Enjoying Meditation

August, 2003

In the morning, we talked about enjoying meditation. It’s an important part of the practice. If you don’t enjoy what you’re doing, it’s going to get dry. So look at the meditation not only as a time to do some work, but also as a time to play. As Jung used to say, “Play around with meditation.” He didn’t mean playing in a desultory way. But see what you can do to enjoy the present moment. That’s a lot of what the concentration is for, so that you know you have the ability to create a good space in the mind. So when things get bad, you have that space. This is an important skill in the meditation. Some people are afraid to play around too much. They try to do nothing and just be very passive and watch. In some cases, it’s useful training in equanimity and patience. But some of the things that can come up in the meditation can be pretty threatening. If you don’t have a good place to go, they can overwhelm you. So you want to become familiar with the present moment to see where the really good spots are when you’re playing with the breath. Realize there’s a lot more going on in the breathing process than you might have conceived. Try to open up your preconceived notions of the breath. How does the air come in and out of the lungs? What’s pulling it in? Whether it’s the movement of the muscles, what causes the muscles to move? Whether it’s the signal that goes through the nerves. Well, what is that signal if it’s not breath energy? It’s a form of energy going down through the nerves. And if you get really sensitive, you can sense it. Always be willing to question your preconceived notions. That’s part of the playing around. I know a lot of people when they hear about the breath going through the body, down through the nerves, feel that it has to sort of be pulled down. Sometimes they only get halfway down the back and already the in-breath has stopped. Well, it’s forcing too much. If you watch, you actually see that as soon as the breath starts coming in, there’s one wave of energy that’s already gone through the whole nervous system. It’s just that you’re not quick enough to catch it. And again, catching here doesn’t mean that you try to freeze it and time, but just simply detect it as it’s happening. When you can detect that, then there’s something to play with. Seeing where it feels blocked, where you can open it up. Which parts of the body feel starved for the breath energy? Once you get sensitive to the areas that seem to be doing most of the work, get overworked in the breathing, try to find the areas that are underworked. Try to share out the labor. And as you share out the labor, you also share out the rewards of the breathing. Because the process of breathing does give energy. If there’s a part of the body that’s not participating, it’s being starved for energy. So each time you breathe in, ask yourself, “Okay, which part of the body wants the next breath?” Think of it going down the left arm, then going down the right arm, then getting more and more sensitive to what’s going on. What changes really do happen as a result of the breath? This way, the concentration practice becomes less of a chore, less of a mechanical process, and more of something where you can explore. And it’s the exploring where the enjoyment is, where the fun is. It’s like developing any skill. If there’s no enjoyment in the doing, it’s going to be hard. Most of us are used to skills and having a sense of enjoyment with the finished product. But the people who get really good at skills are the ones who actually enjoy the doing. It piques their curiosity. It captures their imagination. When you begin to think of the different possibilities, what can a breath do for the body? It does only one thing. It keeps you from dying. It comes in, goes out. That’s it. There’s one of the teachers in the Forest Tradition who one time asked a John Lee, “How can you gain any discernment looking at the breath? It only has two things, in and out.” And John Lee’s response was, “If that’s all you see, then that’s all there is. If that’s all you can see, actually, that’s a lot more. But it does require you to become more sensitive.” The body is an area many of us have learned to desensitize ourselves to. I’ve noticed in particular that people who have suffered abuse of one kind or another as children tend to be very dissociated from their bodies. The nature of our culture puts so much emphasis on the head and on the eyes, things happening outside. People really get out of touch with their bodies. So this is very important. It’s an important process to reclaim this area of your awareness. Resensitize yourself. See if you feel familiar with the body, on good terms with the body. Find an enjoyable place to explore. It’s like a young kid learning how to play the guitar by fooling around with the guitar. He may have been taught a few basic chord progressions. After a while he gets tired of the basic chord progressions. You can always try other progressions. And if the kid is observant, after a while the fooling around turns into music. Even though it may not be music, it’s just the process of exploring. That in and of itself is