The World Is a Slave to Craving

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Try to be mindful to stay with your breath. The word “mindfulness” means keeping something in mind. You’re going to remember to stay with the breath each time it comes in, each time it goes out, and not listen to the other voices in the mind that say, “Go someplace else.” Of course, it is your choice. No one’s forcing you to stay with the breath. You can spend the hour thinking about all kinds of things if you wanted to. But you can give it a try, staying with one thing for a whole hour, and see what you learn about the mind. We stay with the breath, one, because it’s close to the mind, and two, because of the different properties of the body. It’s someone you can adjust to the most. You can make it long, short, heavy, light, fast, slow. Deep, shallow. Try to see what kind of breathing feels really good right now. I guess if you’re going to stay here, you want to stay in a place that’s comfortable, a place where you feel at your ease, where things feel spacious. Think of the breath being spacious throughout the body. There are no walls in the body. If there are any patterns of tension anywhere in the body, think of the breath going right through. Are there any pains? Think of the breath going right through so that the field of your awareness, the field of the breath, fills the whole body. You may notice that there’s tension around the pain. That’s usually because as the breath flows through the body, the mind is subconsciously afraid that the pain will start flowing along with it. So hold in mind the perception that the breath can flow through the body, permeate everything, but it doesn’t have to carry the pain. In fact, you want it to carry a sense of ease as it goes through the body, dissolving away those patterns of tension. The pain may not go, but you can breathe through it. This way you’ve got the breath on your side. All too often, the other voices in the mind have the breath on their side. In other words, greed comes, lust comes, anger comes, fear comes. They hijack your breath. They become stronger because the body feels uncomfortable. And you have the feeling that you’ve got to do something to get that uncomfortable feeling out of the body. In other words, you tend to give in to the greed, aversion, delusion, fear, whatever. So now you take the breath back. You’re a little bit wary of the different voices in the mind. And that chant just now says, “The world is a slave to craving.” Well, it’s the world of your mind that tends to be a slave to craving. Desires come up and they pull you with them. They’re like rivers that flow. And if you’re not careful, you can get swept along and end up someplace you don’t want to be. There are four reflections, actually from a conversation, where a young man who came from a wealthy family decided he wanted to ordain. And after a couple of years, he came back home and he happened to meet the local king. And the local king asked him, “Why did you ordain? You came from a wealthy family. You didn’t lose your relatives. You didn’t have problems with your health.” That, as far as the king was concerned, was why anybody would ordain. And the young monk said, “Well, no.” These four reflections, these teachings I got from the Buddha, convinced me that this was the life I wanted. The world is swept away. It’s basically a teaching on the fact that everything changes. Wherever you can look in the world for your happiness, it’s going to get swept away. The king says, “What do you mean? I’ve got all kinds of happiness as a king.” The monk asks him, “How old are you now?” The king says, “He’s 80 years old.” “When you were young, were you strong?” He said, “Yes. Sometimes I thought I had the strength of two people.” “How about now?” “Oh no, it’s very different. I sometimes mean to put my foot in one place and it goes someplace else.” Here it is, your own body. And it seems to obey you, seems to cooperate with you for a while. And then it starts not cooperating, and it doesn’t give any reasons. It doesn’t ask permission, it doesn’t give any warning. It just stops cooperating. You can’t look for happiness there. At least not a happiness that’s going to last. The world offers no shelter. That was the second reflection. This, as the monk explained it, has to do with the fact that there’s nothing to protect from pain. The king says, “Well, I’ve got all kinds of protection here.” The monk asks him, “Do you have a recurring illness?” The king said, “Yes. Sometimes the pains are so sharp, people think I’m going to die.” He says, “Here you are, king. Can you ask the different members of your court and your relatives to share out the pain, little pieces of pain, so you don’t have to feel so much?” “Well, no.” The king asks to feel his pain all on his own. So it is. There’s no shelter. The world has nothing of its own. Here again, the king objects. He says, “I’ve got all kinds of treasures.” And the monk asks him, “Can you take those with you when you die?” “No. I have to leave them behind.” That’s the teaching on not-self. In other words, the things that we lay claim to, the claim is all on our side. After a while, we have no rights over those things. So where does that leave? The problem is that we’re still a slave to craving. We keep coming back to these things. The monk asks the king, “If someone were to come to an East and say, ‘There’s a kingdom off to the East. The army is weak, but it’s a wealthy kingdom,’ you could seize that kingdom and rule it as your own. Would you do that?” And the king says, “Yes, of course.” Here he’s eighty years old and he’s ready to go out and go into battle again to get even more. “How about if another man came from the South or the West or the North and said, ‘There are kingdoms for the South, the West, and North that you could conquer.’ Would you go for them?” “Sure,” the king says. “How about if someone were to come from the other side of the ocean and say, ‘There’s a kingdom on the other side of the ocean that you could conquer.’ Would you go there?” “Sure.” Here he is eighty years old, no sense of enough. This is the nature of the mind. As the Buddha said at another point, “Even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn’t have our fill of sensual pleasures. It wouldn’t be enough. We’d always want more.” So basically, the young monk had decided that looking for pleasures, or looking for true happiness in the world, or ordinary world, is not going to lead to satisfaction. He wanted something better. We keep coming back again and again and again to these things that disappoint us again and again because of our craving. We think craving is our friend. Or in the Buddhist terms, craving is our companion everywhere. Everywhere we go, our cravings are with us. But it’s not a friendship. It’s a relationship of slavery. Because not only does it keep us coming back to disappointment, when you think about that king willing to kill to get more, we end up doing a lot of harm to ourselves and harm to other people as we follow our cravings. That’s why the monk wanted something more, something better. Something that didn’t age, grow ill, and die. Something that was not subject craving. That’s what the Buddha called the object of the noble search. Our lives are searches. We’re looking for happiness. We’re looking for well-being. But if we look for well-being in things that age, grow ill, and die, we’re not going to find it. The message of the Buddha’s awakening is that it is possible. Human beings can find happiness that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die, and causes no harm to anyone at all. I’ve talked to some Buddhist scholars who say they don’t understand this aspect of the teaching. After all, they say we’re just biological beings, conditioned beings. How can we find anything unconditioned like that? But that’s getting things backwards. It’s defining who you are and then deciding, based on the definition, what you can do. The Buddha never defined what we are. In fact, he himself didn’t start out with a definition. His question was, What can people do? What can a human mind do? What can a human person do? He found that by training the mind he could find this ultimate happiness that was not subject to conditions. He also realized that it was based on qualities of the mind that were not his exclusive possession. Everybody has these qualities in a potential form—hatefulness, ardency, resolution. These are things we can all develop. That’s what we’re working on here, even though we say the body ultimately lies behind your control. There’s something in the body, for a while at least, that you can control. Just as there are things in the mind you can control, you can direct the mind where you want it to go, while you’re healthy, while you’re strong. So while you’re healthy and while you’re strong, make use of that health and strength. So when the health and the strength goes, you’ll have something to depend on. And it’s not something you wait for after death. It’s something that can be found in this life. So this training of the mind, learning to keep it under control, is not a small thing. You may wonder, Why do we stay with the breath? Well, as I said, it is close to the mind. And because it’s close to the mind, as you stay with the breath, you learn a lot about the mind. The breath is like a mirror. You learn to understand your own mind, where the craving has come in and where it’s insinuated itself into your confidence, where you can step back from it, where you don’t have to be a slave, where you don’t have to, as I said in the old commercial, obey your thirst. You can find freedom here in the mind. And it begins by learning how to resist all the different voices that would pull you away from an intention you’ve established. So learn how to maintain this intention. If you’re going to stay with the breath, stay with the breath. If you’re going to stay with thoughts of goodwill, stay with thoughts of goodwill. If you make up your mind you’re going to do something good, do it. Stick with it. Because that sets you in the direction where freedom is found.

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