Not-self in Daily Life

April 21, 2024

The Pali word for meditation, bhavana, means to develop. Like right now, we’re trying to develop three qualities as we focus on the breath. There’s mindfulness, the ability to keep the breath in mind. Alertness, the ability to watch what you’re doing, to see what the breath is doing, to see what your mind is doing, to make sure they stay together. Patience, the wholehearted desire to do this well. And we develop these qualities by making choices. Like right now, you’ve chosen to stay with the breath. You want to stick with that choice. Of course, with every breath, with every mental moment, the possibility of other choices comes up. You could be thinking about something else. You could be focusing on the sound of the birds, the sound of the plane. The sound of the plane in the distance. The meal we just had. The places you’re going this afternoon. All kinds of things you could focus on right now. But most of those things, as the Buddha said, have to do with the world. And if you’re going to develop mindfulness, you have to put aside or subdue all your thoughts about the world. To tell you something right now, the world is none of your business. What they’re doing outside is none of the things you have to pay attention to at all. Your duty right now is to stick with the breath, to get to know the breath really well, so you can feel at home with the breath. Examine the breath to see what kind of breathing feels good. Experiment with different kinds of breathing, short or long, fast or slow, heavy or light, deep or shallow, to see what feels best. And as you get more interested in the breath, the affairs of the world begin to fall away, and you begin to realize they really are none of your business right now. You’ve got more important work to do, because you’ve got to get your mind under control, so that it can think the thoughts you want it to think, and it can put aside the thoughts you don’t want it to think. That’s going to be an important ability to develop, especially as you get older, you get sick, you approach death. If the mind is not under control, it can lead you to all kinds of weird places, literally. It can take you to a rebirth that you really don’t want, just because a random thought has come in and taken hold of your mind. So you have to learn to draw a line as you practice, which things are related to the practice and which ones are not. The things that are related to the practice, you hold on to as you are yours, like you, the meditator, right now. And the breath, your object of attention. And as for other yous, there may be the you who has roles out in the world, put those aside. This too is a good lesson to learn. It’s a lesson in non-self. It points out the fact that we choose our sense of self at any one time, often in very random ways. A thought comes in, grabs our attention, our thought, and we become the thinker of that thought. And all too often we don’t question whether that identity is a good one to take on. And here the Buddha is saying, we engage in what he calls “I-making” and “my-making,” where you create a sense of you, your sense of things that belong to you. And you can do it in a random, haphazard way, or you can do it in a more ordered way, more purposeful way. So that the things you do choose to identify with are actually helpful. Because with the teaching on not-self, the Buddha doesn’t have you apply it to everything all at once, right from the very beginning. As he said, when you think about doing karma, if you have the idea that, well, there’s nobody there, nobody to receive the results of the karma, then why bother making any changes in what you do? The Buddha has you develop a healthy sense of self around the practice, that the goal is something you want, and you’re capable of doing what’s needed to get done to get there. And you do this because you have a sense of caring for yourself. You want to see that you can find true happiness, put an end to the suffering you’ve experienced. So those kinds of a sense of self are really helpful in the path. As for any other sense of self you might have built around whatever else, you’ve got to say, “No, that’s not really me.” You can choose not to take on that identity. It’s important that you realize that you have this ability. Otherwise, anything that comes into the mind, you take it on as your thought. You’re responsible for it, and you have to follow it wherever you go. But if you think of these thoughts simply as things that are arising, then you have the choice. It’s like going down to a store. You go to the produce section. Some of the fruits and vegetables look good, and some of them don’t look so good. Well, you don’t have to pick up the ones that don’t look good. And this principle applies not only outside in the world, but also inside in your own mind. You have to learn how not to identify with things that would really pull you off the path. When the Buddha talks about virtue, he points out that there are three things that the world holds to very dearly, which can pull you away from your precepts. And you have to see them as unimportant. One is loss of wealth, another is loss of health, and the third is loss of your relatives. And regardless, these are very important things. These really are yours. Your wealth is your wealth. Your health is your health. Your relatives are yours. But if a concern for your wealth would make you break the precepts, in other words, you would lie to protect your wealth. Or you would steal to protect your health. Or again, you might lie to protect your relatives. You have to realize, your health, your wealth, and your relatives, they come and go. But the actions you’ve done, those become yours. And they can become yours for a long time. And those aren’t things that you can just say, “Well, I’m not going to take responsibility for that.” Let go. Once you’ve done the action, it’s done. It’s part of your karma. As the Buddha says, “Kamma-sagomi.” We’re the owners of our actions. So you want to make sure that you don’t add anything bad to that collection. So you have to see. Your wealth comes and goes. Your wealth depends so much