Shifting Your Paradigm

January 4, 2004

This afternoon we’re talking about perception, the way our minds label things as a way of stocking them away in our memory so we can recognize them the next time they come. The mind has a kind of filing system. A whole set of perceptions for how it perceives things, how it fits things into different molds before they can get filed away. When we look carefully at the way our minds work, we notice that a lot of times that filing system is a major cause of trouble. Things come up in the mind and we immediately label them as this, that, the other thing. Things happen to us from outside and we label them as this, that, the other thing. And then the labels turn around and they bite us, make us suffer, make us do things that we know we shouldn’t be doing. So the question becomes, how can we change the filing system? How can we change our pattern of looking at things? What’s called a paradigm shift? There are two ways. One, you can think your way into a new way of seeing things, or you can look more carefully at the raw data of experience, to the point where you see that your old patterns of labeling are pretty arbitrary. And when we’re meditating, we apply both approaches. In other words, sometimes we systematically explore new ways of looking at things. But for those new ways of looking at things to really sink into the mind, you have to do that second approach as well. Just look at the raw data of what’s coming in and see that you could label it in other ways. It helps pull you out of your old patterns of thinking and get you right at the basic building blocks. So this is what we do as we meditate. Get down to the raw experience of a breath. How many layers of perception do you have to go through to get to that raw experience? Well, there are quite a few. But it’s a practice that’s worth pursuing, no matter how many layers you have to go through. Because the more you go through, the more clearly you see things. And the more you realize that there are other ways of looking at what you’ve been experiencing. For example, the whole question of the breath and the body. We tend to think of our bodies as just a solid lump sitting here, and then air comes in and out the lungs through the nose. And that air is the breath. And then that perception of the body sitting here as a big lump affects the way we actually breathe, the way we experience the breath. And then when we read about breath energy going through the nervous system, out through the pores, along the blood vessels, it sounds pretty strange. It sounds very foreign, as if you’d have to go over to Asia for it to make sense. But actually, it’s a different way of perceiving the raw material you have experienced. You’ve got it right here, right now. And it’s a very useful way of perceiving it. So try to get as close to the breath as possible, as close to your sense of the body as possible. Allow yourself to inhabit the whole body. And then watch. What is the experience? There’s a being and the body right here. What is it like? If you allow yourself to think of it as an energy body, you’ll begin to notice things that you didn’t notice before, simply because your old pattern of perception didn’t allow for it. So survey the body, what you’ve got right here, right now, from the head on down to the toes, down the arms, down the back. What does it feel like? When you breathe in, what does it feel like? When you breathe out, what does it feel like? Where do you notice the sensations that correspond to the in-breath and the out-breath? Are they tense? If they are, then relax them. Go systematically down the body, relaxing every little piece of tension you can notice. If you can’t notice any tension, consciously flex your muscles for a minute, different parts of the body, and then relax. And you run into some areas that you find that are already pretty tense, that you don’t have to flex them at all. Those are the spots you want to work on. And that sensation of the relaxation, that’s breath. Allow yourself to think of it as breath. It’s not that you’re changing the sensation, you’re changing the perception. And then the perception itself allows for new sensations to come in that you didn’t notice before. Not that they weren’t there before, simply that they were blocked out. But now they’re allowed to come up to the surface. This is what paradigm shift is all about, the data that under the old system just kept getting thrown out, thrown out, thrown out, because it didn’t make sense under the old system. Suddenly it just becomes too insistent. It’s there, and someone decides to take it seriously. It’s not that they sit down and say, “I want to be a great person in history. I want to come up with a paradigm shift.” That usually doesn’t work. What works is just looking at the data that you before used to throw away. And it’s the same with meditation. Just notice the sensations that are going on in the body. And when you begin to see that, there is a sense of energy there. There is a kind of a flow, and it’s either blocked or it’s flowing. But as you relax, you begin to get a greater sense of flow. That gives you a sense of how much there is to explore. There’s territory that we thought we knew. But when you really look at it very carefully, you realize there’s a lot going on there that you didn’t know. This is what makes the meditation fascinating. There’s always a lot to learn about the breath, new ways of conceiving how it goes in, how it goes out, the different ways of how the breath energy in the different parts of the body relate to each other. What happens, say, in the leg when you can release some of the tension in your lower back, say? There’s a connection. Or releasing tension in your lower back, what that does for your upper back and for your neck. There’s lots to explore. And even though these things may not necessarily be written in the text, still, it’s a way of getting into the present moment and opening yourself up to some of the possibilities that you didn’t think were there before. As you begin to settle in, you feel more and more at home in the present moment, both because it’s more comfortable and because it’s more interesting than it used to be. You’re not staying here simply because you were told to stay here. Try that with a child. Tell the child, “Okay, sit in this stool.” “For what reason?” “Well, simply because I tell you to stay here.” The child is going to find some reason to get away pretty fast, as soon as you turn your back. Well, it’s the same with your mind. Say, “Stay with the breath.” “Why?” “Because I tell you to stay with the breath.” That kind of reasoning doesn’t work. Say, “But look, here’s something to play with. I’ve got this big doll right here, a life-size doll. You can play with the energy flow. Give that kind of toy to a child and they’re not going to think of going away anyway. They’ll just get more and more interested in exploring it. It’s the same with your mind. Give