Always Looking Inside

May 16, 2005

Once, during my first year staying with Ajahn Phuong, we had a monk visiting us from the city. The evening came. We were sitting on Ajahn Phuong’s porch. He looked down the valley, and the golden sunlight of the late afternoon was washing everything and how beautiful it was there. The words had hardly left his mouth when Ajahn Phuong said, “Well, don’t look outside. Look at what’s in the mind saying that it’s beautiful, because that’s where the problem is.” I was really struck by that, because the monk’s remarks seemed innocent. But Ajahn Phuong was getting to an important point of the practice. We come to a quiet place like this not to enjoy the beauties of nature, but to make use of the quiet, to make use of the solitude, to see our own minds. Because whether nature is beautiful or not is not the issue. Whether we appreciate the beauties of nature or not, that’s not the issue either. The issue is we’ve got this mind running around making comments on things all the time. Liking this, not liking that, and focusing its awareness outside, so it’s hardly aware of what it’s doing. And yet it’s the big troublemaker. There was another time when we got a letter from a meditator in Singapore. He was explaining to Ajahn Phuong his meditation technique, which was whatever he was focused on. He tried to see that it was impermanent suffering, not self. And again, Ajahn Phuong’s comment was, “Turn around and look at who’s doing the commenting, who’s saying that things are impermanent, stressful, not self.” That’s the troublemaker. So this is what our practice is, always looking inside, looking at the movements of the mind, the comments, the fabrications of the mind. Because they cause trouble. They cause suffering. But as part of the path, we have to use these fabrications. After all, the Eightfold Path is a path that’s fabricated. It’s put together out of our intentions. It has right views, right resolves, right mindfulness, right concentration. All these things require the mind to do some work. But the process of putting together a path is what should focus our intention inside. Our issues are our views, our resolves. And to make them right, we have to pay attention to them. And where do they happen? They happen right here where the body and the mind meet at the breath. So focus your attention right here. See what moves here. A lot of the movement, of course, is going to be physical. The breath coming in and going out. Other things happening in the body. But as the breath grows more and more still, you begin to see the movements of the mind. It’s the same principle. Finding a place of quiet and solitude. When the outside movement gets less and less oppressive, the inside movement begins to come to the fore. Because it’s so easy when you live with other people to say, “Well, I’m unhappy because of that person or this person.” Or, “I’m stressed out because of the noise,” or whatever else is the outside factor that’s impinging on the mind. But you come to a quiet place like here, you sit under the tree, and the mind is still complaining, still chattering away to itself. Once I had someone come here and, after a day of meditating under the trees, came out and complained that it was too noisy. There were all those bugs in the leaves. The wind going through the branches. Birds singing. He was used to meditating in hermetically sealed meditation halls. It just shows you how possible it is for the mind to complain about anything at all. So the issue when you’re meditating is to keep focusing back on what it is that you’re doing that’s contributing. It’s not a matter of saying that when people outside treat you unfairly that it’s your fault. But it does say that the amount that you’re going to suffer from their unfair treatment does depend on your own actions, your own views about things, your own attitudes about things, where you feed for happiness. That’s something you can change that lies within your own power, which is why it’s so important to focus your attention on what your mind is doing right now. And to see the movements of the mind, you not only give it a quiet environment, but you also give it a still point inside, focusing on the breath, so that you notice whenever it moves away from the breath, you’re sensitive to its having moved. It’s like having a very precise ruler that has all the sixteenths of an inch and thirty-seconds of an inch all marked out. You place it down on something, and if there’s anything that’s moving there, it moves the slightest little bit because it has a very precise level of marking. You can see the tiny movements, which you might have missed if your ruler only marked inches or feet. You want to have something very precise and very still so you can see these movements of the mind. So we come to a quiet place like this not to enjoy the quiet. It’s going to be there in the background, the fact that it’s so quiet and so peaceful is a help. But that’s not the main issue. We can’t have it totally quiet here. After all, we have neighbors. We live in a human world. But it’s quiet enough so you can focus inward to see what’s going on in the mind. And not just to see, but also to have an activity to work at. Bringing the mind to stillness, putting together the various factors of the path, that keeps you focused on where the real issues are. This habit that the mind has of creating suffering for itself, even though it wants happiness, you would think that everything it would do would be for the sake of happiness and actually produce happiness. But it doesn’t always produce that happiness. The question is why? Well, there’s ignorance. Some things we like to do, but they don’t lead to happiness, and we like to forget about that fact. Or other things that would lead to true happiness, but we don’t do them because we don’t like them. The question is, why is that? Sometimes it’s just plain old not knowing. Other times it’s willful not knowing. In fact, most of the time it’s that willfulness. Certain things we would just rather forget. And a very easy way to forget is to keep focusing our attention outside, outside, on things outside. So in order to see through those walls we set up inside, you want to focus your attention inside, right here, at what you’re doing. And that’s how you make the most of being in a quiet place, being in nature, where the disturbances are few. So that you can see the disturbances the mind is creating all the time and learn to do something about them.

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