Selecting from the Teachings

July, 2001

Allow the mind to settle down with the breathing. Think of yourself as gathering it in from all the places it’s been roosting in the course of the day, like a big flock of birds. It’s been thinking about this, thinking about that, all over the place. And now all the birds are going to come down on that same telephone pole. Now for the mind to come down like this, you’ve got to provide it with a place of comfort, a place where it feels at ease. Otherwise it’s going to go flying off again, scattered all over the place. So focus on the breath, because that’s one, that’s the element through which you experience the whole rest of your body. We tend to think of ourselves as being in the solid part of the body and the breath comes in and out of that. But actually our whole awareness of the body, from the head down to the toes, out to the tips of the fingers, it’s all through the breath energy that we sense the body. If the breath energy weren’t there, we wouldn’t sense the body at all. So look at the quality of that energy. First look at the most obvious part of that energy, which is the in-and-out breath. And just very gently try to adjust that so it feels just right. Sometimes the adjusting is simply by placing that observation in the mind. You want the breath to be comfortable. Allow the breath to be comfortable. Just think that. Many times the breath will find its best rhythm. Other times you have to nudge it a little bit this way and that. But what’s important here is that you develop your own inner sensitivity. Without that quality of inner sensitivity, the meditation becomes mechanical, becomes forced. That’s when desire takes over. This is one way of keeping check on whether your desire is too much, whether it’s getting in the way of your seeing things as they’re actually happening, and you’re focusing on what you want to have happen the next moment, the next breath, whatever. Stay right here and watch what’s happening. Be sensitive to what’s happening. And that quality of being right here, that’ll make the next breath better. That’ll make the next mind state better. Settle in with what you’ve got. And then arrange what you’ve got right here, bit by bit by bit. It’s like a dog lying down to sleep. The dog lies down. Oops, there’s a root or there’s a rock or something. So the dog gets up and scratches here and scratches there, turns around, then lies down again. You keep doing this until finally the breath really does feel good. And you can get absorbed in it. John Fuhrman once talked about how the breath energy in the body is like water in a jar. Up to a certain point, you can fill up the jar, but then there comes a point where no matter how much more water you put in the jar, it’s holding all that it can. And whatever extra water there is just flows right out. The activity of adjusting the breath, evaluating the breath, it’ll finally reach a state where it’s as good as the breath can get in the body. And then you just settle right in. Let yourself get absorbed in the breath. They talk about discernment being the quality that separates things out. Well, before things can get separated out, they have to be brought together. Because otherwise, when you separate things out, you separate them out in terms of your own preconceived notions. And the places where you draw the lines may not be the natural places where things will separate out of their own accord. Again, this is an issue of your own inner sensitivity. So much of the meditation is involved in this process of making yourself more sensitive inside, learning to read what’s going on inside yourself this way. We spend most of our lives getting sensitive to things outside. We’re pretty much cut off from this, our inner sense of the body, our inner sense of the body. And so we’ve got to reconnect. So the techniques of the meditation point you in this direction and give you some beginning ideas. There are seven steps laid out by John Lee. Those are the main road into the inner sense of the body. Once you get into the main road, then you find there are lots of other little alleys and other details that he doesn’t mention. But they’re very much a part of your own inner awareness. So learn to be sensitive to them. Because without this quality of inner sensitivity, no real discernment can come. You may be told, “Okay, you have to see things as impermanent and constant, not self.” If you don’t have this inner sensitivity, you’ll just apply those labels in terms of what your preconceived notions are. But once the inner sensitivity develops, then you begin to see, “Oh, this is what they meant. This is where that teaching is useful. This is where that teaching is not useful.” And it’s that that gives you your true guidance in how to apply the Buddhist teachings in all levels of your affairs. I received a letter a while back from someone whose mother had died several months back, but they were still grieving over her. They said they were trying to deal with the grief by applying the teaching on not-self. Who was it that died? Who was grieving? That doesn’t work at all. That’s not an approach that’s appropriate place to apply that teaching yet. Because part of the mind says, “Oh, this is denying the importance of the mother. This is denying the importance of our grief.” And it resists. The question is, “Okay, what is the skillful teaching to apply there?” You’re dealing with your sense of love for the person, your sense of loss. What’s the best you can do in that situation? What’s the best thing you can do with that love? Sitting around moping and feeling sorry for yourself is not a skillful application. You do something good, and you dedicate the merit to the person who’s gone. That’s good both for you and for the other person. Just an example of developing the sensitivity of when a teaching is applicable, when it’s useful to apply, when you’re ready for it. This you have to develop using your own inner sensitivity. We’re supplied with so many of the Buddhist teachings. They’re all around us. Books fill the library down in the guesthouse. And that’s just a tiny library. There are bigger libraries that have all kinds of books. So if we want to know the Buddhist teachings, in every tradition they’re there. Now the question is, how do we apply them to a specific incident right in our own minds? That’s where the question of inner sensitivity, the question of inner skill, applies. So we work with the breath to get more sensitive, both to what’s going on in our body and what’s going on in our mind. And then we take the questions that the Buddhist applies, which basically come down to the Four Noble Truths. The other day we talked about skillful questioning, and these are the terms of skillful questions. Where is there stress? What is the cause of stress right now? What teaching is effective to get rid of that particular cause? The books will tell you all the words, but you’ve got to see in yourself. What precisely are you doing right now? What kind of movement is in there in the mind? Is it leaning forward, leaning back? Liking, disliking? Too much energy, too little energy? You’ve got to get a sense for those things. And then you’re going to begin to apply the teachings that are the proper corrective. Sometimes it’s a balancing out. Sometimes it’s an undercutting. There are lots of different ways of using the teachings. But when you’re operating from this sense of being centered inside and sensitive inside, that’s when you get a sense of what applies properly at what particular time and what particular circumstances. Otherwise, there are many ways you can use the Buddhist teachings in very unskillful ways and just kind of run roughshod over your inner sense of the mind. And what happens is part of you rebels. Many times there’s so much damage, it takes a long time to recover. So as you meditate, try to get a sense of what’s going on. Notice cause and effect for yourself. It’s a process that requires trial and error. And this basic ability to look at your own actions, look at the results, notice where you made a mistake. For some reason here in America, that’s an ability that lots of us have lost. So you’ve got to learn how to redevelop it. And even though it may take time and require lots of observation, that’s precisely what the mind needs. Learning how to take time with something, learning how to observe something. Otherwise, you can’t gain discernment. We want to be able to meditate with sound bites, and it doesn’t work. Discernment requires time. It requires observation. And only if we’re willing to invest those two qualities can we ever expect any real results.

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