Specifics

March 17, 2005

We look at the same thing every night, the mind looking at the breath, in hopes that we’ll see something new, either in the mind or in the breath. It’s like a route that you take over and over again. It’s so easy to stop noticing things. The same interchange, the same restaurants, the same scenery. After a while, you lapse into a state of not being very observant. That can happen. So try to fight that tendency. Each breath is a new breath. There’s a possibility of seeing something in each breath that you haven’t seen before. No matter how much you’ve learned about the breathing process, there’s always more to learn. Look at all those talks that Ajahn Lee gave on different ways of conceiving the breath, seeing the breath. Part of it’s having an experimental approach to the breath, trying new things and thinking up new things to try. It’s an important part of the meditation, this ingenuity in dealing with problems. Because many times we’ll come across what seem to be the same problems over and over again. Maybe pain in the body, impatience, lack of energy. Whatever the issue may be, you try one approach and sometimes it’ll work. And then the next time the same problem comes up, the old approach doesn’t work. Which means you’ve got to be on top of things. Which is one of the reasons why ingenuity is such an important part of insight. If meditation is simply a process of following the numbers, putting in blue paint where it says two and putting in brown paint where it says four, you get something that looks like a picture, but it’s not really the same sort of thing. There’s no exploration. And how can you hope to learn anything unless you explore? This is why Ajahn Lee once said, “If you see something that seems right, turn it around, turn it inside out and see where the inside-out version can also be right.” In other words, you play with the sense of the breath energy coming up in the body and that seems good. Well, turn it around and see what it’s like to make it go down. Like the breath is something you have to bring into the body or push out of the body. What happens to the meditation? What happens to your state of concentration when you allow yourself to think the breath is already there no matter what you do? And it’s simply a matter of rearranging the furniture, playing with different aspects of breath that are already there in the body. And since you don’t have to pull things in or push things out, that creates less of a burden on the mind. Think of the breath coming in from the back of the body. Ajahn Fu once talked about thinking of there being a line going down the middle of the body and the breath comes in and out of that line, comes into that line, goes out of that line. Thinking of the breath in that way, what does it do? What problems is it good for? This is one of the reasons why the instructions that Ajahn Lee gives are general principles, but the insight comes in working out the details. One, seeing a problem, and then two, trying to find some way to solve it. So many times people sit here and they don’t see problems at all. They just get a general sense of frustration, but they don’t get very specific. Okay, what is the precise problem? That’s a lot of it right there. You’re sitting here and your mind isn’t settling down. Okay, is it the breath? Is it attitudes you’re bringing in from the day? Is it a general sense of discouragement? Get rid of that discouragement in any way you can. Think of all the people in the past who’ve been worse than you. They’re softer than you are in their meditation, yet somehow they’re able to rally their strength, come up with a solution. So instead of sitting here with a general sense of dissatisfaction, or a general sense of frustration, or a general sense of not being able to settle down, try to be specific. What precisely are the problems? Do you have trouble staying with the beginning of the breath, the end of the breath, the middle of the breath? How about the spaces between the breath? Is it easier to stay with the in-breath, easier to stay with the out-breath? Where do you wander off? If you start asking precise questions like this, then you’re going to start getting precise answers. If all you can think of is generalities, how much merit you have. Or how good or bad your concentration is in general, you don’t get the specific answers you need. So when things aren’t going right in the meditation, try to be very specific and figure out precisely what’s wrong first. What’s the problem? Usually once you’ve been able to figure out a problem, the answer can come a lot more easily. At least you get a way of approaching the answer. Because if the problem is with the breath, okay, you can work with the breath. If the problem is with the mind, you turn around and you work with the mind. Because when you come right down to it, all the issues are specific. So you feel you have a problem with lust. Well, it’s not just one big lust. There’s lust for different things. Just kind of go through the list. If you notice that you lust for particular things, particular sights, sounds, smells, tastes, whatever, okay, go down the list. And if you find yourself, say, focusing on a particular part of somebody’s body, well, focus on the area around it, inside the body. But it’s not so much a lust in general. It’s your habit of focusing on certain things and blocking other things out. Well, bring in the other information. Bring in the other facts of the case. And you’ll see that each instance of lust has its own particular characteristics. Same with desire in general. Not just lustful desire, any kind of desire. Desire is not a monolithic thing. You have specific desires for specific things. When you’re angry, you’re angry about specific things. You may have a general tendency to fly off the handle, but what precisely are the things that make you fly off? Why? What satisfaction do you get out of flying off the handle? What regrets do you have afterwards? When strong emotions come into the mind, they really do seem monolithic, as if it’s the only thing you can think of is to be angry at the only thing you can think of is to desire. But that’s a ruse. What they’ve done is they’ve pushed all your other desires out of the way, because it’s part of the mind that doesn’t want to be angry, part of the mind that doesn’t want to lust. It gets stunted, because it’s only given a little corner of the mind in which to hide. So when one type of desire comes up, ask yourself, “What about the desire for the opposite thing? Is that there in the mind someplace?” Then you may say, “I’m over here, I’m over here, but it seems awfully small.” Well, try to give it some space. Give it some respect, even though it may seem small and weak, small and weak things. Things can grow strong. Little fires can grow. Little snakes can kill. Little princes can grow up and be dangerous. So don’t underestimate the small things in the mind. Just because it’s small now doesn’t mean that it always will be. Give it more space. At least let there be a struggle in the mind. Don’t just give in to whatever the dominant desire or the dominant anger seems to be at any one particular time. Learn to look at things as particulars. After all, you begin to see common patterns. But when you take each specific instance of any of the hindrances—sensual desire, ill-will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety or uncertainty—deal with them as specific, individual things. When you come out with a little victory over one of them, don’t let that voice in the mind say, “Well, it’s only one victory, but I’m going to come back sometime, so don’t think you’re so smart.” Don’t listen to that. Keep piling up the little victories in the mind. That’s what all this comes down to. Each breath is a specific breath. Each way of conceiving the breath is a specific strategy. Each disturbance that comes up in the mind is a specific disturbance. Take them on, one by one, and after a while you start getting skillful. You’re not dealing with generalities. You’re dealing with things as they’re actually happening, which is where you can make all the difference.

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