What Do Your Bones Say?

August 9, 2024

When the Buddha told Rahula to make his mind like earth, it was after he told Rahula to contemplate his body in terms of the elements, the properties that you have and your experience of the body as you feel it from within. Water, liquid feelings, cool feelings, fire, warmth, breath or wind energy, and then earth, the salinity, the hardness, the heaviness. So as you contemplated these properties as you experience them, then he said make your mind like those elements. So where do you feel the earth in the body right now? Where does it feel solid? You can think about your bones. And the question of making your mind like earth would be asking yourself, when someone says something to you that’s unpleasant, what do your bones have to say? Nothing. When there’s a pain in the body, do the bones complain? You may say the pain is in the bones, but they wouldn’t agree with you. Your experience of them is very different from their experience of themselves. That’s a good thing to think about. When the mind is upset about something, when it’s worked up about things, ask yourself, what do the bones have to say? Nothing much. What does your blood have to say? The blood just gets pushed around, it doesn’t have any opinions. That means the trouble. The suffering you feel is all generated in the mind. And so you have your choice. Do you want to keep on generating it or not? Of course there’s the extent to which the mind doesn’t seem to be under your control. It’ll start thinking things that you don’t want it to think, which is why we have to meditate. One of the purposes of the meditation as the Buddha said is to learn how to think the thoughts you want to think, and not think the thoughts you don’t want to think. As you meditate, your sense of what’s worth thinking, what’s not worth thinking, gets more refined. In the meantime, you train yourself in endurance, because pleasant things will come up, both in terms of what other people say and pains in the body. And you want to learn how to depersonalize them. Venerable Sariputta gives some advice he says when someone says something unpleasant, remind yourself simply that an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear. That contact is based on things that are inconstant. It comes and it goes. So when someone has said something unpleasant, let it stop with that, just at the contact of the ear. Anything beyond that is your own contribution. And it’s your contribution that’s making you suffer. So look at that. This is your addition to things. It’s not built into the way things are. All too often we feel that if someone says something unpleasant and our reaction is part of what they said, or pain comes up in the body, our reaction to the pain is part of the pain. But it’s not. We’ve added something to it. And you want to dig down for a while and see what is it we’re adding. There’s the perception of the pain, where it is, what it is, whether it has an intention, whether it’s something there for your experience, or whether it’s just there, not for the sake of your experience. It’s not there to bother you. And in itself it doesn’t have any meaning. We give meaning to it. We ask ourselves, is this pain a signal of something that we’ve got to look into? Something we’ve got to change? But that’s our addition. We’re sitting here meditating, and you have a pain that’s based on the posture. Try to be with it as long as you can. If you find that it makes it impossible for you to focus on the breath, okay, then switch your positions. But otherwise, see if you can stay with the breath at the same time that the pain is there. Notice what happens when you’re not focusing on it. It goes into the background, it changes. Then when you focus on it, it changes into something worse. Why is that? What did you do? And focusing on another part of the body is not necessarily running away from it. Sometimes the pain in one part of the body is caused by blockage in the breath energy in another part of the body. So you can explore for a while. Find the areas of the body that you can make comfortable. Stay with them, and then see if you can think of that comfortable sensation spreading back through the pain. Not stopping at the pain, going through the pain. Do you want to avoid any perception that makes the pain into a worse sensation? So think of it as being porous. And it depends an awful lot on your perception of it. So when the time comes to focus directly on the pain itself, that’s going to be the first question. What kind of perception do you have of the pain? Is it coming at you? How about thinking of it going away from you? It arises only to disappear, running away from you. It’s not coming at you. And to what extent do you actually hold on to the pain? Part of us instinctively feels that if you can pinpoint where the pain is and put a little boundary around it, you’ve got it under control. But sometimes you just maintain the pain that doesn’t have to be maintained. So again, think of it disappearing, going away, going away. And if it comes again, it goes away again. And you begin to see that the less you pin it down, the more erratic it is. And then you may be afraid of the fact that it’s erratic and it can do things you think it wouldn’t have done otherwise. Look into that fear. There’s a lot to explore here. The Buddha had good reason to make pain the prime focus. Obvious teachings. Because when you get on not only to the physical pain, but also more importantly into the mental pain, a lot of the mind’s habits just gather around. It’s like that image of the animals in the savanna. If you want to make a wildlife documentary about the animals in the savanna, you don’t go wandering around the savanna. You stay at the waterhole. And usually in the course of 24 hours every animal nearby is going to come to the waterhole. You get to see them all. The same with the pain. Physical pain or mental pain. You see the mind’s conversations coming from all kinds of directions. And you begin to learn how to identify which voice is dominant at any one time. What happens if you decide you’re not going to listen to that voice? You’re going to change the narrative. As the Buddha said, feeling and perceptions are metal fabrications because they have an impact on shaping the mind. So there you are. You’ve got the feeling of pain and the perceptions around the pain. Those are the important fabrications that you want to understand. And when you understand them, there’s a long way to understanding all the other bad habits in the mind. But all this builds on that attitude of making the mind like earth. So think of the earth in your body. Make your mind like the earth in your body. Because so much of our suffering comes from the part of the mind that gets really upset about things. It goes on and on and on about how bad this is, how bad that is. This is where you want to side with your bones. They’re not getting upset. They’re doing just fine. See if you can do it just fine too. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/240809_What_Do_Your_Bones_SayQ.mp3>