Beyond Acceptance

October 12, 2024

You’re free to choose what you want to do with your mind during this hour. You have that power of choice. The question is how to make the best use of it. You can focus on the breath, and you can breathe in ways that feel good, or you can breathe in ways that don’t feel good. So you ask yourself, why breathe in ways that don’t feel good? You’ve got this opportunity right here. You read in John Lee how you can make the breath really comfortable throughout the body. And given that there is that possibility, why not make use of it? Explore that. What in your breath right now is a potential for a sense of fullness, a sense of well-being, a sense of ease? He recommends that you start with some long, deep in-and-out breaths, and then adjust the breath so it feels just right for right now. When it feels good, start to give it spreading through the body. So you’re bathed with breathing, bathed with a good in-breath, bathed with a good out-breath. That’s something you can do. That passage in the Sutta we chatted just now, when the Buddha talks about how form, feeling, perception, fabrications, consciousness, are hard to say be like this, be like that, don’t be like this, don’t be like that. And for that reason they’re not self. It’s possible to take that as meaning that you can’t do anything with these five aggregates. But then the Buddha himself doesn’t say that. After all, concentration is made out of the five aggregates. You’ve got the form of the body right now, which includes your sensation of breathing. You can make that pleasant. Then there’s the feeling, a pleasure that you get. There are the perceptions that you use to think of the breath flowing through the body. And if your perception of the breath doesn’t allow it to flow, you can change it. We’re not talking about the air coming in and out of the lungs when we say breath, by the way. We’re talking about the energy flow. So what would feel good? What perception would help it feel good? And then you talk to yourself as you stay with the breath. One, you have the intention to stay, and then two, you have the intention to want to adjust it so it feels good. Try to maintain it. And when you can maintain it, try to let it spread throughout the body. All of those count as fabrication. And then there’s the consciousness that’s aware of these things. So the Buddha says, “Develop this.” Which means, take these aggregates you’ve got and make them into something useful. Like that image of the raft going across the sea. Across the river. You don’t just dump twigs and branches and leaves and vines into the river. You tie them into a raft. You’ve got to take advantage of what you’ve got on this side of the river so you get over to the other side. So there is something you can do with these things. And John Lee makes a similar point. He says you’re taking what’s inconstant and trying to see how constant you can make it. What’s stressful, trying to see how comfortable and easeful you can make it. What is ultimately not totally under your control. See where you can exert some control. So you push against the three characteristics. Eventually you find places where they push back. But you’re not going to know where the boundary is until you push. This fits in with the Buddha’s teachings on calmness. And causality in general. Some of the things we experience right now are the result of past actions. In fact, he says all six senses are the result of past actions. But what you choose to do doesn’t have to be determined by your past actions. There is some freedom of choice in the present moment. It’s not total freedom. You can’t wish away a lot of things that are here. They’re just the given. Everything comes from the past. But given what you have coming from the past, you find that there is some wiggle room, some area where you can make a difference. And so you want to make a good difference. As the Buddha said, if everything were determined by the past, then the idea of something that should be done or shouldn’t be done would have no meaning. It all would have been determined a long time ago. Then there would be no path to the end of suffering. But we do have this freedom of choice. He doesn’t explain where the freedom comes from or how it happens, but it’s there. So you might as well take advantage of it. This is a principle we apply to the entire path. We hear so much about acceptance, acceptance, acceptance. Well, yes, there are some things the Buddha has you accept, but there are a lot of things he says you don’t just sit there. You’ve got good potentials inside. Make the most of them. Try to find where those potentials are. Now there are people who would prefer to not think that they have those potentials. There’s kind of a defeatist attitude that everything has already been determined by past. Causes and conditions. You just learn how to accept it. It’s like watching a TV show. The TV show was probably recorded a long time ago. There’s nothing much you can do about it. You can’t change it. You just learn to accept the show. But life is not a TV show. It’s more like an interactive game where you make choices that will determine where the game goes. So explore that. There is an allure to not being responsible for anything. And some people fall for that. Other people try pushing in the wrong direction. They’re pushing the wrong things and they can’t get what they want. They give up. But the