Things In and Of Themselves

August 26, 2008

It’s good to come out to a quiet place like this, to get away from all the issues and narratives of your life, and just be with things in and of themselves, with the breath in and of itself. Try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath actually feels as it comes in and as it goes out. And you can test your preconceived notions about the breath. You may have some ideas of where it comes in and where it goes out, but watch it to see where you actually feel it. When the breath comes in, what sensations let you know the breath is coming in? What sensations let you know the breath is going out? Those sensations, that’s breath in and of itself. Because breath here is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, it’s the energy flow in the body that brings the air in and lets it go out. That relates to other aspects of energy in the body. Sometimes you get sensations in the arms and the legs, as far away as possible from the lungs, that are coordinated with the in-and-out breath. Those sensations are also an aspect of breath. Sometimes you sense a background level of energy in the body that’s still in and out of the lungs. That’s also called breath. In other words, any sensation of energy anywhere in the body counts as breath. As you get more sensitive to the sensations of the breath in and of itself, you can start experimenting with different ways of conceiving the breath, like this. Think of all the energy in the body as related to the breath. Try to notice what kind of mental image you hold in mind, and then see what effect it has on how you feel the breath. Some mental images will actually make the breath more comfortable. Others will make it less comfortable. So this is one thing you can experiment with to find which ways of conceiving or labeling the breath make it a good breath to settle down with. This is what we’re trying to do as we practice concentration, to get the mind to settle down here in the present moment. You settle down, you indulge in whatever sense of pleasure you get here. It’s like stocking up on food. There’s work the mind has to do beyond just settling down. But the settling down is an important part of getting ready for the work. And in the work of settling down, you begin to gain some insight into the mind right there, how your concepts have an effect on how you feel the body from within. Now you can use your concepts in order to create a more comfortable place here. And once the body is more comfortable, you notice how the mind is more and more willing to settle down. So just the process of getting the mind to settle down gives you some insight right there. As the Buddha once said, getting the mind into good, strong concentration, what he calls jhana, requires both insight and tranquility. You have to understand the workings of the mind. And to at least some extent, you have to get it to settle down properly. Not only to get it to settle down, but to get it to stay. There’s a common tendency when we meditate. Once the mind settles down a little bit, you say, “Okay, what’s next?” And the “what’s next” is to get it to stay. This is another level on which you begin to gain insight into the mind, because of the all kinds of impulses to say, “I’ve got to think about this,” or “I want to move there,” or “I want to get my practice going as fast as possible.” And you have to learn how to put all those impulses aside. Learn how to see through them. Remind yourself that good, solid progress doesn’t necessarily mean the fastest progress. If you get too impatient with your meditation, it’s like planting a rice grain, getting it in your rice plant, and it’s growing too slowly for your taste. You want to see the rice really fast, and so you pull it up, pull, pull, pull, to make it longer. Of course, that harasses the rice plant and may kill it. You may end up uprooting it entirely. So you’ve got to learn a sense of balance and have trust in the process that right concentration is part of the path. It’s not the case that you gain it and then just drop it and move on to something else. You stick with it. And in sticking with it, you begin to see there’s a lot you can learn about the mind. As you notice, the waves tend to stray away. Before, when you didn’t have this still point as a reference point, you hardly noticed the natural current of the mind, because there was nothing to measure it against. Now you’ve got a still point here. When the mind strays from the still point, you know. And because you know, that gives you the opportunity to look into it. Why is it straying? Where is it going? What does it want? And often you find that it’s one-sided. The waves are very poorly articulated. It’s just a general urge to move, to see something new. So here’s an opportunity to train that urge. Remind yourself, “I’m going to stay right here.” The moving around doesn’t gain anything at all. For the most part, it’s just old movies you’ve seen many, many times before. You know what Humphrey Bogart is going to say, because you’ve seen this movie countless times. Unfortunately for us, most of the movies that we see in our minds are not even the ones that Humphrey Bogart would star in. It’s more like trashy B-movies and C-movies. Movies you wouldn’t even pay money to see, and yet they run through your mind again and again. Here’s a chance to resist that old habit. This is a lot of what meditation is. It’s resisting old habits. And in the resisting, you learn how to understand them. To use another analogy, it’s