Immediate Knowledge

July 12, 2006

All the things we need to know to put an end to suffering are very close. Things we can experience immediately. On the one hand, there’s the pleasure and pain that we experience. And on the other hand, there’s the question of what the mind is doing. What is your mind doing right now? Is there any connection between the two, between what you’re doing and the pleasure and pain you’re experiencing? That’s something you’d think we would know, because they’re happening right here. You can experience them right here. And yet, for most of us, it’s a mystery, because our attention is out someplace else. We have all our theories about the world. We can explain all kinds of abstractions, things that are far away in space and time. And yet, the things that are going on in the world are going on in the mind, what the mind is doing. Of all these activities, all the events in the mind right now, what’s the intention? Which one is shaping things in the present moment? And what are the things being shaped? That’s something we very rarely know. And as for the pleasure and pain that’s coming from our present intentions, that’s something we very rarely know as well. So this is why it’s such a big shift in our values, a big shift in our whole approach to knowledge, to come here and practice the Buddhist teachings. Because we have to look very carefully at things we’ve taught ourselves to overlook, out of the feeling that there’s something more important out there, that there’s something more interesting out there. But now we’re told to turn around and look at things that we’ve been ignoring all along. It goes against the grain. But if we have any hope for true knowledge, it has to come from right here. Otherwise, all we’re dealing with is concepts and memories. And you know how slippery those are, how arbitrary they can be. We’re asked to build our concepts on things that are immediately here, so we can keep checking them again and again and again with every present moment. And you can test them. How does your understanding of the mind, how does your understanding of the body, how does your understanding of pleasure and pain result in more pleasure and pain? More pleasure, more pain? Less pleasure, less pain? You can check that right here if you pay very careful attention. So this is why we’re focusing on the breath, because it’s something right here, right now. And if you have doubts about other things, you can at least be confident that when the breath is coming in, you know it’s coming in. And if you don’t know whether it’s coming in or not, you can know that as well. But when you’re with the breath, you know it. You know that you know it. That’s the beginning of a certain measure of certainty. You can take that as your beachhead. And for the time being, that’s all you have to know. Is it coming in? Is it going out? If you want, you can play with it a little bit to see if it’s possible to make it more comfortable or not. And if you find a rhythm of breathing that’s really comfortable, try to stick with that. Right there, you’re getting your beginning lesson in discernment, learning to discern differences in the breath and seeing what differences in terms of pleasure and pain are related to your intention—the way you perceive the breath, the way you decide that you’re going to breathe. So the beginning point for certainty lies right here, as you focus on the breath and as you begin to explore the breath. So try not to let your thoughts wander too far away from here, because when they wander away, they’re wandering into uncertainty. Try to familiarize yourself with this spot right here. This is where the mind and the body meet, right at the breath. This is where intention and feeling and attention and perception, all those factors of name and name and form, all meet. Even though you may not be able to parse them out yet, at least you know that all the important things you need to know are right here. Try to make this right here the basis of whatever other certainty you’re going to try to find in life. Because once this problem is solved, the problem of “What are you doing that’s causing suffering? What can you do to put an end to suffering?” is what the Buddhist teachings are all about. It’s what right view is all about. The whole path follows from that. Once you’ve solved this problem, then you’ve solved all the problems that really need to be solved. Once the mind learns how to just drop all of its old habits that cause suffering—the things it can’t imagine any other way of doing things, or that it’s clung to because it hasn’t really paid attention to what it’s doing—you can drop those. As you drop those, new things appear in the mind, new understandings, until you hit the understanding that there is a Deathless, there is a part of the mind. It lies totally beyond suffering. Knowing that is worth more than anything else in the world. So it can all be found right here. If you learn how to look, if you look continually, if you learn how to question and learn how to watch, you’ll find that the meditation tends to go back and forth between those two things. There are times when you notice that the mind isn’t still enough, and that’s why there’s stress. So you try to make it more still. You try to calm it down and just drop any other activity. Then you stay with that stillness until you get more sensitive to the stillness. Then you begin to realize that even in the stillness there’s an element of stress. So you pick up the questioning again to find out what you’re doing that’s causing that stress. Until you see the intentional element there. Then you drop that. And then you settle in again. Practice leans back and forth in these two directions of settling in and then questioning and settling in and then questioning. It’s like walking. Sometimes you lean a little bit to the left, lean a little bit to the right. You let go of your left footsteps, your right footsteps. But the left foot and the right foot are part of the same body. They’re part of the same process, the walking. And here, as Ajaan Lee says, we’re walking in place, like soldiers on a parade ground. We’re stepping in place. The difference is that their stepping in place really doesn’t accomplish much, but ours does. We get more and more familiar with this spot right here. We’re more familiar with what the mind is doing, more familiar with what results from what it’s doing. This way, your intentions get more clear. You get more refined. The pleasure you gain from this process gets more refined. You can finally reach the point of no intention, because you don’t need intention anymore. Up to that point, there’s always something lacking. You always need to intend to do this, to choose to do that. But finally, everything gets so refined, there’s no more need for intention. It just falls away. This is something else that can happen right here. If you pay attention, if you’re observant, if you learn to ask the right questions, if you learn to watch carefully, everything opens up right here. All your doubts are resolved right here. Once your doubts about right here are resolved, you begin to realize that doubts about anything else are really not important, because resolving this doubt takes care of everything. (crickets chirping)

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2006/060712%20Immediate%20Knowledge.mp3>