A Mountain of Bones

January 6, 2024

Focus on what you can do with your breath right now. You can start with long breathing. See how that feels. Then short breathing. See how that feels. Heavy, light, deep, shallow, fast, slow. Try to decide what kind of breathing you like best right now. If you’re feeling tired, you may want to breathe in a way that’s energizing. If you’re feeling tense, try to breathe in a way that’s more relaxing. You have this freedom. Take advantage of it. This is one of the Buddhist skills, seeing the things that are right close to us that we tend to overlook and see how much we can get out of them. If your happiness depends on things that are far away, you don’t have much control about things that are far away. But things that are right close to you—your breath—you can control it. You can make changes. And the changes really can make a difference. This is just the beginning. As you get deeper into the meditation, you’ll find there are more things you can do with your breath, more things you can do with your mind right now. You make up your mind. You’re going to focus on different parts of the body. You can decide to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Think of your head. Think of your shoulders, your arms, your torso, your hips, your legs, your feet, all at once. They’re all breathing. Because breath is not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the flow of energy in the body, and that flows everywhere throughout the nerves. So take advantage of that. We live in this world where there are so many things you can’t change. So it’s good to focus on the things that you can. There are difficulties you have to put up with, but you can find that you have inner strengths that you can rely on, that you can develop. We can develop mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. Concentration, the ability to stay with one thing. And discernment, the ability to understand what we’re doing that’s helpful, leading to well-being, and what we’re doing that’s not leading to well-being. Realize that we have the choice to reflect on this. This gives you a sense of confidence. Buddhism is so often… criticized for being pessimistic. We talk about aging, illness, and death, separation, suffering. Vulnerable truths are all about suffering. But remember that the Buddha talked about himself as a doctor. He talks about aging, illness, and death because there are things that he can do about them and teach you how to do something about them, too. So when the doctor asks you, “Where does it hurt? What are your symptoms? The doctor is not being pessimistic. The doctor is simply doing his job. And the doctors who are afraid to talk about certain illnesses mean that they don’t know how to deal with those illnesses. But the Buddha takes them all on, all forms of suffering. He says there’s a way of comprehending them so you don’t have to suffer. Even though you may have done unskillful things in the past, or had unpleasant experiences here in the present moment, you don’t have to take them on. As Ajaan Sawat used to say,”Think of that mountain over there to the east. Is it heavy?” When Ajaan asks a question like that, you realize it’s a trick question, so you have to be very careful how you answer. So he himself gave the careful answer, which is, “If you try to pick it up, yes, it’ll be heavy on you. But if you don’t pick it up, it may be heavy in and of itself, but it’s not heavy on you.” That’s the skill we’re looking for—how not to overdo it. We don’t weigh ourselves down with things. And when we don’t weigh ourselves down with things, we find out we’re the only ones that are weighing down the mind. The things in the world don’t push themselves on us; we pull them in. So we have to learn how to look inside to see what we’re doing to pull things in, and how we can unlearn that habit. In Pali it’s called pasada, and it’s paired with sanghuega. Sanghuega is when you look at the world around you and you see that if you don’t get out, there’s a lot of suffering. Like that chant we had just now, “We’re subject to aging, illness, death, separation.” Those are the reflections that lead to sanghuega, which is a sense of dismay. It actually means terror in Pali. When you think about all the deaths, all the illnesses, all the times your body has aged through many, many lifetimes, you think of the story of the young Buddha, reflecting on the fact that he was subject to aging, illness, and death. All the things where he was looking for happiness were subject to aging, illness, and death. Where was he going to find anything that was something he could really trust? That was his sense of sanghuega. He realized that if there was a way out, it was going to have to be through looking into the mind. To look into the mind, you have to get really quiet. So he left the responsibilities of his home and went off into the forest. After a lot of false starts, he realized that there was a way out, and it was the ultimate happiness. He wasn’t running away from things; he was running toward something that was really good. But we allow ourselves to get bound up in things that are going to disappoint us again and again and again. We think they’re important, and we think that they constitute everything that we could possibly find, everything we could possibly do. So we trap ourselves. And some people say, “Well, just