Embodying the Dhamma

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Listen to the Dhamma, and it seems to be words, concepts. Then we take the concepts and the words and we try to apply them to experience. As long as they’re on the level of concepts—things you listen to, things you think about—there are going to be problems. Concepts are abstract. That’s why discernment, or wisdom on the level of what you listen to and what you think about, is not all that effective in treating the mind. And it’s not considered real wisdom, real discernment. The real discernment has to come from developing. You have to take these qualities and develop them in the mind so you can get a sense of exactly what the Buddha is getting at. The Pali term is bhavanamayappanya. The discernment that comes from practice, the discernment that comes from developing the mind. One very important way of getting a feel for these qualities is trying to see how they apply to dealing with the breath. In other words, you can hear the abstract quality of equanimity. When is it right to be equanimous with the breath? What is right effort applied to the breath? And you find as you get a better and better sense of what’s working and what’s not working with the breath, what kinds of breathing help the mind, what kinds of breathing are not good for the mind, what ways of approaching the breath are putting too much pressure on it, what ways of approaching are putting too little pressure on it, you begin to get a feel for things. And it’s this feel for things that helps you understand the Dhamma. It’s understanding on that level, not on the level of thoughts or concepts. But on the level of the interplay within your mind, between the mind and the body, and between different events going on in the mind. And this kind of knowledge takes time. You don’t get a feel for things simply by reading books or hearing other people talk about things. It’s like learning how to sail a boat. They can tell you about where you place your hand on the rudder and what you’re supposed to do, but getting a feel for when you have to push the rudder to the left, when you have to push it to the right, that takes time. And sometimes you’ll find you have to flip the boat over several times before you get a sense of what’s too much and what’s too little. So it’s to be expected that there are going to be times when you stray off the path, when you go into one extreme or another, the extreme of being too active or too passive, too accepting of things, or too irritated with things. There has to be a sense of a little level of irritation in your practice. You’re irritated at your defilements. You’re irritated that greed, anger, and delusion can sneak up and put their hands over your eyes, or put warped glasses over your eyes. Everything gets distorted. It’s going to happen. The question is learning how not to get stymied when it happens. Have the patience to look at events from a slightly detached point of view. This is why it’s so important to get a sense of the observer in the mind. The part of the mind that simply watches, looks at what’s going on, and can put a little question mark against your thoughts. The conclusions you come to as to where you are in your practice, what’s happening with the practice, where there is progress, where there’s no progress. Have a part of the mind that can always step back from those things so that when you’re in the middle of a problem, you’re not totally surrounded by the problem, but at least part of you has stepped outside the problem to get a little bit of perspective. So when that little bit of irritation at the defilements blows into full-scale anger, which then doesn’t stop inside the mind, it goes out to other people, situations outside, all kinds of stuff, or it can turn on you as a person, as a whole. This happens so many times in the practice. Suddenly you decide that you are a wonderful meditator or you’re a miserable meditator, and you go back and forth between those two extremes. The question is not, “What kind of meditator are you?” It’s, “What are you doing right now? What’s happening? How are you responding right here and right now?” Because your practice as a whole is going to be a mixed bag. That’s for sure. Until it gets really onto the Noble Paths, there’s always going to be a mixture of skillful and unskillful. Overshooting the mark, undershooting the mark. And the way to get past all that is to have this sense of the observer. It’s a construct, for sure, but it’s a useful one because it helps give you the perspective you need in order to be your own teacher. This, more than anything else, is really essential in the practice. Whether the teacher is here in the monastery or not, you have to have your own inner teacher. You have to be training your inner teacher because there’s nobody else who can sit there in your mind and watch you as you’re meditating and whisper advice. What you already have is lots of different voices in your mind whispering advice. The question is learning how to discern which of the voices you should listen to and which ones you shouldn’t. That comes from practice, from having that ability to back up a little bit and just watch. And as that sense of the watcher gets more and more solid, you find that you can detect more and more subtle