Buddha is basically saying there, don’t give up. And when you do find something that you can change, make sure you change the right things. We see so much of this in the world where people are trying to change the wrong things. And they can change them. They can make a difference. But certainly not for the good. You look around. You see war. You see genocide. You see all kinds of horrible things. People found that they can do it. They can get away with it, they think. But they can do it sometimes. It’s all very misguided. To some extent you can help other people see the error of their ways and to some extent they’re going to be resistant. But again, you’re not going to know until you push a little bit. But the important thing is you learn how to take advantage of this freedom you have inside to create a good place in the mind, a good place in the body where you can settle down. This is a skill you want to take with you when you leave the monastery. You can’t take the monastery with you, but you can take the skills that you’ve learned here. And one of them is the skill of knowing how to make a good difference. The skill of having the right attitude that you’re not going to know where you can make a difference or you can’t make a difference until you try. So you keep trying. I saw a discussion recently where people were saying that Westerners find it hard to get the mind into good, solid concentration. So maybe, could there be a path that doesn’t involve concentration? And the ajahn they were talking to said, “It may be difficult, but it’s not impossible.” And the effort that’s put into adjusting your form and feelings and perceptions and fabrications and consciousness, so they all come together in a good state of concentration, it’s effort well spent. And the Buddha himself points out there are some things you accept. You accept the fact that there is pain in life, you accept the fact that there will be people who will say nasty things to you. When somebody dies, you have to accept that fact. But as for the unskillful qualities in your mind, the Buddha said, “Don’t accept those. Accept the fact that they’re there, but you’ve got to do something about it, and you can do something about it.” In some cases, doing something means simply watching them. And when you give them your steady gaze, they get embarrassed. It becomes obvious that these are stupid things. It’s simply that you haven’t been paying careful attention. That’s why that part of the mind gets away with doing what it wants. But there are other things in the mind where you give them your steady gaze and they stare right back. They’re not going to be embarrassed. That’s where you have to do what the Buddha calls “exerting a fabrication.” Look at the way you’re breathing, look at the way you’re talking to yourself, look at the perceptions and feelings that you’re applying, and see where you can change them. Try to figure out where’s the allure of that particular cause of suffering. And sometimes you’ll say, “I don’t like it at all.” But it’s there. And the mind is going for it. There’s something there that pulls the mind to it. But try to figure out what that is. Here again, there are some people who tell us, “Just don’t let things be. Don’t try to figure them out. Just accept them.” But again, that’s defeatism. You can figure things out inside. Then look at the perceptions and feelings that you have around that particular mind state. And how do you change those perceptions? So you can see that it’s not all that attractive. Last night we were talking about sensual fantasies. You have to see what’s the allure of these things. And can you poison the fantasy? Change the perception? Put something in the fantasy that makes it unattractive? So the next time it comes up, you go straight to the poison. And you find that the whole process begins to lose a lot of its appeal. That’s the important thing. We go for these things because we’ve learned how to associate an allure with them. And the allure, or the association, is pretty arbitrary. And as long as it’s arbitrary, you can change it. And you find that it is for your long-term welfare and happiness to do that. Because that’s the good thing about knowing that there is a path. Buddha did teach four noble truths. He didn’t teach just one, that there is suffering, so you have to accept it. He taught there are four, and there are different duties you can perform. Try to comprehend the suffering to see exactly what in there is the clinging. What’s the desire? What’s the passion? Then you try to look for the cause. And then you put together a path that will deliver you to the end of suffering. So there are four noble truths. There’s that Buddha misquote. I said the Buddha teaches that says, “I teach one thing and one thing only, suffering and the end of suffering.” And people say, “Well, if it’s one thing, then what that means is that if you accept the suffering, then it’s not suffering anymore.” But the Buddha never said one thing. He just said, “I teach suffering and the end of suffering.” There are two things. The suffering is to be comprehended. The path to the end of suffering is to be developed. And even though the aggregate benefits don’t lie totally under your control, they do have enough leeway. So you can use them to make that path. That’s the good news in the four noble truths.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/241012_Beyond_Acceptance.mp3>