learn how to be happy in your trap.” But as the Buddha said, we’re like rabbits caught in a trap. They just hop, hop, hop around, but they can’t get away. But he said, “There is a way to get away. Why contend yourself with being trapped?” This is why he encourages people, when they get heedless, to develop a sense of sanghuega themselves. It may be unpleasant, but it forces them to stop and think about the things they’ve been running away from, the ideas they’ve been running away from. Because you look at the world. You realize it’s a really sad place where people have to feed off other beings. And even if they’re vegetarians, they have to feed off the labor of other people. We’re born, we feed, and even though we may look after our bodies really well, we’re going to get older, we’re going to grow ill, we’re going to die. It happens again and again and again. The Buddha said, “If you could take the bones of the different lifetimes you’ve had, just in one aeon, and if they were preserved and there was someone to look after them, make sure they didn’t get scattered, there’d be a pile bigger than that mountain over there.” And that’s just one aeon. He said, “We’ve been through many, many, many aeons, uncountable aeons.” So with each of those bodies that were discarded, there was pain, there was aging, there was illness, there was death. There was a huge pile of aging, illness, and death. Think about that. That’s too abstract. Think about going into an old folks’ home and seeing the people who haven’t trained their minds. Some of them are really suffering. And you realize that if you don’t train your mind, that could happen to you. Now, as you reflect on this, not to get depressed, but to realize that he really does want to find a way out. That’s when he offers his way out, through being virtuous, developing concentration, and learning discernment. Figuring out what you’re doing that’s skillful and what you’re doing that’s not, how to develop your skillful qualities and abandon the unskillful ones. So it’s a good way out. It’s a life of virtue. It’s a life of concentration. It’s a life of compassion. It’s a life of goodwill. It’s a life when you’re careful about what you do. So in finding your way out, you’re not just leaving people behind or trashing the world. You’re taking good care of the world. You’re leaving some gifts behind as you go. Some of you say, “Well, you’re running away.” Well, think of it more as a samsara, this process of coming back again and again and again, wandering here, wandering there. It is a process. It’s not a place. It’s an addiction. And you’re learning how to outgrow your addiction. So you’re not helping anybody else by hanging around, still being addicted. When you can outgrow your addiction, you can show other people that they can outgrow theirs as well. So the Buddha does have you think the thoughts of sanghvega. So you realize that you should have a sense of urgency in getting out. Otherwise, you never know how much longer this opportunity to practice is going to be. We live in a world where there has been a Buddha. And he’s shown that there is a way out. There are lots of societies, lots of cultures, even in the world right now, that don’t know about the Buddha, that don’t know that this way exists. As the Buddha explained, there are many periods when there has been no Buddha, nobody to show the way. In periods like that, people live in darkness. It’s like living in a world where there are no doctors. You have illnesses, but there’s nobody who knows how to treat the illnesses. So here we now, too, have that time. So try to have a sense of urgency in your practice. How many more piles of bones do you want to create? You’ve got this set of bones right here, right now. Use them well. You’ve got this body right here. Use it well. You can start simply by the way you breathe. Notice that, yes, you do have choices. We hear about the teachings on karma. For a lot of us, it’s oppressive. We think about all the bad things we may have done in the past. We don’t like the idea of having to face those unpleasant consequences. But the Buddha teaches karma as a way out. Notice that in that contemplation. “I am the owner of my actions, whatever I do, for good or for evil. To that will I fall.” The fact that we can do good means that we can fall heir to good actions. That’s where the passada comes in, where the confidence comes in. So try to make the most of your abilities, because we all have these potentials within us. Cultivate sanguego when you’re getting lazy. Cultivate passada when you’re getting discouraged. These two emotions can work together to get you on the path and to keep you there. In the sutta, where that reflection comes in about being subject to aging, illness, and death, it goes on to say, “Not only am I subject to these things, all beings are subject to these things.” But all beings have these potentials. They work their way out. If you just think about the fact that you’re subject to these things, and the Buddha said that gives rise to a sense of heedfulness, that you’ve got to be careful in what you do. If you think about all beings being subject to this, that goes deeper. No matter where you might go, you’re still subject to these things. That, the Buddha says, is what gets you on the path. And keeps you there.

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