Fullness of the Breath, The

January 31, 2004

Part of staying with the breath is exploring what the breath has to offer. You read in the teachings of Ajaan Lee, his various ways of describing the breath, and you get the impression that all the way up to his very last days he was finding new things about the breath, trying to put them into words. He talks not only about long breaths and short breaths or deep breaths and shallow breaths. He talks about full breaths, tough breath energy in the body. The word “neo” in Thai is hard to translate into English. It’s something that’s very resilient. Ajaan Fu used to talk about the breath energy being full in the body. You might want to explore what that means. Try pumping in a good long breath. As you breathe in, try to relax around the long breath. Think of the body having areas that you can just breathe in, breathe in, breathe in, and never get full. As soon as you reach a sense of fullness, you don’t push the breath out. You allow it to stay there. Of course, it’ll come out on its own, but as soon as you catch a sense of it deflating, fill it back up. It’s almost like keeping a tire full of air. This kind of breathing can be useful in all kinds of things. When you’re feeling tired, when pain gets really bad in the body, you can use a full breath energy to counteract the pain, to create a cushion around the pain, an energy barrier around the pain, an energy barrier around your tiredness. It may not be a permanent solution to the problem, but it helps get you through a lot of things. It’s just one of the many ins and outs of the breath. Ways of using the breath energy are good both for the body and for the mind. Ajaan Fu said that when he was out in the forest, working with the breath was his main medicine. Of course, there’s that story about Ajaan Lee himself having what sounds like a heart attack after walking three days into the forest. He knew that he was going to have to walk out, so he put himself together by using breath method number two. In fact, he formulated breath number two in response to his heart attack, came out later, and had it written down. So there’s a lot to explore right here, right here inside us. If you find that you get fascinated with the breath, it gives you a lot to deal with. A lot to keep you going, so that trying to stay in the present moment is not simply a chore or not simply an act of will. Whenever there’s a need for persistence, whenever there’s a need for resilience or effort, the intelligent way is to make the effort as easy as possible. Not by being slack about it, but by finding ways of making it easier to really be persistent, really sticking with it. They say that one of the important things about practicing, say, for music or in sports, is watching to see where you’re doing things inefficiently. Like when you’re playing a scale, swimming a lap, noticing where you’re using energy in ways that you don’t have to. Once you notice that, you can change the way you do things. Then the effort required gets less. You get the same results, but with less effort put into it. That’s the intelligent way to be persistent, the intelligent way to exert yourself in the practice. You try not to exhaust yourself. You try to husband your strength as much as possible, while at the same time doing the full job, doing what needs to be done. Our problem is that when we throw ourselves into a task, oftentimes we’re not very efficient. We do too much, waste a lot of energy, which is why our effort is less. Our efforts can’t be sustained. You just run out of fuel because you weren’t using your fuel properly. So when you’re focused on the breath, notice what’s needed to stay focused on the breath. Notice what’s not needed. Then let go of your excess baggage. It’s like going out in the wilderness. You want to carry enough to keep you going, but you don’t want to carry too much because you don’t have a range. That kind of knowledge requires experience, doing it again and again and again. You can be the kind of person who prepares for every eventuality, but that means you’re not going to go very far. The other extreme is not carrying anything at all, but then you find that you need this, you need that. Part of the skill, of course, lies in finding medicine along the way. Finding things you will need to use or learn how to use along the way. But there are some things you need to take with you. So as you’re going out again and again and again, you get a better idea. If you pay attention, you get a better idea of what’s needed and what’s not. The same principle applies to the meditation. You can throw yourself a lot of effort into one hour and find yourself exhausted at the end. If you’re not paying attention, effort to be right effort requires that you pay attention to what you’re doing. Notice which of your efforts are skillful and which ones are not, which ones are productive, which ones are counterproductive, and learning to make adjustments. This is why meditation is called practice. It’s something you do again and again and again, with the eye to seeing what you’re doing that’s inefficient, what you’re doing that’s creating unnecessary burdens on the mind. What you can do to make the task lighter. If the breath energy in the body is full, you find it’s really resilient. You can sit longer periods of time. You can deal better with pain. It eases your burdens in a lot of ways. So you might want to experiment with this issue of the fullness of your breath. See what this can do to help make the meditation go more easily. It’s in the experimentation like this that you’ll learn. If you don’t experiment, you simply review meditation as a technique or an exercise where you simply follow the instructions and wait for the candy to come out at the end. It doesn’t work that way. You gain some things from the meditation, but you don’t learn as much as you could by being observant. Developing your sensitivity. Exploring the potentials that you have right here in the present moment. After all, they’re free. It’s one part of our experience that they’re never going to be able to privatize. There’s the breath element, there’s the heat element, there’s the water element, the liquid in the body, there’s the solidity in the body, there’s your sense of space, your sense of consciousness. In the texts, they talk about acquiring confidence in these things. In other words, learning to settle in and feel at home. That confidence can come only through your own experimentation, your own powers of observation. When you try something out, monitor the results, that’s when the knowledge is really yours. It’s the difference between cooking simply following a recipe and then actually putting the recipe aside and learning to experiment, so that dish becomes your dish. This is how practice of concentration gives rise to insight. A lot of the insights are unexpected, but if they’re all expected, what would be new? What would you learn in your practice?

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