on the economy that it’s so easy for other people to steal, to cheat, to take away from you. Your health is so dependent on things that are outside of your control. If we had a really bad forest fire here, for days on end, and the smoke got worse and worse and worse, what could we do about it? It would be bad for our health. As for our relatives, the Buddha said, “You have relatives, they come from who knows where. Before they were born, you didn’t know them. After they die, they go other places, forget all about you.” So we can’t really cling to these things for any sense of security. So it’s best to say, “Well, they’re just not really mine.” It doesn’t mean that you mistreat them. You treat them well. You care for them as best you can. But you have to realize that ultimately, they have to go. And you have to be prepared for that. So you have to realize, okay, these are things that you borrowed for the time being. You’ve taken on a temporary role, but it’s only temporary, and you have to be ready to give it up at any time. This is what non-self means in daily life. The same with the dhammas of the world. There’s wealth, there’s status, there’s praise, and there’s pleasure. All things that we like. But each of these has its opposite. Loss of wealth, loss of status, criticism, pain. And you can’t have the good side without the bad side. As long as you’re clinging to the good side, then when it gets taken away, you’re going to suffer. You have a feeling that part of you has been taken away. But if you realize it’s just decorations along the road, things that you can use for a little bit, but then you have to let go. It’s a lot easier when the time does come to let go. So you’re thinking about the wealth. If you took some paper money out of your pocket, ask yourself whose name is on the paper money. Your name isn’t on there. Even if it’s your credit card, it has your name, but the bigger name, the more important name on the credit card is the bank. They’re the ones who are in charge. The value of what you’ve got can go up and down. It’s not really yours. So when you realize that it’s not really yours, how do you convert it into something that is of value to you? Well, you learn to use your wealth to develop the perfections of generosity, the perfections of goodwill. That’s how it becomes more solidly yours. Same goes with status. Status is something other people give to you, you can take it away. There was a case in Thailand years back of a monk who was very popular in the palace, and then there was a misunderstanding. He gave a dharma talk that, when it got to the ear of the king, didn’t sound so nice. And so he immediately stripped of his title, stripped of his status. And then after a while the king realized he made a mistake, and the status came back again. The monk had no control over that. So realize when people lift you up, they can also take you down. So it’s something that someone else has done for you. You may feel you earned the status, but then again, that’s earning in the eyes of others. And they can suddenly change their standards, change their ideas, and that status is no longer yours. Same with praise and criticism. You may be proud of your name, but if your name is in somebody else’s mouth, or on somebody else’s computer, they can do what they want to with it. You can say only the things about me that I want to have said. In other words, your name is not self, it’s not really yours. So when people criticize you, you can step aside. You don’t have to be the target of their criticism. And when you get out of the way like that, then you can look at, “Why did they shoot my name to begin with?” And sometimes you realize it has very little to do with you, and a lot to do with their own problems. But if you identify strongly with the name, you’re not going to be able to see that, and not be able to free yourself from the sorrow that comes when someone sets their sights on you. As for the pleasures, how many of the pleasures in the world can you really hold on to? All too often it’s the memory of a pleasure you had in the past, and even that can start to erode. And John Swat used to say, “The sensual pleasures of last week, where are they now? They’re long gone.” A while back I was reading a book that was proposing that space and time move at the speed of light, which means a little bit of pleasure all of a sudden is very far away, within the next second, within the next minute. So how can you identify with things like this? You learn to use the pleasure, the kind of pleasure that has a good impact on the mind. As for pleasures that have a bad impact on the mind, you’ve got to let them go. So it’s in this way that you begin to use the teaching on that self, to free the mind from a lot of suffering in day-to-day life. You don’t have to go all the way to being Arahants, the Buddhist students in the past, the ones who had reached a point where they could let go of everything. But if you learn how to let go skillfully, selectively, then you can get a lot of advantage out of this teaching. Years back I had a student who had a period when he was a student of another teacher, and they were doing a module on death and dying. And the teacher told him, “Pretend that you’ve died and you’ve come back and you’re talking to people from that different perspective, where you no longer feel that you’re the victim of what they do or say. You’re no longer invested in things. You’ve left this world behind. Then you come back and you can talk to the people behind and see from that released point of view.” And he found that he was a lot more engaged in the discussion and enjoyed the discussion much more. Then when he got back to his normal assumptions, he was his old self again. And one of the people in the class said, “Well, I liked you better when you were dead.” And this is a lot of what not-self means. You’re dead to the things that you used to hold on to, but you realize they’re causing you harm. So why keep them alive? Why keep that identity alive? You let it die, and you’ll be a lot lighter as a result.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/240421_Not-self_in_Daily_Life.mp3>