Body, Feelings, Mind, Dhammas

May 27, 2024

If you were to draw a map of where your mind has been in the course of the day, it would be all over the place. More entangled than the route maps that they give for airlines. Shooting over here, shooting over there, back here, back there. What we’re trying to do as we meditate is to bring it to one spot and keep it here. Think of it gluing to the body. Using a feeling of pleasure. That’s what makes the mind want to stay here. So you’ve got body, feeling, mind. Three of the establishings of mindfulness. It’s not the case that you’re dealing with just one at a time. You’ve got all three that you’ve got to bring together. You want the body to be filled with good breath energy and then to be filled with a feeling of comfort and for your awareness to fill the body. So you want them to cover the same territory with a sense of ease, a sense of fitting well together, belonging here. So make a survey. How are things going in the body right now? How are things going in the mind? What are the feelings you sense as you survey the body and the mind? And if work needs to be done to fix one of the three, well, do the work. Sometimes the focus is on the breath. Trying to figure out what kind of breathing would feel good right now. If there are pains in the body, which direction should the breath go through those pains? Should it go through the hip? Should the breath come down the spine and go through the hip? Or should it come up the leg? Or should it come in the side, straight into the pain from the outside? Or should it come in from the other side of the body? Sometimes you find that there’s a pain in one side of the body. It’s best to focus not there, but on the opposite side. So if it’s in your left shoulder, focus on your right shoulder. Or if it’s in front, focus behind. See how that affects things. And what kind of breathing would feel good right now? What kind of feeling would you like to have spread through the body? How would you create that feeling? By the way you breathe? Or simply by the way you relate to the breath? In the Canon they talk about feelings of ease that come from simply being alert to the breath. So what way of being alert to the breath would create a good feeling right now? And then there’s the mind. Is the mind ready to settle down? Is it feeling sluggish? What can you do to give it energy? One of the things you have to watch out for is that you focus on one spot in the body and the mind is already sluggish. And that just slugs it out. So in a case like that, you may want to move your energy around, move your focus around. In other words, stay with the head for a couple breaths, and then down to the neck for a couple breaths, and then to the chest, the solar plexus, the abdomen, down through the body, down the legs, down the arms. Keep moving around. Years back when I was looking after John Furrier when he was sick, there were some other monks at the monastery and we originally started out with fairly equal shifts to look after him. But then one monk had an excuse. There was construction work that needed to be done and another monk said, “Well, I’ve got to help the first monk.” And the third monk had to help the first two. And all of a sudden I found myself with a 2 a.m. to 8 p.m. shift. So you can imagine, 2 a.m. to 3 a.m., it was pretty hard staying awake. But I found that if I moved my focus around, three breaths in one spot, three breaths in another spot, three breaths in another spot, I was able to keep myself awake. So you can try that. Sometimes there are issues in the mind that you have to deal with. We like to say that it’s best to deal with your issues after the mind has been quiet, but if you can’t get the mind quiet to begin with, you’ve got to ask yourself, “Well, what’s standing in the way? What thoughts are standing in the way?” And ask yourself, “How are these thoughts opposed to the Dharma?” The Buddha we hear giving you a Dharma talk, what would he say? He’s one of the people you want to admit to your committee, because he’s got good advice, good advice on how to breathe, good advice on how to talk to yourself, good advice on the perceptions you want to hold in mind, the feelings you want to focus on, all the skills you’re going to need to create a sense of well-being in the present moment. So what do you know about him? Once you know about him, what would you have to say? You want to internalize him as much as you can. So you can think of some good reasons not to be upset about the things that have upset you during the day, or not to be attracted to sensual pleasures that you can think about. Whatever the issue may be, try to think of the antidote. So this way you’re working with body, feelings, mind, depending on which is the problem at any one time. The fourth frame of reference, or the fourth establishing of mindfulness, in the beginning, the Buddha says, that gets applied to things that would pull you away from developing equanimity with regard to the world. As you try to see how the issues that would pull you away, or hindrances, we can focus on the fact that whatever the issue is, it’s inconstant, and it’s going to be stressful if it’s inconstant, and if it’s stressful and inconstant, why hold on? Why lay claim to it? So you’re trying to develop some dispassion for it, and then you realize it was your passion for whatever the issue was that kept it going. We feel some dispassion, then it ceases. And then you can just drop the whole issue. So what you’re going to focus on as you sit here with the breath really depends on which aspect of those three main things, body, feelings, mind, is the problem. Focus there. But don’t forget the other two. Say if you focus just on feelings of pleasure, it’s easy to zone out, to blur out, to fall into what John Lee calls delusion concentration, where it’s very quiet, but you’re not really sure where you are or what you’re focused on. It’s all too blurry. So deal with the problem, and then make sure you can bring all those three aspects together. The body filled with good breath, a sense of ease filling the body, a sense of energy filling the body, and then the mind, your awareness filling the body. Once you’ve got all three of them together, then it’s just a matter of maintaining them together. That’s going to require talking to yourself in a different way. Because there will be part of the mind that says, “Okay, enough of that. What’s next?” You say, “No, it’s not enough.” If it really were enough, you’d be seeing into the nature of the mind, how it creates suffering, being able to let go of the cause, so you could realize cessation. If you haven’t gotten there yet, no, you haven’t gotten enough concentration yet. Because concentration is what enables your discernment to be more than just discernment that you’ve read in books and borrowed from the Buddha. You start manufacturing some of your own. So talk to yourself in a way that keeps up your interest, even in the stillness, even when things are not changing that much. Because what’s happening actually is there are things changing, even in a state of concentration, even in a state of stillness. It’s just that you’re not sensitive enough to them yet to see the subtle changes going on. Or the problem is that you’ve gone back to identify with the voices that get impatient and want to see some action. Tell them it’s good to watch some stillness for a while. And you will have to protect this. So the parts of the mind that want to be active, tell them, “Okay, your duty is to shoot down any thought that would get in the way.” And the first thought, of course, that gets in the way is the thought of boredom. So you shoot that down. And then you begin to be aware that thoughts go through many stages. In the beginning it’s just a stirring in some part of the body that you could either regard as a stirring in the breath or as a stirring in the mind. And the part that wants to have some entertainment says, “Okay, let’s make this a thought.” You watch out for that. Breathe right through it. The image I like to use is of a spider in a web. It’s in one spot on the web, but as, say, a fly hits the web or something else hits the web, it moves over, takes care of the insect, and then moves back. So try to do that inside your body. Then you start seeing interesting things going on. Now the mind will want to slip in an idea, slip in a thought, say, “No, we’re not going there.” This is a really useful skill so that you’re not overpowered by your thoughts. This is one of those skills that can be transferred to issues in the day. When you find that you have an addiction of some sort, there are certain thoughts that you really believe, that you really listen to, the ones that say that you’ve got to go back for that hit, more food, more whatever. But if you can learn to breathe through thoughts, ask yourself, “Well, can I breathe through this one?” And you find that you can. And you find that a lot of those thoughts that keep pulling you back to your old addictive behavior are not so authoritative anymore. You’re beginning to change the balance of power inside. Since we meditate, it’s not simply a matter of hiding out and being quiet for a while, and then going back out to the world just as we were before. We go into the world with new insights into how our minds work, and how we might be able to use our insights into the workings of the mind. To get past some unskillful behavior and unskillful thoughts that have ruled our lives for far too long. So there’s insight that comes with trying to maintain the concentration. Try to develop a taste for it.

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