, then you’re just going to be drifting around. So you try to keep stitching each moment together, and then you notice what’s coming up in the mind. If it’s something skillful, you want to encourage it. If it’s something unskillful, you want to try to get rid of it. That’s what the persistence is. So you’ve got three factors for awakening right there - mindfulness, analysis of qualities, and persistence. The three factors for awakening come in line. There’s a sense of fullness, a sense of calm, the mind gets concentrated, and then it develops equanimity. Equanimity here is not just indifference. The kind of indifference that comes and says, “Well, this is no good, that’s no good, nothing in the world is any good, so I’m just going to give up.” That’s not really equanimity, that’s apathy. Equanimity is when you see “I’ve got what I need inside. If anyone were trying to bring me anything more, I wouldn’t need it.” It’s like you’re full of food and someone brings more food to you and you say, “I don’t need that.” You can be equanimous about the food. So this is the equanimity that comes from having a sense of enough, having gained enough. Equanimity that comes from wealth, not from poverty. So in this way, if you develop any of these factors for awakening, you’re strengthening your mindfulness, strengthening your sense of having the body, feelings, and mind, feeling of pleasure, present awareness, all here together, in a way that’s stable. Because as the Jhans say, “If you’re going to gain any insight, it has to come from a stable mind.” That’s what the Buddha said. What the Jhans say is that you have to be like a hunter. The hunter doesn’t know when the animal is going to come by or what time he’s going to be able to get the animal, but he does know where the animals tend to be. And he goes there, he sharpens all of his tools and weapons, and he goes there and he sits very quietly so as not to alert the animals that he’s there. And also so that he can detect when the animals come by, because if the hunter is not quiet, even if the animals do come by, he’s not going to hear them. But at the same time, he has to be alert. He can’t just be very still and drift off. Because if he’s still drifting off, then the animal can pass right in front of his nose and he won’t see it. So you’ve got to make this combination of stillness and alertness. That’s why we get the body still, we get the mind still, but at the same time we do it with a sense of well-being, and at the same time we give the mind work to do with the breath, to keep it alert. As the mind gets more still, you begin to see the things the mind does that create suffering for itself. Because that, as the Buddha said, is where the real problem lies. Suffering doesn’t come from the weather, it doesn’t come from the economy, it doesn’t come from politics, it doesn’t come from bad relationships or good relationships. It comes from within the mind. It’s the things that the mind does as it deals with the world outside and the world inside. It’s what weighs the mind down. And so where are you going to see that? You’re going to see it in here. But you have to see it from a still mind. Because if your mind is running around, you can’t see anything else running around. Everything seems to be running around. You can’t make the distinction between what’s still and what’s not. And all you see are the really gross, blatant movements of the mind. If you want to see the subtle ones, you’ve got to get the mind really still but really alert. Body, feeling, mind, all feeling, one another up like this. And make this your normal, default setting. That when greed begins to show itself a little bit, you know. Anger shows itself a little bit, you know. You’re right there, you’re alert. And that puts you in a position where you can do something about it. You can see that it really does weigh the mind down. But you see, it’s not that it’s coming in to weigh itself on you. You’re the one that’s picking it up. And when you pick it up, then you trap yourself. It’s like those monkey traps where they take a coconut shell and they drill a little hole in it, big enough for the monkey to slip its hand through, but not so big that it could slip its fist through. And then they put something inside that the monkey likes. So the monkey comes, sees it, slips his hand through the hole, grabs onto the object, and then he can’t get his hand out. And ten times out of ten, the monkey will not let go. If it let go of the object, it’d be gone. But it’s holding on to the object, but it’s stuck. This is the way the mind is. Things don’t come and weigh themselves on the mind. We’re the ones who pick them up. And then we pick them up, we’re trapped by them. The image that the Buddha gives is a fire. Back in those days, they felt that fire grabbed onto its fuel, and then when it was in this fuel, it was trapped. Only when the fire let go, was it freed, to go back to its original fire element. So this is the way the mind works. We grab onto things, and then we find that we’re trapped by them, which means that we don’t have to change them. We have to change the mind that grabs. Teach it how to let go, and then it’ll be free. So all the work that needs to be done is done right here. So you’ve got the mind so that its default setting is right here, with a sense of stillness, with a sense of awareness filling the body. And then you’re in a position that when the mind grabs hold of things, you can see. And you can see, “Oh, I’m the one that’s grabbing hold. I’m the one that’s trapping myself. I’m the one who can let go.” And as you see that, and you’ll see it in many stages, the burdens of the mind begin to lift, because you’re not picking them up anymore. Or even if you do pick them up, you realize it, and you let them put them down right away. That’s how you can live in the world and still find happiness. Because you realize it’s through your own actions that you’re going to find happiness, and this is how you train the mind so that it doesn’t act in a way to create suffering for itself, but acts in a way that actually relieves itself from suffering, frees itself from suffering. And this is how meditation is an expression of goodwill for yourself and for other people. When you’re not weighing yourself down with suffering, you’re less likely to have to lean on other people and cause them to tip over. So as you train the mind in this way, everybody benefits. All beings get that much closer to finding true happiness.

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