Put Down Your Burdens

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There’s a story in the canon of a monk who lived alone. He went for his alms alone, ate alone. Word of this monk came to the Buddha. And the Buddha called him to talk to him. He said, there is that kind of seclusion, there is that kind of solitude. And he praised it. But it was important for the monk to know there were other kinds of solitude that were more important. In that case he talked about being secluded from your constant companion, which is your craving. Because it’s possible to live alone and be obsessed and absorbed with cravings. So living alone is for the purpose of getting to see the mind and to see to what extent it’s palling around with its cravings. But before you get rid of all your cravings, there’s another level of seclusion that’s called mental qualities. And that’s something you can do right here, right now. Bring your mind to the breath. And as long as you’re not thinking about sensual thoughts, your mind isn’t taken up with wrong views or wrong resolve or any of the other wrong factors of the path, that counts as secluded. And there’s a sense of ease that can come from that. Because unskillful thoughts often provoke the mind. The Buddha talks about the property of sensuality, which is there in the mind. It’s our fascination with thinking thoughts about sensual pleasures. And it gets provoked. Either provoked by things we see or hear or smell or taste or touch outside or from within the mind itself. The mind gets bored. It’s been working hard. It wants some pleasure. And that’s where it usually will go. And when that property gets provoked, it’s not a comfortable state. There’s a sense of lack. And if that felt needed, you have to do something to fill up the lack. So I try to put thoughts of that sort aside. What kind of body is sitting here? And it’s sensitive to the breath. What kind of breathing would feel good right now? Try to satisfy that hunger. That’s a different kind of pleasure. It’s the pleasure of form. And it doesn’t have all the drawbacks that sensuality has. So when the Buddha talks about renunciation or seclusion, he’s not saying, well, just do without. He’s saying, put aside your normal concerns. The concerns of the day. And allow the mind to be right here with just the feeling of how the breath feels as it comes in, feels as it goes out. And allow the breath to sweep through the body. Think of it as a big broom that goes down the body as you breathe in, clears things out, expels them as you breathe out. And when you’re thinking about something, there will be a pattern of tensions in place in the body that will correspond to that thought. In fact, this is why mental work can be so tiring physically. Especially if you’re thinking a complex problem. You have a little post-it tension here, and a little post-it tension there. And there’ll be little strings connecting them. And they can get quite elaborate throughout the body. Especially when you have to keep many different factors in mind all at the same time. And sometimes when you stop thinking the thought, the pattern of tension is still there. So right now you don’t have to think any of those thoughts. Forget about your work of the day. And sweep through all those lines of tension, all those patterns of tension. Sweep through all the centers of tension. Think of them being expelled with every out-breath. You breathe in, you sweep through things. And you breathe out, you sweep them out. As for the part of the mind that says, this is being irresponsible, you say, no, this is being very irresponsible. You’ve got to take good care of your mind. And it certainly doesn’t help to carry a lot of patterns of tension around with you. You want the mind to be able to think clearly. You have to be able to sweep out old thoughts. Sweep out old patterns of tension. And allow the mind and the body in the present moment to get some real good nourishment with the breath. The sense of ease as the breath comes in. The sense of fullness as the breath begins to saturate all the different parts of the body. Expand your awareness so it builds the body, but it doesn’t go beyond that. Go a little bit beyond it in case you sense there’s an energy cocoon around the body, but don’t go beyond that. You go beyond that and you start thinking about the world outside. And that’s leaving your frame of reference. Think of the image in the canon of the monkeys. There’s a part of the Himalayas where the monkeys stay and no human beings go. That’s not safe. But then there’s a part where monkeys go and human beings go. And that’s where the monkeys are not safe. Because human beings will set traps. So you want to stay away from the traps, so you just stay away from all thoughts of the world outside. This is your time for the mind in and of itself right here, right now. No other responsibilities, no other cares. You have to give the mind this measure of freedom. On a regular basis. Because otherwise it carries around all the weights of the world. And so many of those weights are things that we have no control over at all. But we’ll impinge on our lives in one way or another. And so it’s very easy for us to worry about them. And then again, those worries become more patterns of tension in the body. They become more obstacles in the mind. They keep you from breathing easily. Keep the mind from thinking clearly. And you can’t impinge on the health of the body. So you need time to sweep them away on a regular basis. And that’s what we’re doing right here, right now. Sweeping the mind. Sweeping the body. Think of the breath as a cleansing agent. It’s a solvent. It’s a dissolving agent. It’s removing away all the tension. And beyond the range of the body right here, you have no other responsibilities right now. You have to lighten the burdens of the mind as much as you can. When the time comes to take on those burdens again, you’ll be in much better shape to do it. Keeping your knife sharp. If you simply use the knife day in, day out, day in, day out, day in, day out, it gets really dull. And you have to use more and more energy to get it to cut things. And even when you can cut through things, it’s not a neat, clean cut. So you have to take the knife every now and then and stop using it and sharpen it. Coat it with oil so it doesn’t get rusty. It’s scabbard. And then when the time comes, you really need to use it. There you are. You’ve got a good, sharp knife. Cut right through things very quickly. If you’re afraid to take the time to sharpen it for fear that you won’t be doing work that needs to be done, you really don’t understand how to get the most use out of a knife. It’s the same with your mind. You think the mind has to keep on thinking, thinking, thinking all the time. You don’t know how to control your own mind, how to look after it. It needs time to just be by itself. To forget the world. Because after all, someday the world’s going to forget you. All your responsibilities right now, you’ve come to a point where you can’t carry them anymore. And the world will just have to keep on going without you. And although it seems to need you right now, you’ve come to a point where it’s totally fine without you. So you have to learn how to be totally fine without it. So take this time. Just be with the body. Be with the breath. Be with your awareness here in the present moment. Get the awareness to fill the body, the breath to fill the body, the sense of ease and fullness to fill the body. Now see if you can maintain that. And if you wonder what’s going to happen next, think of the image of the foolish, inexperienced cow. It already has pasture, it already has water. But it sees another hillside. It says, hmm, what’s the pasture like that over there? What’s the grass like over there? What’s the water like over there? But it doesn’t know how to get from where it is to go down through the ravine over to the other hill. It usually gets stuck down in the ravine and can’t get back to where it was. So you’ve got water right here, you’ve got grass right here. Make the most of it. And then you find out, and this is what the image doesn’t tell you, when you stay right here, things will develop on their own. You don’t have to go someplace else to get to a deeper state of concentration or someplace else to gain insight. It’s all going to happen right here. When the mind settles down, everything you need to know is right here. All the different kinds of fabrication that go into the breath, the way you talk to yourself about what you’re doing, your perceptions and feelings, they’re all right here. These are the things we need to understand. So you’re in the right spot already. It’s just having a willingness to learn how to settle in and then stay. You’ve got to suspend all the mind’s activities, aside from the activity of staying concentrated, mindful of the breath. And it’s for how that will develop. It’s not going to develop because you planned for it to develop in a certain way. It’s going to develop on its own, like a tree. You plant the tree, you water it, and where the branches are going to go, you don’t have much to say on that. It’s going to grow. And it’ll do perfectly fine without you rearranging the branches for it. So plant the mind right here. Look after it. And it’ll do its growing on its own.

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