things going on in the mind. And it’s a longer perspective as well. So you can see patterns in your meditation. Sometimes you’ll find that you tend to go through cycles. Things seem to be going fine, and all of a sudden there’s a crash. And then you react to the crash. And things struggle back and forth for a while, and finally you get on the path again, and things seem to be going fine again, and then you crash again. It’s important that you learn how to, one, be non-complacent when things are going fine, to realize that it’s not totally hunky-dory. There’s going to be some missteps, and it’s because of the missteps that you’re going to lose your way at some point. So you can’t be complacent when things are going well, and you can’t let yourself get depressed or tied up in knots when they’re not going well. We can have that sense of the long view over time, and the detached viewer in the present moment. That helps you get perspective on what’s happening, and also enables you to get that feel for what’s working and what’s not working. So when you listen to different Dharma topics, you realize that all of these things relate to how you’re dealing with the breath. You notice in Ajahn Lee’s writings, he sometimes talks about the five faculties as they relate to the breath, the seven factors of awakening as they relate to the breath, the eightfold noble path, all the wings to awakening, and more. They’re embodied in the way you relate to your breathing, what you do with the breathing. And it’s in the relating and the doing that you actually embody those Dharmas. Remember, the Dhamma is actually a quality of the mind. The words are pointers. Those are not the real Dhamma. There’s the Dhamma of the words, there’s the Dhamma of the practice, and the practice is just this—how you’re relating to the breath, how you’re relating to the mental states surrounding the breath. So the words should be pointing right here. This is where they get embodied. Once they’re embodied, they’re there in the mind as relationships, as attitudes. So when you tune into the breath, the experience with which you’ve learned how to tune in properly will embody a lot of the proper Dharma qualities right there, without you having to know their names. So again, this takes time, it takes effort, but the important thing is to have the proper perspective all the way through. So even when the mind is in a wretched mood, not all of the mind is in that mood. Part of it is observing, and that’s the important thing. Let these things not have power over the mind. Like that passage in Lumbudun, when someone asked him if he had anger in his mind, he said, “Well, it’s there, but I don’t take it. I don’t take hold of it. I don’t want it. Just leave it there.” Things can come popping up in the mind through past karma, but in present karma, you’re not creating any reaction. And exactly how free that is, and exactly how free of the influence of those things that is, that’s what you have to get there. You have to get there in your own practice to understand what he’s talking about. But the basic principles right here is developing this observer. That may not be the unconditioned. It’s definitely not the unconditioned, but it plays an important role in getting you there. It’s a relatively unconditioned spot in the mind. And even though it may not be absolute, it’s good to have something that you can use, something relatively better than your normal state in which you just flounder around in your emotions and flounder around in your misconceptions. This requires patience, endurance, and the ability not to get worked up over things. Finding out where the buttons are in your mind. Other people can push your buttons because you’re always pushing your buttons. When you learn not to push the buttons, then that observer gets stronger and stronger. Or when you learn to recognize the buttons and learn not to react when they’re pushed. All of these are important skills in learning how to train that inner teacher that you need to keep watching over you 24 hours a day, except when you’re asleep. Ultimately, the presence or the absence of the teacher doesn’t make that much difference in your practice, because you’re not here to play. You’re here to please the teacher. If you have to please anybody, try to please your inner teacher and keep training that inner teacher so it’s more and more worth pleasing. I remember when Ajaan Foong passed away, there was a sense of loss. But after he was gone, I began to realize that a lot of his teachings had become fixed in my mind. And there they remain as my teacher. It’s like the Buddha said when he was about to pass away. He said, “The Dhamma and the Vinaya that I’ve taught, those will be your teacher when I’m gone.” It’s not just the words that he taught, but it was the embodiment of the Dhamma that you developed for the practice. That’s your teacher. That’s your touchstone for understanding what the words are all about and for keeping you in line, keeping yourself in line. So whenever things get difficult, stop and ask yourself, “Okay, which part of the mind is observing this?” And try to stay right there with the observer. And your ability to stick there with the observer, that’s what’s going to see you through.

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