Labels

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As I mentioned this afternoon, Ajaan Fu once said that the students he found easiest to teach were the ones who had the fewest preconceptions about the path. Merchants from the town would come out sometime in the evening of the monastery and sit them down to meditate. They hadn’t read anything about what the Buddha taught. They didn’t read much, to speak of at all. But they did know that their minds were a mess and they wanted to straighten them out. So he said, “Okay, focus on the breath.” And that’s what they do. Because they had no specific idea where this was going, it was easy for them to settle down with the breath and then follow it where it would take them. Instead of trying to anticipate where it was going to go or what was going to happen next, they would stay right there. It may not necessarily be easy, but at least those issues that come from having a lot of preconceived notions about the path were not getting in the way. They may have had other issues and concern about their work, concern about their family, but those were obviously distractions. But when we’ve read a lot about what the Buddha had to teach, sometimes it seems, “Well, this is not a distraction. It’s keeping track of what we’re doing, giving us the right labels to apply.” And just that is enough to insinuate a lot of distracted thinking into the mind, thinking that, “Well, this is part of what we’re doing,” and then it just pulls us away from the breath. So try to be as close to the sensation of breathing as possible, with as few labels placed on top of it. You need labels to begin with. Without labels, you can’t do concentration. It’s just learning to keep the labels as directly related to what you’re experiencing as possible. It’s kind of funny, this business with labels. The mind has to send out a message to itself. If the mind were one unity, it wouldn’t have to send messages, but it’s not. There are all kinds of voices going on in the mind and so you need a message to keep reminding yourself where you’re supposed to direct your attention, which thoughts are relevant, which ones are not. This label, “the breath, the breath, the breath,” serves as your standard. You’ve got the in-breath and you’ve got the out-breath. Those are really all the labels you need. Then there’s a label where the mind keeps note of the fact that it’s with the breath or that it’s not with the breath. That’s another set of labels that are useful. Then there come up questions about which of these sensations in the body are actually related to the breath and which sensations in the body are not. What it comes down to is that everything you sense in the body is related to the breath in one way or another. It’s either related to the in-and-out breath process or it’s related to the general field of breath energy in your body. That’s a useful label to have as well. It encompasses everything you’re sensing in the body. Because, after all, if it weren’t for the in-and-out breath, you wouldn’t have a sense of the shape of your body at all. If there were no movement in the body, there’d be nothing to define its shape. So everything you’re sensing in the body is related to the breath in one way or another. Keep that thought in mind. When you start sensing this field of energy as that, as a field of energy, as a field of breath energy, it helps you sort out which are healthy breath sensations and which ones are not. Certain sensations you put up with say, “Well, this must be a hard part of the body. This must be the bones. This must be the leg. This must be the arm. It’s got to be like that because it’s solid, because it certainly feels solid.” But then when you tell yourself, “Well, that’s a solid sensation. That’s breath, too.” You say, “Wait a minute. That doesn’t feel like a comfortable breath at all. It’s a blocked breath.” Learn to think of how it might flow so that it would flow properly. This is where we survey the body as we sit down to breathe, just to get a general sense of how the energy flow in the body is flowing, where it’s blocked, where it’s not blocked, where parts of the body seem to be missing because the blockage is so extreme. Survey the body. You can do the parts in any order at all. Just try to figure out a way that you cover the whole thing. You can go through the body as many times as you like, as long as the in-and-out breathing feels comfortable and you’re working with the sense of breath energy in the body to make it flow more and more smoothly. It opens up the different channels in the body. Experiment to see what feels good, what doesn’t feel good. As for all the Dharma lessons you’ve learned, all the theory that you build up around the meditation, just put it aside. Because you’re right here to be with the breath. Theory has its place, but right now, you can put it aside. Just try to be as totally with the breath as possible. Don’t hold any of your awareness back. Let yourself get immersed in the breath. There’s a term, kayakatasati, mindfulness immersed in the body. You want that quality of immersion, totally in the breath. You’re surrounded by breath. The breath comes in, it can come out. It can come in anywhere in the