Developing Your Potential

April 7, 2004

Focus on your breath. The breath is coming in. Know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know it’s going out. And be as sensitive as possible to how it feels. Does it feel comfortable? Could it feel more comfortable? Experiment to see. You can try long breathing, short breathing, deep or shallow. Try to see what the breath can do for the body. This is one of the basic principles of the Buddhist teachings, that the very simple things we have already can be put together in such a way that they can lead to true happiness. We don’t have to go searching outside for other people, other things, for happiness. All we need is right here. The problem is we’re not paying much attention right here. We’re looking at other things outside. Our attention gets distracted by things we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think about. And yet the happiness those things offer is pretty shallow. They’re like the lights in Las Vegas. They promise all kinds of happiness out there, this mirage in the desert. But that’s just it. The happiness they offer is a mirage as well. Sometimes you can look at a whole life spent chasing these things and you have nothing to show, aside from a lot of regrets. It was the Buddha’s insight into this that made him go off into the wilderness, because he had all the things that everyone could offer in those days, in terms of material pleasures, sensual pleasures, pleasures of power, the potential for all kinds of mischief. And he saw it as just that, really. These forms of happiness were not going to take him anywhere. He really wanted to go and it could tempt him to do all kinds of very unskillful things with his life. So he realized he had to get out into the forest, get out into the wilderness to see what on his own he could do, what potential for happiness was there right inside the mind, right in this fathom-long body. What does the body and mind have to offer in the present moment? Well, you’ve got the breath coming in and out, and you’ve got very simple abilities of the mind, the ability to keep things in mind, the ability to be alert, to be aware. It doesn’t sound like much to begin with, but he said you put these things together and they can take you to the ultimate happiness. If you really give them a space and the time and the persistence that they require, then you discover they really could take you to that happiness. And that’s what he spent the rest of his life teaching everybody else. And it’s a difficult path. It’s a challenging path, but it’s a path that works. Otherwise it wouldn’t have lasted all this time. Other religions come along and they promise a lot easier things. You believe in this being or you believe in these teachings and they say, “Oh, that’s all you have to do and that will take you to ultimate happiness after you die.” Of course, after you die, you can’t come back and complain that you didn’t get what you were promised. And so it’s easy to see why religions like that last, because they promise the easy way out. But here’s a religion that promises the hard way, but it’s got results that you can find in this lifetime. That’s why it’s lasted. But it’s a challenge. As the Buddha said, true happiness is possible. You’ve got this human life. The question is, what are you going to do with it? And with the possibility of true happiness there, you owe it to yourself to explore that possibility, to test it, to see if it really is true. So we start with these very basic ingredients. You’ve got the mind here in the present moment, and sometimes the problem is that it’s not in the present moment. The body’s always here and it’s always present. The mind’s always slipping off to other things. Or if it’s not slipping off to the past or the future, it’s getting all entangled in very unskillful ways about what’s going on in the present moment. So you’ve got to learn how to untangle that. This is where we give in the breath as our foundation. It’s what you hold on to. As you stay with the breath, it helps get you out of the constant back and forth of all the different conversations going on in the mind, monologues and dialogues and committee discussions. Pull out of those for a while. Just stay with the breath. Give yourself a new perspective. It’s like the Buddha going out of the palace and into the wilderness, getting away from all those issues in the palace and lying low. So here you are with a breath. You’re kind of lying low. As for the issues in the palace, in other words, all the stuff that’s going on in terms of your thoughts about this, your thoughts about that, your opinions, you don’t have to focus on them. Just let them pass, pass, pass. You find that a lot of the thoughts going on in your mind don’t have to be chased out if you just don’t pay attention to them. They’re there. You know they’re there, but you don’t have to focus on them. A lot of them will just go because so much of what goes on in the mind just snaps as far as spinning the wheels. Some thoughts will grab hold of the mind, and those are the ones you’re going to have to grapple with. But in order to grapple with them, you need a good solid foundation. As Ajaan Mann used to say, you need a good stronghold. Make the breath your stronghold, your body here in the present moment. You know this sensation of the breath. Just stay with that sensation. Settle into it. Let your awareness melt into the breath, which you can do by getting more and more sensitive to how the breathing feels. That forms your foundation. Then you use your other weapons to deal with the thoughts that really grab hold of the mind, like the chant we just had now on the parts of the body. The very first five of those, those are the weapons that are given to a new organism when you ordain. Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, skin, teeth. These are the parts of the body you see when you look at it from the outside. These are your weapons for dealing with lust. Lust comes up. Remember, it’s the mind that goes out lusting. It’s not the body that provokes the lust so much as it’s the mind’s desire to lust after something, and then it goes looking. It will grab hold of whatever it can find. When you actually look at the things that the mind grabs hold of, there’s not that much there that you would really want to get involved with. Take the skin, the nails, the teeth, and the hair. Take them apart and see what you’ve got. There’s nothing there. In fact, if you came into this room and found these things piled in the room, you would turn around and go away. Yet, somehow, in certain configurations and in certain lights and from certain angles, you can make them look attractive. That’s lust doing that in the mind. What you’re doing is opening up your eyes so they see more of what’s actually going on. When you see the whole picture, you realize there’s nothing there that’s worth lusting for. Again, working with this, you take the breath as your foundation, as your stronghold. Otherwise, you feel like you’re depriving yourself of something. But if you have that sense of well-being that comes with the breath that you’re really sensitive to, you compare the pleasure that comes from the lust and the pleasure that comes from the breathing, and you realize the pleasure that comes from the breathing is a lot more satisfactory. It’s more solid. It’s more lasting, because it doesn’t require you to blind yourself to things. It actually comes from opening your eyes up. There are other weapons for dealing with anger. A lot of times you hear that goodwill is the antidote to anger. Actually, goodwill, together with all the other brahmaviharas, are sublime attitudes. You need all of them to deal with anger, because sometimes it’s really hard to stir up goodwill. But when you think about equanimity, which is basically a contemplation of the fact of karma, what those other people have done, they’re going to have to reap the results of their karma. You don’t have to be the avenging angel that’s going to come in and make it come faster, because otherwise then it becomes your karma. It’s just a contemplation of death. That’s a good weapon to use against complacency, laziness, things like that. You say, “Well, I could wait for another day, wait for another year, wait for another lifetime to do all the work.” But if you let go of this opportunity, you never know when it’s going to come again. You see people coming into the monastery, and they stay for a while, and then they disappear. You have no idea where they’re going. It’s like that scene in the Divine Comedy where Dante talks to these people who appear in a whirlwind. Their faces appear for a moment, and then they’re gone. You don’t know how long that whirlwind is going to take to whirl them back around again. So when you have the opportunity, when you can surface a little bit and your nose is above water, take the advantage to breathe. Take the opportunity to train your mind while you have the opportunity, because it’s the trained mind that’s going to make all the difference. Everything’s up to trust, hope, and faith that things will work out in the end. There’s no guarantee. The only guarantee you have is your trained mind. And if your mind isn’t trained now, we’ve got to train it now. Death could happen at any time. So these are the weapons that you use to deal with the thought of death. Thoughts that come into your mind that are going to pull you away. In fact, the Buddha has a whole slew of weapons. It all comes based on this foundation you’re building here with the breath. Everything else comes out of this. As the Chan Fung used to say, this is the foundation for our skill right here, which is dealing with the breath. Everything else comes out of this. So this has to be your primary focus. As for those other weapons, it’s like when you’re in a battle. Say you have a gun. And you have a knife. And you have a spear. Well, you use those weapons as necessary. But you never want to give up your strong position, your stronghold here. And you never want to give up your determination that you’re going to win the battle. One of Ajahn Mun’s last Dharma talks was right on this point. He says the one thing you never want to abandon, and there’s all these other things you have to let go of in the practice, but one thing you hold on to is your determination not to come back. Not to have to come back and do this all over again. Because it’s the Dharma promises, when you win this battle, there’s nothing else you have to fight for. Nothing else you have to struggle for. The job is done. There’s no other job in the world that ever gets done. You work and work and work, and finally you just can’t work any longer because you don’t have the strength. Or else people don’t let you do the work. But the work of the world never gets done. It’s a constant effort. People tend to forget this, how much effort goes into just being alive. This is one of the Buddha’s major insights, to see how much we have to keep working. Keep fabricating just to be here, just to have a present moment. It’s something we do with compulsion. In fact, we don’t know how not to do it. That’s what we’re learning, how not to be constantly fabricating the present. That’s what it ultimately comes down to. The problem is we don’t realize how much we’re fabricating. Our entire experience of space and time in the present moment is a fabrication. A lot of effort goes into it, and it’s an effort that never gets done, unless you decide to take this path, the path that puts an end to it all. We’re scared of that kind of end, but we actually get there. We realize it is the ultimate happiness. This is the only job that the world has to offer that can come to completion. And the completion is total happiness, ultimate happiness, ultimate well-being. So take this opportunity while you have it. It starts with these simple things, being with a breath, being alert, being mindful. And it builds on that. That’s one of the reasons why the path is so reliable. It starts right where you are and stays right where you are. It’s a developing of right where you are. You don’t have to go believing anything else. You have to believe that you’ve got the potential right here. Some of these very simple things that people tend to overlook, but when you develop them, they take you places you could never imagine.

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