Unburden the Mind

January 2, 2019

We’ve come here to get some physical seclusion, to find some peace of mind, to get away from all the messages of the media, all the messages of the people around us, and give the mind a chance to be on its own. Of course, one of the first things you find when you get off by yourself is that there’s still not a lot of peace. In this case, you can’t blame anything around you, unless you want to blame the wind or the insects going through the leaves. One time we had someone come here whose experience with meditation had only been inside meditation halls. And after his first day out in the orchard, he came back and complained about the sound of the insects and the leaves. Of course, the sound of the insects was not much of a disturbance to the mind. It was his conversation about the insects and the leaves. This is an important principle. In addition to finding physical seclusion, we have to find mental seclusion. And that means getting away from a lot of the burdens we carry around all the time, the constant commentary we have on things, the little messages we make for ourselves. To say, “Remember this wrong that somebody else had done, or this problem that had happened.” We keep burdening ourselves with these things. This is one of the basic principles of the Four Noble Truths, is that the burdens that weigh the mind down don’t come from outside. They come from ourselves. So we have to look and see what ways we’re weighing ourselves down. We focus on the breath to get away from our normal conversations. Then set up a few new rules. Anything that’s not related to the breath is a distraction. Anything that’s not related to the breath is something that’s causing suffering, something you have to abandon. We try to live by those rules as we sit here and meditate. The thoughts that we used to like to entertain, we have to say, “Nope, not right now.” The thoughts that seem perfectly innocent, “No, not right now.” The thoughts that seem interesting, important, “No.” Just be with the breath. It helps if you can find a way to breathe that feels really good. Ask yourself what are the most sensitive parts of your body right now. They’re usually down around the area of the heart. Sometimes they’re around the face. But wherever they are, what kind of breathing would feel good there? Watch those areas for a while. Experiment a bit until you find something that feels gratifying, feels nourishing, refreshing. Then think of that comfortable feeling spreading through the body as your conscious awareness goes through the body as well. There’s already some awareness in the different parts of the body. But in most cases it’s not very conscious. Spread your awareness around so you’re fully inhabiting the body. You don’t give much room for the mind to think about anything else. At the same time, when thoughts do come up, you begin to notice that there’ll be a little pattern of tension here, pattern of tension there. Something you couldn’t notice when the mind was only in one spot. This is one of the reasons why we work on a whole body awareness. So we can sense the little stirrings in this area where the mind and the body meet at the breath that can turn into patterns of tension, that can turn into thoughts. We can breathe right through them. And keep at it, keep at it. And there will be a part of the mind that objects and says, “I want to think of that thought. I want to explore this thought.” And you have to ask, “Why?” This is where you begin to see. This is where the mind comes from when it’s disturbing itself. It’s got a curiosity. It finds its thoughts really fascinating. And, of course, once they’re fascinating, then you take them on and they turn on you. Nine times out of ten. So you want to have the breath as a place where you can retreat to. Nine times out of ten. But for the time being, during the meditation, as you’re working on concentration, it’s ten times out of ten. You don’t want to go to those thoughts. Entertain only the thoughts that have to do with the breath, getting it more comfortable, learning how to judge how well things are going on. This is what the discernment is. It’s your powers of judgment. This point gets missed a lot with a lot of techniques that claim to teach insight. They just put the mind through a meat grinder and say, “Just note things in this way, or do this, or do that,” and insight will automatically come. In fact, they discourage you from judging things. Whereas for the Buddha, insight is a value judgment. It’s about what you’re doing. Is it worth it? What are you holding onto? Is it worth it? If it’s not worth it, why hold on? You’ve got other alternatives. And having the breath here as a place you can rest in and settle in on, that’s an important alternative. So find your thoughts less interesting and make the breath more interesting. Sometimes there’s a lot that’s going on with the breath energy. You read Ajahn Lee and his different descriptions of breath energy, and it seems like with every Dhamma talk it’s a different description. Sometimes he talks about the breath energy going down the spine, out the legs, out the tips of the toes. Ajahn Fu used to talk about it going down the spine and then out of the spine, base of the spine, down into the ground. Other times Ajahn Lee talks about the breath energy coming up from the soles of the feet, up through the legs, up through the spine. The breath energy is in the head, the breath energy is in the chest, in the intestines, all around the arms. The breath energy is outside of the body. It’s a kind of cocoon of energy that surrounds you. There are lots of different energies here that you can play with. When you think about how much the health of the body depends on the smooth flow of energy, it gives you a good reason to want to get to know these energies. The more sensitive you are to them, the more you’ll be able to sense little tiny thoughts, little bits of greed, aversion, and delusion, as they just begin to arise. And you can begin to notice the steps by which the mind gets involved. So you’re trying to increase your all-around sensitivity here. Moving into the present moment and fully inhabiting the present moment, and then becoming sensitive to all the various aspects of the present moment right here. And if you’re in the present moment a little bit, then you pull out and go to the future, and then pull out and go to the past. There’s a lot you’re going to miss. And you’re still stuck in that habit of the mind that wants to go someplace else, that’s fascinated with its thoughts. And yet, when you learn how to inhabit this sense of the body right here, you’re still fully inhabiting the sense of the body. You begin to see that the Buddha was right. When you go with your thoughts that are based on all the wrong forms of craving, you weigh yourself down. Your mindfulness becomes wrong mindfulness. You remind yourself of all the slights and harm and hurtful words that other people have imposed on you. John Lee has a nice image for that. He says, “It’s like food that they’ve spit out and then you pick it up and you eat it. And you don’t eat on it just once. You carry it around so you can chew on it some more.” Who are you going to blame? If they spit the words out, you just leave them right there. If you’re going to carry something around, carry around the lessons of right mindfulness—how to be aware of the breath in and of itself. How to be ardent. How to be alert. How to put aside all the different disturbing thoughts about the world—your personal world, the world at large. These are things that are worth remembering. These are things that are worth carrying around. And you find that they don’t weigh the mind down nearly as much as your normal luggage. There’s a story that Ajaan Fuang told about one time with Ajaan Lee. A group of his students were going to get on the train in Ullambong, which is the main station in Bangkok, and take a train up to Lopburi, and then go into the forest. A lot of people who had never been with Ajaan Lee before went on the trip. They showed up at the train station. Some people had two pieces of luggage, some people had three. They figured they could get a porter. Ajaan Lee took one look at the luggage that everybody had, and he just started walking down the railroad track. Ajaan walks down the railroad track. Everybody has to walk down the railroad track. Some people were struggling with all their luggage, and they complained. “Tampao, Tampao,” they said, “how can you expect us to carry all this luggage while we’re walking?” He didn’t say anything for a while, but finally said, “Well, if it’s heavy, throw it away.” So one by one, the different people stopped and sorted through their luggage. That was back in the days when, on the side of the railroad tracks in Bangkok, they had lotus ponds. Most of the luggage got thrown into the lotus ponds. By the time they got to the next station, everybody had just one bag. That’s when Ajaan Lee allowed everybody to get on the next train. So as you’re meditating, you’re learning how to sort through your luggage, and you’re realizing that most of the stuff you carry around is just not worth it. And no one’s forcing you to carry it around. You’re the one who’s doing it yourself. So use the breath as a place where you can stand and sort through things. Take an interest in the breath so you can become a better judge of what’s worth thinking about and what’s not, what’s worth carrying around and what’s worth throwing into the lotus ponds. And it’s in that way that we find the peace that we’re looking for.

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