like getting a sense of how strong the current is in a river. If you simply look at the surface of the river, you don’t know. If you take a raft going down the river, you don’t know how strong the current is, especially deep down in the river. It’s only when you build a dam across the river that you begin to gain a sense of how strong that current is. So as you’re practicing concentration, you’re building a dam in the mind. In the beginning, you’ll have the disconcerting experience of seeing the dam get washed away time and time again. But unlike a physical dam, you can just go back and build another one. Keep this up, because it doesn’t cost any money to build a dam. Then there will come times when a strong current will come through the mind, and you can resist it. You see it coming, you see why it’s coming, and you realize you don’t want to go along with it. You can withstand it. And just that much, you’ve learned a lot about the mind. So it’s important as you practice that you’re not too impatient. You want to stay right with what’s here, right here, right now, and not be continually anticipating what’s next. You’re conducting an experiment, and an important part of conducting experiments is that you’re willing to watch consistently, carefully, patiently. You’re here with the breath in and of itself, not the breath as it’s going to change into the next moment. You want to get used to having this perspective of things in and of themselves, simply as they’re directly sensed, without a lot of the interpretation we tend to put around them, without a lot of the anticipation we tend to push them into. Once you get a sense of how things are in and of themselves, then you can experiment with them, because you’re ready to watch. When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son, he started out first with a meditation on patience, equanimity. This is trying to keep your mind as patient and equanimous as earth. You throw death into the earth and it doesn’t get disgusted by it. You can pour perfume on the earth and the earth doesn’t get attracted by it. Similarly with fire. Fire can burn disgusting things or nice things, but it doesn’t feel one way or the other about them. Water can wash away disgusting things or nice things and it doesn’t react. The wind can blow disgusting and nice things and it blows them in just the same way. There’s only when you give a whole lot of instructions and patience that he then taught him breath meditation. Now, the breath meditation wasn’t just sitting and watching things, whatever comes up. Once you have a sense of an ability to be sensitive to the in-and-out breath, then you start training yourself. In various ways, you train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to the whole body, breathe in and out calming the breath, breathe in and out sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure. In other words, there are things that you will in the meditation, but it’s not just brute will. It’s based on a foundation where you’re willing to watch whatever comes up so you see what works and what doesn’t work, and you can adjust things accordingly. But the patient ability to be able to sit with things long enough until you really see them for what they are, that’s an important prerequisite. That and the honesty to admit what’s actually right there, so you’re not constantly reading into it more than is there or trying to deny what’s there. You’re seeing things in and of themselves as they actually are, as they’ve come to be. That’s the type of perception you’re aiming at. Then you first have to put the mind, though, in a position where it can do that, which is why you develop concentration, develop patience, develop equanimity. All these qualities are going to put the mind in a good position where it can really observe things as they’ve come to be, for what they are, simply on the very direct level of how you directly perceive them. So whatever work is required to get the mind in that position is work well spent, work well done, time well spent, and effort worth the investment. So once it gets there, don’t just throw it away in anticipation of what’s next. Getting the mind in this position puts you right where you need to be in order to see things clearly. Being able to see things consistently, because many things you’re going to observe will require time to understand them, to see the connection between a cause and its effect. Sometimes the connection is immediate, and sometimes it takes a long time to get worked out. So you want to be here throughout that long time, and that requires patience, powers of endurance, tenacity, a willingness to stay right here. You want to be here regardless of whether anything interesting is happening or not, because we’re not here just to see things that we anticipate. In fact, we’re here to see things that we don’t anticipate, which means that you have to be willing to admit that you don’t know what you’re going to see. Get in the position where it’s ready to see, and then you watch. And your willingness to watch consistently over time is what eventually will enable you to see things that are really special, that you couldn’t have anticipated, because they lie outside of the framework of what you’re used to. This is how we get outside of that framework, is by watching things as they happen in and of themselves, as they’ve come to be right here and now. So try to keep your powers of perception right on this level. Don’t let them wander off.

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