Right Heedfulness

January 26, 2018

Spend the rest of the hour talking to ourselves about the breath. The mind’s talking to itself all day long. We talk about the breath as a way of getting to finally go at least a little bit still. Because when you talk about the breath, you’re talking about whether it’s comfortable, whether it’s not comfortable, and what you can do to make it more comfortable. Where you feel it, where it’s flowing smoothly, where it’s not flowing smoothly, what you can do to make it flow more smoothly in those areas. The purpose of this is to put aside a lot of the other issues that we’re talking to ourselves about. Give yourself one big thing to think about. The house of one of his supporters, instead of having chanting at the meal, he said, “Let’s have a Dhamma discussion.” The supporter’s sister had been practicing meditation with somebody else. She said, “Meditation is all about making your mind empty, right?” He said, “No. If you make your mind empty, it’s like leaving the door open to your house. Anybody can walk in. Any thought, any idea, just walk right in. You’ve got to give the mind some work to do. Keep the door closed.” Focus on cleaning up your house before you let people in. So talk to yourself about the breath for a while. Learn how to trust the voices that are wise and to look a little scant at the ones that are not so wise. Realize that there are dangers in the mind. In fact, that’s the beginning of not only heedfulness, but what you might call right heedfulness. Heedfulness is the recognition that there are dangers, but there are things that you can do to protect yourself from those dangers. What makes heedfulness right is when you notice what are the real dangers in the mind, and also what are the real ways that you can protect yourself. Being heedful of the qualities of the mind is a highest blessing. All too often we’re heedful of the wrong things or afraid of the wrong dangers—dangers coming from other people, the dangers of having an unpleasant situation. There are dangers there, but they’re not the real ones, not the ones that can really devastate the mind. The ones that devastate the mind are the ones that come from within. These voices in the mind, you can’t trust them all, because they can get you to do all kinds of things. Many times we see people building up something good in their lives, and then some little voice gets in the mind and they turn around and destroy it. This is where the dangers are. As the Buddha said, we go through life with cravings as our companions. We learn to trust them, we treat them as friends. But as Ajahn Swat commented one time, we’ve got everything backwards. We have to see suffering as our friend and craving as our enemy. There are things we can learn from suffering. You only get to know it well because it can teach you all kinds of good lessons. Whereas with a craving, you’ve got to watch out. You have to be all around in your heedfulness. What this means is that there are some voices that we tend to identify with really strongly, and yet they can be the ones that will destroy us. When you find yourself resistant to a particular teaching, instead of looking at the problem of the teaching, you ask yourself, “What’s this resistance coming from?” Or if there’s an attitude that you hold on to, you say, “This is right. It’s got to be this way.” Well, maybe it’s not. Because it’s these voices in the mind that you trust. They’re the ones that can eventually lead you astray if you’re not careful. This is why we have people practicing for a while and then giving up in the practice. It’s a voice in the mind that they’re not willing to look into, one that they trust implicitly. Because it sounds like their voice. Their real voice, the real them inside. And that’s something you’ve got to watch out for. If the real them is getting you to do something that’s going to pull you away from the path, you can’t really trust it. This is why John Lee has that image of all the little voices in the mind, all the beings that are traveling around in your body. They leave ideas in your head. It’s his image for getting you to look askance at the voices you tend to identify with. They’re thoughts that come into the mind. This is one of the reasons we work with the breath, to give yourself a place to stay in the present moment that’s not in the mental conversation. It’s the physical sensation, the breathing. Bathe the mind in that. If you’re thinking about that, talking about that to yourself, get so that you can get it all around the body. Think of the body being bathed in the breath. Think of your inner sense of the body being properly in the body. We have this sense of ourselves. It’s almost like an ectoplasm. It can change form. Sometimes it’s in line with the body, sometimes it’s not. But think about your head being in your head, your torso being in your torso, your arms in your arms, your hands in your hands. Get this inner sense fully in the body, filling the whole body. That can help get you out of the conversations. There’ll be a little bit of commentary in the background, but it’s just basically breath, breath, breath at that point. So when the time comes to get back with your old conversations, you can come at them from a new perspective and be willing to do this. The concentration on its own is not going to do it. This is why Right View has to come along with it. Right View, these voices in the mind, these cravings and clingings, they’re the trouble. Even the ones that you’ve identified with very, very strongly. Sometimes they can be especially troublesome. But to learn to look at them, step back from them, you need another place to stay. This is why we work with the breath. So you’ve got this physical sensation that you know feels good. That helps to quiet a lot of the really impatient voices in the mind that want quick happiness, quick pleasure, a quick fix. Here it is, your quick fix. You’ve got it right here, the breath. You can work with the breath energy in the body. It helps to allay some of the problems. But it doesn’t work with all of them. You’ve got to learn to look at every voice in the mind and say, “Where is this leading me? What does it want? What are its basic assumptions?” It’s like learning how to read an ancient text. You’ve got to figure out what are the basic assumptions of the author. Sometimes they surface in the imagery that’s used. Sometimes they surface in the tone of voice, the statements that are made without. Any felt need to explain them or to justify them? Okay, there you are. Look for those. Ask yourself, “Why would that be self-evident? Why would that have to be true and not open to discussion?” So try to develop a sense of well-being in the body, well-being in the breath, so you can do this kind of analysis and not feel threatened. Some of the voices will feel threatened, but if you can find a place to stand inside where you can look all around at all the voices in the mind from a new perspective, from the Buddhist perspective, we try to adopt that as the right view. Remember, where does suffering come from? It comes from craving and clinging. In fact, the clinging itself is the suffering. What does clinging mean? It means holding on to a particular view, holding on to a particular idea, and not being willing to question it. There’s so much emphasis nowadays on trying to adjust Buddhism so it fits into our culture. Well, the whole point of Buddhism is that it should ask us to pull out of our culture, our sense of having to belong to this crazy, insane culture we’ve got here. It should give us a new perspective. Because a lot of the voices that are most insistent and seem most firmly implanted in the mind are things that are implanted there by our culture, whether it’s mass media culture or the culture of our families, or wherever we picked it up. If we don’t look at those voices, they can lead us astray. Again, this is where a lot of people who practice for a while and then they stop practicing. It’s because they’ve got voices in the mind that they’re not willing to look at and not willing to disidentify with. Despite the concentration, despite what they’ve heard about the Dhamma, there’s part of them that resists. So you’ve got to learn how to turn around and look at that. That’s what it means to be heedful of the qualities of the mind. And when you can do that in an all-around way, it really is a blessing. It really is a protection. That word mangala in the suttas just now has both those meanings. It’s a protection. It’s something we use as our tool in developing heedfulness. But it’s also a blessing. It leads to happiness. If this didn’t lead to happiness, it would just be a very tense and fearful teaching. But it’s not. It’s confident. There is a way out. But it requires examining everything and putting the mind in a position where it can examine everything from a sense of well-being, a sense of stability, so it doesn’t feel knocked over when it recognizes that some of the voices that it’s been listening to all along are really not worthy of any trust. So get some trust in the breath, get some trust in the process of concentration, get some trust in the process of getting the mind to step out of its conversations. That’s when all the tools in the mind, all your thoughts and everything, can actually be a blessing instead of a danger.

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