the mind something to explore here, especially something that helps to create a greater sense of well-being, a greater sense of strength, a greater sense of openness, stability, a good place to stay right here. The mind will be happy to stay. In this way, the way you play around with the breath, the way you explore the breath, leads you into concentration. It’s one of two ways. One is after a while the mind just gets tired of playing around. It really wants to rest. So it just settles in and just stays with the breath. The other is when you realize that you’ve taken the breath about as far as you can take it. The energy in the body feels full. Everything’s flowing just fine. And no matter how much you adjust the breath, you’re not going to get any better. That’s another reason to just stop all the adjusting, stop the playing, and just focus on being really, really at one. In this way, the meditation teaches you a lot of good lessons about the power of perception. The way you perceive things really is going to shape your experience. It filters out a lot of things that are there. It may tend to emphasize things that are either unimportant or actually harmful for you. Once you’ve learned this lesson in terms of the breath, then you can turn and look at the mind. You’ll find the same process going on. Things happen that normally would set you off, but look precisely at the thing that’s happening. On the one hand, you know that you don’t want to get any better. You don’t want to get angry, or you don’t want to get lustful, or you don’t want to indulge in fear. And yet you find yourself following these patterns over and over again. So you’ve got to look at the raw material with the intention of changing your perception to look at precisely the thing that sets you off. And is it really all that bad? Does it have to result in anger? Does it have to result in lust? Does it have to result in fear? Can you look at it from another side? The more precise perception itself that sets you off, the easier it is to change. Because the closer you get, the more arbitrary your old patterns of thought, your old patterns of perception, begin to seem. So we’re trying to get as close as we can to the immediate present. And even though it’s still going to be shaped by a type of perception, you want to have better perceptions. More useful perceptions, perceptions that don’t pull you in directions you don’t want to go, make you say or do things that you’re later going to regret. Years back, I was staying in Bangkok, in the back of the monastery. And right across the wall, in the back corner of the monastery, right across the wall, there was a little store that opened up at four in the morning and played a huge boombox. The first time it happened, I kept wondering,”How on earth am I going to meditate in a situation like this?” Then I remembered Ajahn Chah talking about how it’s not that we’re being disturbed by sound. We’re the ones that are disturbing the sounds. We’re the ones that are talking about the sound in our mind, making issues out of it. So I tried to look very carefully at what that sensation of sound was. And there was a physical sensation that went along with it. It wasn’t just in the ears because it was a boombox. It was a really deep bass. And I found that the closer I got to the actual perception of the sound, the more my own body, my sensation of the body, seemed to change. I could think of it as a screen through which the sound just traveled, and it wasn’t catching any of the things. I thought later of a passage in the Canon where they talk about the mind of, for example, the idea of meditating. It’s like a net that doesn’t catch the wind. It made it a lot easier to meditate and to get out of the old stories that I used to think about sounds and the people who made the sounds. You can apply this to just about anything that comes in, any perception. The Buddha talks about restraint of the senses, and he’s not saying that you don’t look or you run away. You don’t run away from your perceptions. You just notice which of the details that set you off, and you learn not to focus on those details. You realize there are other details you can look at. It all comes down to that set of perceptions, which you normally apply to things that create issues, that harm you. So you try to get as close to the present moment as possible so you can make the shift there. That verse we chanted now on friends, it doesn’t apply only to friends outside. It also applies to patterns of thought in our own minds, the patterns that give rise to lust, the patterns that give rise to laziness. If you’re weak and unable to do anything, just look at precisely what are the perceptions, what are the sensations that say that you’re weak. Look at them very carefully. Look at them very precisely. And you begin to realize that they don’t have to carry that message at all. You’re the one that applied the message. So the best way to get out of our old habits, the old patterns of behavior, is to try to break things down to precisely what’s happening right here, right now, just in terms of the little events that are happening, the sensations in the body. Perceptions, sights, sounds, smells, taste, tactile sensations, ideas, as they come, when you get them as close as possible, they’re just simply events in and of themselves. That’s what allows you to make your shift. The same principle applies when you get up in the morning. You lie there and you’re awake and you say, “Oh, I’m still too sleepy. I can’t get up.” Well, ask yourself, “Okay, what precisely, what sensations tell you that you’re too sleepy, that you’re still too tired, that you didn’t have enough sleep?” Just go through your body. See, is it this sensation? Well, no. Is it that sensation? Which is the one that prevents you from getting up? You realize that there’s nothing. So you get up. Break things down so that they’re manageable. And as you break them down, you find that you start making bigger shifts in your mind as well. It’s in this way that this simple exercise of exploring your breath in the present moment teaches you lessons that can make you a different person. We’re not talking about making you a person, but changes habits of behavior. Learning to drop patterns that are not your friends and to hang out with the ones that are. Because when you get into the mind, it’s not just hanging around with friends. You tend to identify with those patterns. And if they’re harmful patterns, here you are. You’re identifying with your enemies, with your non-friends, as the verse would say. So instead, try to look for the true friends. And where do you look for them? Right here in your immediate sensations. That’s what allows you to change the people you’re hanging around with inside. So that your perceptions, instead of being harmful to yourself and the people around you, actually become helpful. They become part of the path.

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