June 2, 2024

As you sit here trying to strip things down to their essentials, there are lots of things you could be thinking about right now. But for this hour, cut away all thoughts that are not related to the breath. There’s a word, upati, in Pali, which means baggage, all your paraphernalia. And try to set it aside, because this is what weighs us down. Going to John Lee’s image, it’s like magnets that keep pulling the mind, holding it in this constant cycle of getting born, eating, having some pleasure, having some pain, and then dying. And then doing it all over again, and again, and again. For what? I had a student one time who, one night during his meditation, started having memories of previous lifetimes. And he said, at the end of each life, the thought that came foremost to mind was, “What’s suffering? What’s suffering?” “For what?” “Is there some way that you can live? Is there some way that you can train the mind so that it doesn’t cause suffering for itself?” That’s the big issue. We all want happiness, and we scramble and fight and do everything we can to find that happiness. A lot of times the scramble and the fighting is precisely the thing that causes pain and suffering. So any thought that would pull you into another world, what they call “becoming” in Pali, learn to look at it askance. Say, “Where are you going? What is this?” And the best way to develop that attitude, first off, is just to say, for the time being, you’re not going to go with any of them at all. Of course, the mind will slip back into its old habits, but as soon as you catch it, bring it back to the breath. What you’re doing, of course, is creating a different world right here. But it’s a special kind of world. It’s a world that you can look at carefully. You can look at the processes of becoming. You can look at the processes of the mind’s intentions and their results as they happen, which is why this is a good state of becoming to develop. That’s one of the really interesting parts about the Buddhist strategy and the practice. Ultimately, we’re trying to get beyond this continued process of creating these worlds and then having them collapse on us. This is even the desire to be done with them. That ends up creating other worlds, because it’s the desire, it’s the craving, the delight that forms a focal point for the mind. And then around that focal point these states of becoming develop. So what are you going to do? The desire for becoming causes becoming. The desire for no becoming causes becoming. The Buddha’s way out was really interesting. He started out by creating these states of becoming that allow you to see the process. One, pull you out of your sensual cravings. Those are the main things that obscure the mind, because they’re always pointing outside to something that’s lacking, something that’s got your attention. And you replace them with these states of what are called form becoming. You inhabit fully the form of the body. The breath helps you because the breath energy fills you. You breathe in, think of the whole body breathing in. You breathe out, the whole body breathes out. As you get more and more interested in how this happens and how you can deal with blockages and tense spots, the whole body process becomes more and more just that, a real whole body process. You’re pulling away from your sensual desires. You’re focusing instead on this world of the form of the body. And it’s from here that you can watch things more carefully. You can actually see how this process of becoming takes shape. It’s transparent becoming. And it requires skill. And the fact that it requires skill means that it requires your full attention. That, too, helps you see it. Because with sensual becoming, everything is focused on the object, on the thrill of the desire, and on a lot of make-believe and a lot of things that are ignored, like sitting and watching a play. Part of the interest in the play is that you can block out the fact that there are all these other people sitting in the auditorium with you. And you block out the knowledge that you know these are actors playing a role. And when they leave the stage, they’ll probably be chewing gum and chatting with each other and taking on totally different personalities. You block that out. So much of the enjoyment depends on blocking things out, pretending they’re not there. So that obscures. What’s actually going on? Whereas with concentration, everything has to come up into consciousness. Because things will come up into consciousness. All these other obstructions, all the other wanderings you might want to do right now. You have to be very clear about the fact that they’re there and the fact that you’re not going to follow them. I’m always amazed at these descriptions of concentration as being totally one-pointed and totally blind to the rest of the world, as opposed to wonderful mindfulness which is open and aware. The Buddha described concentration as an enlarged state of mind. All of his images are of awareness filling the body, surrounding the body, all around, in all directions. Because it’s only with that kind of awareness that you can catch these incongruous thoughts as they begin to form. You catch them before they start taking over. Then you have to keep reminding yourself that you don’t need those thoughts right now. They’re not helpful. If the mind is going to think, have it think about how to make the breath more comfortable. Once there’s a sense of comfort, what’s the most effective way of allowing it to spread through the body? In this way, you begin to see the essential parts of any state of becoming. There has to be a view—in this case, the view that this is a worthwhile activity, and the view that any obstructions or any hindrances are just that, they’re hindrances, as opposed to being those wonderful, engrossing thoughts that you might otherwise think they are. And there have to be habits, practices. In this case, your habitual way of following thought has to be changed to another, a new habit, a new training—how to stick with the breath, how to enjoy the breath, how to get engrossed in the breath. There are steps, there are methods, there are ways of doing this. And although there are some general patterns at work, in general, there are some general ways. You also have to figure out which specific ways of snaring the attention of the mind, attracting the mind, really work for you. This is why the Buddha offered so many forms of concentration practice. Some people find the breath difficult to follow. Well, there’s the contemplation of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. You can contemplate other aspects of the body. Feelings, mind states. There are lots of concentration objects. The whole point of it is to find something that the mind really does find interesting, something it wants to stick with, it finds congenial. And then you