Lionhearted

March 11, 2004

An important principle in training the mind, practicing meditation, is learning that there are a lot more possibilities in the present moment than you might have imagined. It starts with little things, like the breath. You could sit here simply watching the breath come in and go out. And not notice anything. And of course, after a while, I get bored, and the mind will immediately try to find something else. Or you can start looking into the breath, see what you can do with it, how you can play with it, to see exactly what is this breath energy moving in the body, which part of your sensation of the body is the breath, which part is doing the breathing. Realizing that any kind of motion, either the motion in what seems to be the solid part of the body, that’s breath as well, in addition to the air coming in and out of the lungs. And so you’ve got the breath in the body pulling in the breath that comes in and out the nose. So there are two different kinds of breath right there. Then you can look into the question of how do you tell what’s a good time to stop the in-breath and start the out-breath, or vice versa. What are the signs? What’s a sign that you’re pulling too hard on the in-breath or pushing too hard on the out-breath? Learn to look for that as well. And after a while, you begin to realize there’s a lot going on right here. And you’ve got a lot of possibilities. There are all kinds of different ways you could breathe. Think of every part of your body as surrounded by a healing breath energy. Which sensations in the body help encourage that healing breath energy? You can explore that as well. How do you develop a sense of fullness? What does it mean to have a full breath? How do you keep track of the amount of breath energy that stays in the body? There’s the moving breath, and then there’s the sort of background breath energy that doesn’t move, but has greater or lesser levels of energy. Sometimes if you breathe out too long, it drains that breath energy. So you may want to emphasize more of the in-breathing and try to let the out-breath go without any effort at all. If it’s going to go out, it’s going to go out on its own. You don’t have to push it. You don’t have to do anything to it. It will go out on its own. And then you look for the sign that it’s gone out far enough. If it goes out any further, the level of breath energy in the body is going to get depleted. So you’re starting the breath in again, breathing in again. In other words, there’s a lot to do here, and there are a lot of possibilities. If you pay careful attention, you’ll find that you’re more capable of doing things than you might have imagined. It starts, as I said, with simple things like the breath, and then it moves on to other areas of life. You realize that even breathing can be a skill. You start with looking at other areas in life that can be approached as a skill as well—how you deal with other people, how you deal with ethical issues that come up in the course of the day. Over time, you begin to see more and more that you’re capable of more than you might have thought. This is important, and this is a basic principle that led the Buddha out in the forest. Everybody else in his time said, “Look, the life you’ve got already is already good enough. Wealth, dancing girls, three palaces, excellent food, a doting father. What more could a young man want?” Well, he did want more. Everyone else said, “Well, this is as good as it gets. It doesn’t get any better than this, so content yourself with that.” You refuse to be content. This gives you a sense of the lion heart that he had. He wanted nothing short of total happiness. And he wasn’t going to stop until he found out whether human beings were capable of it or not. And by pushing himself, exploring potentials in the present moment, he found that he was capable and other people would be capable as well. It’s a good principle in the practice to always be ready for a challenge. I remember my very first year with the Jon F. Wong before I really got with the program. There was one day we’d had a work project that lasted all day, and it was tiring. At the end of the afternoon, he announced that that night we were going to do an all-night sit. And I wasn’t up for it. So I told him I didn’t think I was capable of doing it that night because we’d been working so hard that day. He looked at me for a minute and said, “Well, is it going to kill you?” I said, “Well, no.” He said, “Then you can do it.” So I did it. It wasn’t easy, but it was possible. When you have an experience like that that stretches, you find that you really are capable of a lot more than your mind had imagined. So try to approach everything in life, seeing what the potentials are, and set a high standard for how you’re going to approach things—what questions you’re going to ask when you do something, when you say something, when you think something. What are the results going to be? What’s the most skillful way of approaching a particular task or particular issue? Take it as a sport, something you enjoy doing. Take it as a challenge that you’re ready for. It’s only in this way that the meditation will take you to unexpected places. If everything fits into your expectations, well, exactly what are your expectations based on? They’re based on ignorance. They’re based on past experience. But the whole point of the practice is that we’re trying to open up to something that’s not there in past experience, something that’s greater than that. So if you approach it with this attitude that it’s a challenge, and you take it as your sport, when you approach it that way, then the whole experience and the whole question of trying to do better, trying to be more skillful in your thoughts, words, and deeds, is not a burden. It gives interest to life. It gives a sense of direction, a sense of purpose, that would otherwise just get squeezed out of us. You see, with so many people, as life goes on, as they get older, their expectations of what’s possible just get squeezed, squeezed, squeezed, smaller and smaller. And it’s a sad thing to watch. So don’t let your heart get squeezed out by the sufferings of aging, illness, and death, and the general run of the world. Try to take every activity as a challenge to see what’s the most skillful way of doing this. And you start right here with the breath. Make the breath your sport. Make it your game. It is something you play with. And you learn things. It’s like learning a musical instrument. If you simply do what the teacher tells you to do, it can seem like a chore. But if you’re interested in the potentials of that instrument, what kind of sounds can it make? And you’re willing to experiment. If you make mistakes, if something sounds horrible, well, you’ve learned that that sounds horrible, but you don’t have to do that again. After a while, you get a better and better sense of the potential of the instrument and your potential as a player of the instrument. And it’s fun, because you’re exploring. If you take the same attitude towards the meditation, you never run out of interesting things. John Lee, with his teachings on breath meditation, kept finding new ways of conceiving the breath, thinking about different levels of breathing. He learned different ways of directing the breath and thinking different ways of how it might come into the body. As you read his Dhamma talks, he kept coming up with new things throughout his life. So, with the breath, you never run out of interesting things to discover. The important thing is that you’re ready to explore, willing to explore, and you’re open to new possibilities that might not have occurred to you before. Think of the meditation as not a programming, but as a path of discovery. If it’s programming, you’re told that you’re going to get insight into impermanence. So see things that are impermanent and then say, “Oh, that’s an insight.” And be very dutiful about the whole thing. That doesn’t give you any real insights. You’re just programming the mind. And you know that if you’re told beforehand what the program has to be, the mind has this uncanny ability to make things look like what they’re supposed to. If you’re told that if you see the whole world as red, then you’ll get a reward. You can see the whole world as red. You can make it happen. But that doesn’t mean that you get any real insight. Approach it instead as a path of exploration. The Buddha tells us there’s something really valuable here in the present moment, the deathless. And he gives you a few standards for measuring it. It’s not inconstant, it’s not stressful, and it’s not self. So whatever comes up, you test it. The not-self is there to remind you that there’s no attachment there. If you find something that’s in constant stress, you let go of that. Ultimately, when you hit what seems to be constant and totally free of stress, there can still be an element of attachment. So that’s what the teaching on not-self is for. To let go of even that attachment. So that instead of taking the deathless as an object of the mind, the mind gets totally immersed in the deathless. So those are the standards. And then he sends you out into the present moment to explore this territory here, to see exactly where that is that you’re looking for. He doesn’t tell you too much more about it, but he gives you enough instructions to understand how to dig around, how to find out new things in the present moment, and how to test what you’ve found until you find the real gold and you know for yourself for sure what you’ve found. And that sort of thing can’t be found simply by following instructions or programming the mind. You really have to dig and find new things. Push the mind to some of its limits sometimes to find what you really are capable of. Once you hit it, you find that it’s something you could never have imagined, but it’s there.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2004/040311%20Lionhearted.mp3>