Putting the Practice into Practice

September 26, 2008

We’ve heard a lot about the Dhamma. Now is the time to practice it. We’ve read the books telling us to focus on the breath. So here’s your breath right here. Here’s your mind right here. Bring them together. Keep your awareness of the breath constant, as constant as you can. And don’t be surprised if you wander astray. That’s to be expected. The practice consists in coming right back. As soon as you notice that you’re off the breath, remind yourself of why you’re here. You’re here to develop concentration, to develop mindfulness and discernment. And they don’t get developed as you wind around, thinking about yesterday, thinking about tomorrow. They develop as you keep bringing the mind back to where you want it to be. You’re developing new habits. They’re going to take time, but you can speed up the process. By being as intent as possible. In other words, as soon as you’ve realized you’ve wandered away, come right back. Don’t wait to tie up loose ends. Or make little notes to yourself that when you wander away the next time, this is where you want to pick up the thread. Let your thought worlds have lots of loose ends. You’re not committed to making them neat and tidy. Be willing to leave these fragments of thoughts scattered all over the place. Of course, they don’t stay there, they disappear. But there is that tendency in the mind that once you’ve started a thought, you want to see it all the way through. And that’s a tendency you’ve got to learn how to overcome. If there’s something you want to see through, you want to see this business of concentration, all the way through. Can you stay with one whole breath? Can you stay with two whole breaths, all the way through? When you find that you can do that, then the next test will try three. If the idea of staying with a breath for the entire hour seems daunting, just take in little bits and pieces like this. And over time, the bits and pieces can grow. In other words, you want to use what you have learned in the books to help you, but not to become oppressive. You may read about wonderful states of concentration and insights that come, and then they’re not happening in your practice, at least not yet. And you start getting discouraged. That’s using the insights in the books to actually get in the way. As a John Lee once said, when you read the books, that’s what you learn how to understand. You understand the books. But then when you sit down to practice, the first thing you run into are your defilements. Greed, anger, delusion. Sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor. Restlessness and anxiety. Uncertainty. Things you don’t like to see in yourself, but they’re there. So your first step is learning how to work around them. So you may not be starting out where you’d like to start out, but this is where you are. And the better part of wisdom is learning how to start where you are. These are some of the lessons that you learn as you sit down to practice. You’re learning about your own mind now. You’re not learning about the books. The books are there to point you to your mind. But it’s only as you sit down and try to get the mind to stay with the breath that you begin to see where it’s compliant and where it’s not. That’s a different level of knowledge. Here the knowledge becomes more strategic. How are you going to deal with areas where the mind is recalcitrant, where it just doesn’t want to cooperate? How are you going to strengthen the areas where it does? And there’s some general instructions and general pieces of advice, but ultimately it’s up to each of us to figure out what works. John Lee’s main piece of advice is to try to make the breath as comfortable and as interesting as possible. And that’s why you have this range of breath energies in the body. You read in the book about the breath flowing down the back. What does that feel like? What would that be? Some people think he’s talking about air going down your spine. That’s not what he’s talking about. It’s an energy. There’s an energy flow. And if the muscles of the spine are tight and tense, it’s not going to flow. So go down the back of the spine. Go down the front of the spine, vertebrae by vertebrae. See if you can relax the muscles and yet still stay with the back straight. And then when you’ve done that, notice how does the spine feel as you breathe in? How does it feel as you breathe out? Does it feel different from what it felt before? Then you do the same through the pelvis, down through the legs. All the way out to the muscles around your toes. You start at the back of the neck and go down the shoulders and through the arms. You start at the throat, go down the front of the body. You go from the middle of the chest, go down through the intestines. That’s one way of working with the breath energy. In other words, try to get in touch with what you’re actually experiencing right here, right now. And you’ll find that as things open up and relax, there’s a greater sense of flow in the body. It’s a lot easier to stay settled down. It feels nicer. There’s a reward. You’ll begin to realize that training the mind is like training a small child or training a pet. There are times when you have to be stern and insistent that we are here to be trained, you know. And then there are times you have to give rewards. So learn to see what kind of rewards the mind likes, what kind of rewards it wants. What kind of rewards it responds to. This is going to differ from person to person. As you make the knowledge of the practice more personal like this, you begin to realize that there is this whole other level of knowing that comes when you actually try to put the teachings into practice. There are lots of things about the breath and the body that