follow the methods. So you’ve got the view, you’ve got the habits and practices, and then you’ve also got a sense of who you are. This, again, is one of the more interesting strategies, because eventually you want to start taking apart that sense of who you are. But in the meantime, all you need is a sense, “I’m responsible for my actions. I can read them. I can sense what their results are.” That’s as much “I” as you need. Because you want to look more and more simply at events in the body and the mind, just as that, as events arise and pass away in connection with other ones. Because that’s the whole point. It’s not just watching things arising and passing away. You have to see what arises with them, what passes away with them. Because once you see the connections, then you can have more control over what’s happening. This may seem to be fighting against the idea of not-self, which is that ultimately things are outside of our control. But try lifting your arm. And as long as you’re not paralyzed, you can lift your arm. Decide when to breathe in. Decide when to breathe out. You can do that. So while you do have this ability to control things, make the most of it. Because what you want to do is see how far these things can go. You’re exploring all these essential elements of becoming, the views that support the becoming, the habits, and the sense of who you are in all this. Try to make them skillful so they’re actually more conducive to understanding the process. Then try to question, “Is the state of becoming you’ve got here as easeful as possible, or is it possible to get a more easeful state of becoming?” That question begins to sensitize you to different areas of stress that you might have overlooked otherwise. You keep at this, and you find it’s like peeling layers off of an onion. You’ve got one layer peeled off. Well, there’s another layer, so you peel that one off. So you try to get the state of concentration more stable, more subtle, more refined, stripping away all things that are unessential. Because you see more and more, it’s the unessential things that wear you down. It weighs you down. Finally, you can simply see things arising and passing away. As the Buddha said, when you’re at that state of the subtle arisings and passings away of stress, the idea of existence doesn’t occur to the mind. The idea of nonexistence doesn’t occur to the mind, because it sees things passing away and they certainly don’t look like they’re existing in any sense. You see them arising, and you say, “Well, they don’t really not exist, either, because there’s something happening.” But we can get the mind past the ideas of existence and nonexistence, and you undercut the basis for any notions about becoming or not becoming. That’s how you get the mind out of that dilemma. It’s by stripping things away, away, away, even till the end. The idea of being and not being starts seeming superfluous. So this is the general pattern. It’s contemplating and then letting go. Contemplating what’s unnecessary and letting go. Holding on for the meantime what does seem to be necessary. Then developing a more and more subtle notion of what, in what seems to be necessary, actually isn’t. This is one of the reasons why, on the external level, we try to live as simply as possible. That’s why the Buddha has those contemplations of the requisites that we do every evening. It might seem strange. Why do we keep chanting about food, clothing, shelter, and medicine? It’s because these things are necessary for life. Actually how necessary? How much is necessary? When you practice looking at things on the external level in this way, how much food do you really need? How much shelter do you really need? Because if you take more than you really need, you’re depriving yourself of other things. We don’t tend to think of things in that way. Everything is just the more, the better, the more, the better. But we forget to contemplate that there’s also a trace of what we’re afraid of. The more clothing you have, the more you have to take care of it, the more space you need to store it. The same with food. The more you eat, beyond a certain point, the more you cause disease in the body. And you’re wasting valuable resources that you could put to a better use. Years back, when I was teaching at Chiang Mai University, all my other friends who were Westerners teaching at the university tended to have their apartments or their rooms broken into because people came to steal their stereos, came to steal this, that, and the other thing. It never happened to me, because I didn’t have anything for anybody to steal. All I had was this little fan that nobody seemed to be interested in, and that was it. That’s your protection against theft. I once knew a professor at Harvard with a similar situation. He had this old Nissan Sentra, which was all banged up. He said he could park it anywhere in Cambridge and never have to lock the doors. Nobody was interested in it. So there’s a kind of protection in not having much at all. Nobody becomes jealous. Nobody wants to take your stuff away. The same principle applies in a lot of areas of life. As you start thinking about the necessities of life and begin to realize how little you can get on and how much better it is if you try to strip things down only to the essentials, you begin to see and appreciate the whole principle of renunciation, that there is a trade-off. If you take things more than necessary, you’re depriving yourself of other things, other opportunities. And then you learn to apply that same principle to the mind. This is where Lumpudun, one of the early Ajahns in the forest tradition, said that the world deals in things in pairs. But the Dhamma is just one thing clear through, stripping things down to their essentials and then stripping them down again and again and again. And it’s only that way that you find what’s really of value. So it’s like that old question you used to ask yourself. You used to ask in World War II, “Is this trip necessary?” When the mind is about to think of something, ask yourself, “Is that trip necessary?” Nine times out of ten, you’ll find that it’s not, and it’s better not to go. The more you cultivate the breath, the more you find that the happiness that you used to seek in thoughts and senses and sights and sounds and smells and tastes and tactile sensations actually can be found here in much better form, much more reliable. As the Buddha said, it’s a kind of pleasure that’s blameless, not only in the sense that it doesn’t take anything away from anyone else, but also it keeps the mind clearer. So many other pleasures fog the mind, but the pleasure of concentration makes the mind more transparent. And the more transparent it is, the more you understand where true happiness really lies.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/080215%20Down%20to%20Essentials.mp3>