Events as Events

January 15, 2023

When you establish mindfulness, the Buddha says that you focus on the body in and of itself, and you put aside all greed and distress with reference to the world. The body in and of itself means precisely that, not the body in the world, just the body as you have it right here. The body in the world would be thinking about the body in terms of whether it’s good-looking to other people, whether it can do the work that’s required by the world. In other words, you see it in the context of the world outside. Here we’re dropping that context and giving the mind a new context, just the body right here, what’s appearing right now. In this case it’s the breath, to focus on the breath coming in and going out. It’s an instance of what they call the wind element, the energy that flows through the body. And just address it on its own terms. Does it feel good? Does it not feel good? If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. As the Buddha said, the breath is the factor that has the most influence on your sense of the body as you feel it from within. So take some time to look at it on its own terms. Don’t drag other issues in to interfere. When you look at things on these terms, they get a lot simpler and it’s a lot easier to see what your duties are. Because once you think of things in terms of the world, then on the one hand the duty is that the world passes on you. And when there’s the sense of you in that world, then you’re going to think about, “Well, what do I like what do I not like?” And the duties you follow tend to be the duties of your likes and dislikes, which have no guarantee that they’re going to take you anywhere good. Because you know how arbitrary your likes and dislikes can be, and how fickle. Today you like one thing, tomorrow you don’t like it. And you start liking it again. But the duties that the Buddha gives you, it’s not that he’s imposing in the mind. He’s simply saying, “If you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you’ve got to do.” First you get the mind really still, and then you look at what’s going on in your experience of the body and the mind here in the present on their own terms. Not in the terms of the body, on the terms of the mind. Events in the mind, events in the body. But the Buddha calls on the one hand name and form, on the other hand consciousness. Consciousness is your awareness. Form is your sense of the body as you feel it from within, in terms of earth, water, wind, fire. Or solidity, liquidity, energy, warmth. And then name refers to mental events. You’ve got feelings, you’ve got perceptions, intentions, acts of attention, contact among these things. And you want to learn how to just be with these things on their own terms, instead of thinking of this as “my body” or “my mind” or “my awareness.” It’s just there’s awareness. They’re mental events, physical phenomena. Just right here. And when you look at them in those terms, it’s a lot easier to realize what you can do about them. Because in particular, when you get to acts of attention and acts of intention, there are skillful ones and unskillful ones. Your perceptions can be skillful or unskillful. And whether they’re skillful or not has nothing to do with whether you like them or not. It has a lot to do with where they’re going to take you. And when you look at them on those terms, how they appear, how they condition the mind, how they condition the body, then it’s a lot easier to get the duties right. In other words, wherever there’s a sense of stress or suffering, you’re trying to comprehend it to see what it is that you’re clinging to. When you see what you’re clinging to, then you figure out, well, what’s causing you to cling? That’s craving. So you comprehend the clinging and you try to abandon the craving. So that you can realize the end of suffering through the end of craving. And you do that by developing the path. Everything from right view all the way to right concentration. When you look at things in these terms, it’s a lot easier to do the right duty. Because it’s pretty obvious. A certain perception has an effect on the breath, or a certain way of paying attention to the breath will have an effect on it. And you see that the effect is either good or bad. If it’s good, then you can develop that. If it’s bad, then you let it go and replace it with something else. So when the Buddha’s talking about things like name, form, consciousness, he’s not talking about abstractions far away. He’s talking about your direct experience right here. Simply that you remove the sense of I, me, mine for the time being. And just look at these things as events. Because if you look at them as yours, then it’s a different set of duties. The duty becomes develop what you like and abandon what you don’t like. And as I said, your likes are pretty fickle. So you can’t take that as reliable. So try to stay with these things on their terms. And you begin to see how they interact with one another. In the Pinnacle of Arising, the Buddha says that name and form depend on consciousness. Consciousness depends on name and form. And you can interpret this on many different levels. On the level of rebirth. If there’s no physical basis for the new being to take birth, then even if there’s a consciousness, the consciousness has no place to land. Or if there are the physical requisites for name and form, but there’s no consciousness coming in, name and form has no place to stand. It’s the combination of the two that allows a new being to take birth. That’s on the level of rebirth. But it’s also happening right here, right now. Consciousness is the simple fact that you’re aware of things going on in the body, aware of things going on in the mind. If it weren’t for that consciousness, there’d be no knowledge of these things at all. At the same time, if these things like mental events and physical events were not happening, consciousness would have nothing to know. It wouldn’t have an object. So an image in the canon is you’ve got two sheaves of reeds, like two haystacks leaning against each other. You pull one away and the other one falls. You pull the other one away, this one falls. Consciousness depends on name and form. Name and form depends on consciousness. This is how we maintain our sense of the present moment. And then building on the present moment, we can also create thoughts of past and future. Right now we’re trying to keep away from getting involved in past and future. You want to just see what’s happening right here, right now, simply as events. If you add your sense of you to it all, then it becomes a state of becoming. And for the time being, you don’t want to go there. You want to get used to seeing these things simply as events. Because when they’re simple events, you begin to see how ephemeral they are, how quick they are to change. And you begin to wonder how you could think of building anything solid on them at all. But before you give up on them, try to build at least a state of concentration. So the mind can get settled and still with a sense of well-being. When it has that sense of well-being, then it can look at its old attachments, the old ways it had of thinking and looking, and realize, okay, that way of doing things actually causes stress, and I don’t have to do it. When you realize that it’s stressful and you realize that it’s unnecessary, why would you hold on? You don’t even have to think about inconstancy, stress, not-self. Just the fact that you realize, okay, it’s not worth the effort. That’s when you let go. Because you’re letting go simply of events rather than a sense of letting go of something of a part of you. It’s a lot easier to let it go. So learn how to look at things on these terms, simply as events, mental events, physical events. And the less you get invested in them, the easier it is to let go of the unskillful ones, to develop what’s skillful, and then ultimately to let go of what’s skillful too. But you don’t want to do that until things are really solid. Because when the Buddha has you let go, it’s not like he’s going to set you adrift. But he has you let go of things that are going to cause disappointment. And when you let go, you find yourself in a place where there is no disappointment. He’s treating you well, much better than you’ve been treating yourself. So have some trust in this process. And realize that when the Buddha’s talking about these things, he’s not talking about far distant abstractions. He’s talking about what appears in the present moment when the mind gets really still. And your sense of yourself can begin to fall into the background. And you see events as events, where they should be developed, where they should be let go. Then you’re following the right set of duties, the duties that have your best interests in mind. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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