Not Knowing What You’re Carrying Around

January 28, 2020

We carry a lot of burdens around with us. We’ve done it so long and so consistently that we often don’t even realize that they’re there. We just take them for granted. We see this both in the body and the mind. And we have patterns of tension, ways of holding the body, ways of breathing, that really are bad for us. So much body work is designed to realign the body. Because we’ve got it all out of alignment. Sometimes it’s because of old injuries. Sometimes it’s because of perceptions we have in the mind that the body has to be held in a certain way. The same principle applies in the mind. There are a lot of perceptions we hold on to. They govern things in the mind. And they’ve been there so long that you don’t even notice them. So when you meditate, it’s a matter of learning how to recognize these things, realize that they’re there, and then we can put them down. This is why it’s good to question your assumptions. This is when you breathe in. Is the energy coming in from the outside? Or is it starting from the inside? If you’ve been assuming that it comes from the outside, try to change that perception around and see what happens. Or when you breathe in, do you feel you have to pull the air up into your nose before it goes down into the lungs? Why do you have to pull it up? Ask yourself some questions. Turn things around. It’s only then that you can see that you’ve been holding on to something that opens the possibility that you could let it go. It’s the same in the mind. What kind of perceptions do you have about the body? What kind of perceptions do you have about where you are in the body? What perceptions do you have about who you are? The Buddha says that your ideas about who you are come down to five things. Either you identify with the body, or with feelings, or with your perceptions. You’re the one who labels things, or you’re the one who fabricates thoughts, or you’re just the one who’s aware. And then around those five things, the Buddha said, there are four different ways that you can create a sense of self. Either you are that particular activity. Or you’re somebody who has that particular thing. Or you’re in that thing. Or that thing is in you. That gives you twenty alternatives right there. It sounds pretty abstract, but just ask yourself, do you identify with your body? If the body were to go, how would you feel? How about you? Your feelings? Your pleasures. Do you hold on to your pleasures? Do you take them as a goal? When pain has invaded the body, do you feel like you’ve been invaded as well? And so on down through the different aggregates. One of the good ways of questioning them is to fabricate your experience in a different way and see where it resists, see what gets in the way. As the Buddha said, you try to breathe in and out aware of the whole body. Well, what gets in the way of that? It’s interesting that so many meditation instructions start out by saying, “Focus on the breath.” But the Buddha never says that. It’s an optional point. It’s often very useful for getting a grounding. But it’s not entirely necessary. You can be aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Sometimes you can develop a whole body awareness before you think of spreading the breath. Just try to keep the whole body in mind, but see what shrinks it down. Or if you go through the different spots in the body, you’ll find that as you focus on some spots it’s easier to maintain focus, and in other spots you blur out or other thoughts come up. That particular part of the body may be associated with some old memory. If you see any tension there, try your best to maintain your focus and see if you can release the tension that’s there. See what comes up. Sometimes you see that you’ve been holding on to something for a long, long time. Do you make a survey of the torso? When you breathe in, does the neck tighten up? When you breathe in, does the stomach get to relax? Or does it stay tense? Learn to ask yourself these questions, because if these assumptions aren’t questioned, they just stay there. I’ve been reading a book on the history of different aspects of math, and all the great steps forward in math came from questioning basic assumptions, everything that people took for granted for a long, long time. Someone comes along and says, “Well, what about this? What about this? What about this?” And the assumptions were so invisible to everybody that nobody even thought of questioning them. Nobody even realized they were there. They just seemed part of reality. But when you learn how to question them, things open up. New possibilities for math. And the same thing goes with your mind. You’re holding on to things. You don’t even realize you’re holding on. And it’s the Buddha’s definition of suffering. It’s no wonder he says suffering is caused by ignorance. You’re holding on in areas that you don’t even realize. So learn to question things. This is why Ajaan Mahamud, when he talks about dealing with pain, focuses on asking strange questions about the pain. Do you think the pain is the same thing as your body? And on one level, you say, “Of course not.” But if you dig down a little bit, you’ll notice that there is a part of the mind that thinks that’s exactly the way it is. When the knee is pained, your sensation of the knee and the sensation of the pain seem to be the same thing. So learn to question that. What if they’re two separate things in the same place? After all, think of the radio waves going through the air right now. You can put a radio in one place and you can pick up lots of different waves, lots of different signals from different stations. And you don’t have to move the radio around to get the different signals. They’re all there in the same place. It’s just a matter of what you’re sensitive to. The same way with the pain in the body. They’re in the same place, but it’s as if there were different frequencies. Your awareness is there, the sensation of the body is there, the sensation of the pain is there. But they’re different things. Can you see the difference? When you can separate these things out, pain becomes a lot less threatening. So ask questions. Get the mind to settle down. And then ask questions about it. Questions about the body, questions about the mind, questions about pain. These are the big three things. See if you can find where you’ve been holding onto things, carrying things around. Picking up something and then just stashing it away, having this big, big sack that you drag around behind you. And if you never empty out the sack, it just gets unbearable. Take a chance to empty it out and see what you’ve got. For the most part, you’ll find that a lot of things you’ve been carrying around are not worth it at all. Like going into the nest of a pack rat. It’s picked up things from around the house, totally random. Whatever it catches is fancy. It takes them back and stores them in the nest. If you’re going to hold on to something, hold on to something good. Hold on to virtue, concentration, discernment. Hold on to your desire to understand your mind and the way it creates suffering. You can put an end to it. Those are things you hold on to. As for everything else, learn to question it. And that’s how you can begin to put down some of your burdens. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2020/200128_Not_Knowing_What_You're_Carrying_Around.mp3>