The Four Properties

December 15, 2008

This is a season of colds and flus and other assorted goodies. The outside elements are out of balance. After record heat, now we’re getting sudden cold. The body that’s been dealing with the heat and the dryness and has all of its processes primed for that kind of weather, suddenly finds itself trying to adjust to the sudden change. This is one of the areas where meditating on the properties of the body, meditating on the elements of the body, is very important. It’s a really helpful process to give the body some help, and it’s good training for the mind. I noticed it with a John Fung’s lay student that after he passed away, the ones who really stuck with the meditations were the ones who had some chronic illness or some chronic condition, something that would show to them how useful the meditation could be in keeping themselves healthy and functioning. So it’s important in this time of disease to remember that the meditation is your ally. All too many people, when they get sick, let the meditation go. They say they’re not strong enough, or they’re not focused enough, or they just don’t have the time or strength to meditate. Well, you always have the time, and you can use the meditation to strengthen yourself, particularly in terms of these elements or properties. Always remember that the breath is primary. It’s the one that adjusts all the other properties. The breath here means not only the in-and-out breathing, but also the general energy buzz throughout the body. It’s a basic principle that if your circulation is good throughout the body, you’re going to be stronger and healthier than if it’s not. If there are pains in the body, you’ll find there is a tendency to avoid that painful area while you’re meditating. Try to breathe without using that area, and that actually makes the situation worse. And the reason we do that is because the pain seems prior, and the breath has to then fit into the areas of the body that are left by the pain. So you have to change your attitude. The breath is prior. The breath comes first, and then the actual feeling of pleasure or pain comes after what the breath does. So rather than let the old pain govern what the breath is going to do, remind yourself that full body breathing is going to be helpful, and it will change that area of pain. So don’t let yourself be ordered around by the results of past pains, even if that past pain is just one second old or one moment old. Hold in mind the picture of the whole body breathing, and the breath energy—whether it’s the in-and-out breath or the more subtle breath that Jon Lee calls the refined breath or the subtle breath—can take over and fill the whole body. And then from that point, you can bring in the other elements. Some conditions are caused by the breath. Some are caused by too much cold. Others are caused by too much heat. The body reacts to the cold by creating a fever. Hence, you’ve got to learn how to think of the different elements in the body, these properties of heat and coolness. Jon Fuehring would identify the heat as the fire element, which is standard throughout the Theravada world. The coolness, he’d say, is water, which is not so standard. But it’s a useful concept to keep in mind. You can ask yourself, “Well, where is the warmest part in the body right now? Does it feel out of balance? Are there other parts of the body that could use a share of that warmth?” And in the same way that you spread breath energy around, allow yourself to spread the heat element around. Or if things feel too hot, where is the coolest sensation in the body? Which part of the body feels cooler than the rest? Can you allow that coolness to spread through the body as well? A lot of this is going to require your own powers of observation, because sometimes bringing in too much coolness to cure a fever actually makes it worse. It depends on how you relate to the energies in the body. This is something very personal. Each of us relates to the body in a different way. We have different histories of how we relate to the energies in the body. So it takes a while to unlearn some old bad habits and learn some good ones in their place. But as you get more familiar with thinking about the body in these terms, or your internal sense of the body—and this is why the Buddha uses the four-element meditation as a mindfulness practice—you’re trying to get into the body, out of the world of the senses, and into the world of the body as it’s felt from within, the world of form, which is what these elements are all about. It actually raises the mind to a higher level. You get more and more sensitive to how this internal sense of the body is affected by your thoughts and how it affects your thoughts, and how you can bring about peace among the various elements. That includes the fourth element, which is the element of selective awareness. The fifth element is the element of solidity, heaviness. Ideally, you don’t want to feel too heavy; you don’t want to feel too light. There are times when you need heaviness. If you’re feeling dizzy, lightheaded, weak, faint, it’s good to think of the solidity in the body to counteract too much wind energy, breath energy. You’re also learning how to use the power of thought to bring these things into balance. You find that we have a tendency to push things. There’s the thought, and then there’s the physical pushing inside. You want to change the way things are flowing inside. Sometimes that’s helpful, and sometimes it’s not. Again, this is where your sensitivity has to be really sharp. And if you have any old ideas about good, good ways and bad ways of dealing with the energy flows or energy blockages in the body, as with any preconceived notion, you’ve got to learn how to explore it to see to what extent you actually learned something right, or you just took a quick look at something and came to some conclusions that are not always applicable. So what this means is that in times like this, it’s a really good time to explore how you relate to the energy in the body. I’ve noticed cases where people have breakthroughs in terms of how they relate to the breath or how they relate to the feelings within the body and the mind. And it’s actually an emotional kind of breakthrough. Parts of the body that were shut off are suddenly allowed in. Parts of the mind that were shut off are allowed in, and they’re okay. We learn how to get along together. This principle of balance and harmony is a good principle to learn, and this is a good place to learn about it—how you relate to the energy in the body, how you relate to your sense of the body as you feel it from within. In the West, we don’t have much of a vocabulary for dealing with this. It’s good to use these concepts of the four elements to get a handle on how we push the energy around inside, which ways we’re actually exacerbating problems, and which ways we can actually help. So when you’re lying there not feeling quite so well, what can the mind do to help the body along? At the same time, provided it’s got a place for itself to dwell. So even when you’re feeling sick or weak, remember you’ve got the breath here as a potential medicine. After all, it is the energy of life. You can ask yourself, “Is the way you’re breathing actually helping the problem, or is it a part of the problem?” If it’s part of the problem, what can you do to change the way you breathe? Be more sensitive to what works and what doesn’t work. This also helps take your mind off the illness. You find yourself less and less concerned with how much longer you’re going to be feeling sick or what the disease is going to do to you. You say you’ve got an opportunity to understand something right here, right now. You examine the mind and the body, name and form, as they interact right now. And once you find that it captures your imagination, your mind is in a totally different place, not feeling so beset upon, not feeling so burdened, but just thinking of the illness or whatever the situation is as an opportunity to learn, to gain knowledge. You gain new insights into how the mind frames issues, how it perceives issues, and how that power of perception can be used for good or for ill, and how you can master it so that it becomes more and more a healing perception, a healing way of looking at things, and a healing way of how you know how to change the situation. What’s just the right touch in changing the way you breathe, changing the way the heat manifests in the body, the way the coolness manifests in the body, the way the solidity of the body manifests itself? And how you can bring all these things to a proper balance. Even though the elements outside may not be balanced, inside you are balanced. You form a sense of well-being regardless of what the conditions are. That’s a lot of what meditation is all about. It’s showing you that your happiness doesn’t have to depend on things being a certain way, because you’ve got your inner resources to work with.

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