you simply cannot write down in books. Because a lot of it has to do with your pre-verbal experience of your body. You can learn to use the words to help sensitize you to that, but there’s a part that is not words. It’s the actual sensation of the energy. And then you find that there are other ways of conceiving the breath energy that are useful for specific problems. If your back is feeling weak, you might think of breath energy coming up the back to strengthen it. If one part of the body feels overworked as you’re breathing, try to think of the rest of the body pitching in to help. When you think of the breath coming in, exactly where do you feel it coming in? Could it come in in other areas? And what does that do? There’s a lot to explore here. As you get more and more sensitive to the breath energy in the body, you begin to get more sensitive to the movements of the mind as well. This is where it gets really interesting because then you can start seeing how does a thought form? How quickly can you catch it when a distraction is forming? How can you breathe to dislodge the distraction? Often you’ll find that when a thought comes into the mind, there’ll be a slight change in the breath energy in some part of the body. In your arms or in your stomach or in your chest. When you sense that change, when there’s a little tightening there, can you breathe through it and relax it? Can you zap it and see what happens to the thought? There’s a lot to explore here. You find you come to a whole different level of knowledge. Traditionally, they say there are three levels. There’s a level of knowledge or understanding that comes from reading and listening. There’s a level that comes from thinking. And there’s a level that comes from actually putting things into practice. There’s another traditional way of dividing things up that goes even further than that. There’s the knowledge that comes from reading, the knowledge that comes from practice, and attainment. In other words, when you actually attain Nirvana, you have your first taste of the deathless, you have total awakening. That’s a whole different level of knowledge right there. And actually, it’s only when you get that far that you really know the Dharma. You can read about, say, the Four Noble Truths. Part of the reading tells you that there are duties you have to do or tasks you have to do or tasks that are appropriate to each truth. You want to try to comprehend suffering and abandon the cause. To do that, you’ve got to develop the path. So it’s actually following the duties that you get into the level of practice. And there’s a third level where you’ve actually completed the duties. You’ve totally comprehended suffering to the point where you’re totally dispassionate toward it. You’ve abandoned the cause. The path has been fully developed. You realize the end of suffering. It’s at that point that you really know the Four Noble Truths, what they’re good for, how far they go. This practice that we have of focusing on the breath, how really useful is it? It’s only when you’ve taken it all the way to the waking that you really know. So we’re working on developing our knowledge, taking it so it’s not just words. Right now, we’re making it part of the practice, so that hopefully someday it’ll yield the results. You have to keep reminding yourself you don’t really know the Dharma until you’ve gotten that far. In the meantime, you’re learning. And your willingness to learn, to keep learning new things, that’s what makes attainment possible. So as you approach the skill of the meditation, think of other skills you’ve developed in the past. Painting, music, cooking, carpentry. Think about how you learned those skills, how you mastered them, which attitudes were helpful, which ones were not. Try to bring those helpful attitudes to bear here on the breath. There’s a lot to learn. It’s not just in and out. Simply exploring the breath energy in your body can take years. Fortunately, we don’t have to know all aspects of the breath energy, just enough to keep a sense of well-being going while we’re sitting here meditating. So that issues in the body get less and less distracting and you can focus more directly on the mind. But if this quietude or the stillness of the breath, the stillness of the mind, gets boring, remind yourself, okay, there’s nothing to be bored about. You’re here to look into the mind. The more quiet things are, the more you’ll be able to see, if you’re willing to see, if you’re willing to sit with the quiet. And John Cumbia makes a comparison with learning to be a hunter. You’re going to go out and you’re going to catch a rabbit. You don’t know beforehand that you’re going to catch the rabbit at two in the afternoon. All you know is that there’s an area where rabbits tend to go. So you position yourself there and you have to be very quiet, but very alert at the same time. You let yourself get bored, your mind begins to wander, then the rabbit goes right past you and you don’t see it. If you don’t stay quiet, the rabbit will hear you there. It’ll go someplace else. Anthropologists say that when they try to learn the skills of different native cultures, the hardest one to learn is hunting, because it requires so much concentration, so much alertness. Modern-day hunting with its scopes and all those other technological advances, that’s something different entirely. The hunting that John Cumbia was talking about was something very primitive, very simple, but requires a lot of concentration, a lot of alertness, and a lot of stillness, all at the same time. So be willing to learn from the stillness. It has lessons to teach. If you don’t, you’ll just be stuck with your book learning, which doesn’t take you very far.

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