body. As you work through the body several times, and after a while you begin to feel everything feels connected, it’s flowing well, then you can place your attention at any one spot in the body and allow your awareness to feel like it’s radiating out of that spot to fill the whole body, like this candle here in the front of the room. The flame is in one spot, but its light illumines the whole room. Then try to maintain that whole-body awareness. It has a tendency to shrink. This is, after all, how we think about the past and the future. We drop our frame of reference with the body here in the present moment and shrink our awareness down to one little spot, and there it goes. It’s like it has to go through a tube in order to get to the past or get to the future. Or focus down to one spot and then, on the basis of that one spot, redefine what it’s sensing here so that it turns into a world of the past or the world of the future. But if you don’t let it shrink, it’s hard for the mind to get lost in the past, get lost in the future, really to go there. You can think about the past and think about the future without going there, with a sense of the whole body. But you can’t get lost in the past, lost in the future, as long as this whole-body awareness is going. So try to maintain it. Learn to keep it expansive. Keep it steady. These are the skills of the Master. The skills of meditation. The skills of getting the mind to settle down and then to stay there. As you’re doing this, you’re getting a sense also of how to deal with issues of stress. After all, it’s stressful breath that you’re working with to try to make less and less stressful. That right there is training in Right View. As a Buddha once told one of his students, Right View consists of seeing that whenever anything is arising, see it as stress arising. Whenever anything is passing away, see it as stress passing away. Learn to view things in those terms, and you’re headed in the right direction. So when you’re practicing this way, there’s no clear division between concentration practice and insight practice. You’re training the mind to look in terms of insight, and at the same time, you’re training the mind to settle down. The more fully immersed you are in the present moment, the more fully immersed you are in this process of working with the breath, untangling the tangles that keep things blocked, opening things up inside. The practice is all of a piece. So you’re doing insight or you’re doing concentration. You say, “Well, it doesn’t really matter. I’m following the path. I’m trying to bring everything together right here.” This is what’s so amazing about this practice. It embodies everything you need to know right here. If you stop to think, you can analyze in terms of the theory and get all the factors of the path all worked out, but you don’t need to analyze them. Just bring them together for the time being. The more fully immersed you are without pulling anything back, holding anything back, the closer you are to the terms of real insight. You notice when the Buddha expresses, the messages that come from insight. There’s something, “Oh, there is this. When there’s this, there’s that. When this stops, that stops. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this, the cessation of that. It’s just this and that, this and that. Or actually, this and this in the Pali. Not a lot of analytical terms. It’s just little pointers. Ultimately, you get the mind to a state where it’s so unified, it doesn’t need the pointers anymore. John Sawat once made an interesting observation. You get the mind ultimately to a place where there’s no sannyā, no perception. You begin to realize that the mind has been playing make-believe with itself all along. It’s saying,”Okay, let’s call this this and let’s call that that.” It’s like little kids saying, “I’ll be the doctor and you’ll be the patient,” or, “I’ll be the cowboy and you’ll be the Indians.” That’s how make-believe starts. You apply labels to things. Then you stick with those labels, play with them. You come to an agreement over the labels. That’s how people talk. It’s the same way the mind has labels for itself. There are these internal agreements. “Well, this will mean this and that will mean that. We’ll call this this and we’ll call that that.” But what we’re doing as we’re meditating is undoing that process. We don’t have to come to those agreements. We don’t have to make-believe anymore. We don’t have to set up these conventions. That’s the direction in which the insight is going to take us. So an important part of getting there is to learn to strip away the mind’s other labels for things right now. The more fully immersed you are in the breath, the fewer labels you have to apply to things, the closer you are in getting in the direction where insight is going to take you. So allow yourself to be fully immersed in the breath and don’t hold things back to try to comment on this. Don’t comment on that too much—just enough to get things more and more refined, more and more steady, less and less burdensome, less and less disturbed. Just that amount of activity will take you in the direction you want to go.

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