enjoyable. This is how we learn anything. It’s through the doing. We tend to get out of touch with that. I was reading this book recently called The Last American Man. He’s promoting someone who’s learned all the skills, or enough skills, to survive in the wilderness, and then tries to teach that to ordinary Americans. He finds that they’re totally clueless when it comes to learning skills. They may be able to be good at Nintendo and good at computer games in general, but when it comes to simple processes of just carrying a bucket, rolling a hoop, if they don’t pick it up immediately, they have no idea of how to learn. This is bad. We need to reclaim that skill, the skill of how to learn. It involves using your ingenuity, testing things, being observant. When I was staying with Ajahn Phuong, sometimes it seemed like he was making it a game. There were chores I had around the monastery. He would indicate that I had to do the chore, and he wouldn’t tell me precisely how to do it. He was aghast to see how few skills I had developed as a young American. He taught me a few, but then a lot of them he would only give me a few indications. Then he would let me try to figure them out for myself. At first, I found it frustrating. Other people seemed to be getting explanations. Why wasn’t I getting explanations? But after a while, I realized that he was trying to develop the habits I was going to need in the meditation. You start out with less than enough information, because after all, no matter how detailed a meditation guide is going to be, it’s still not enough for all the ins and outs of the mind. But if you have some background in learning how to learn, how to pick up a new skill, how to explore, how to experiment, how to judge when the results are good or when they’re not, it gives you good habits for the mind. Because a lot of the meditation is going to be exploration, trying to figure out how much concentration is enough, how much is not enough. What are the signs when the mind is telling you that it really is ready to move out of concentration into a more exploratory mode? When it’s ready to rest. You can hear the basic instructions that when an issue comes up, try to examine it. If you find that the examination is going nowhere, the issue is getting blurry, go back to the concentration. It’s a sign that your concentration isn’t strong enough yet to deal with that issue. It’s a basic rule of thumb. But still, there’s a lot of room for play in there. When you’re focusing the mind, how much is it necessary to have that center focus? How much emphasis should be placed on the full range of awareness, expanding that range of awareness? Ideally, you should have both together. How do you do that? Well, that’s up to you to explore. You have to develop the ability not only to experiment and improvise, but also to gain a sense of what’s working and what’s not working. This process goes best when you approach it with an attitude that you’re playing. For many of us, the process of playing is a difficult one. We had to do it in school, where there was somebody breathing down our necks, always ready to grade us. This is why it’s better to think of a kid off in his room playing a guitar, fooling around, not bothering anybody. Nobody’s going to grade him on his chord progressions this afternoon. He’s playing so that he wants to learn to enjoy it. And as he finds something new, he finds joy in the exploration, joy in the discovery. So when you think of the meditation as a process of exploration like this and playing around, it makes it a lot easier to begin to pick up the skills that you need, develop the sensitivity that you’re going to need. Remember, meditation is not a process of pre-programming the mind, trying to fit it into a mold, saying, “Well, you’re going to see things this way, gain that particular insight.” If you approach it that way, it’s very easy to put the mind into that kind of straight jacket. But is that insight? Does it really do anything good for the mind? It may do a few good things, but our ability to clone insights, what we read in a book and just try to force it on the mind, makes the whole process suspect. Is it really insight, or are we just trying to get a cloned version of the insight? It’s better to approach the meditation as an exploration. The Lord is saying, “There’s something really, really good. There’s a diamond here in your mind,” he’s saying, “and here are the tools you’re going to need to find it. But you’re going to have to learn how to master the tools before they’ll be able to show you where that diamond is, before they’ll be able to uncover it.” He also gives you a few guidelines for testing the diamond to make sure there really is a diamond and not some piece of plastic. Or a piece of glass. And then he sends you off into the room and says, “It’s in there someplace.” So it’s a process of exploration. And if you look at it that way, exploring, you’re developing skills, try to find enjoyment in the exploration. Try to find enjoyment in the challenge. When you have that, you’re going to find that the whole practice goes a lot more smoothly.

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