Your Big Sister

December 18, 2008

Jon Voight once said that the breath is like an older sister who’s been looking after us ever since we were small. She’s cared for us, taken us around everywhere, fed us, kept us alive, basically. And yet we don’t pay much attention to her. Most of the time we don’t even notice whether she’s short or tall, as he said, long or short, slow or fast, heavy or light. And it’s time to show her some gratitude. To see what she needs and to learn how to put her needs first for a while. She’s been putting us first for a long time. Because if you pay attention to the breath, you find you can get more out of it. It’s simply keeping yourself alive. To find out what kind of breathing is good, what feels good inside, where it feels good in the breathing process, how to maximize that sense of feeling good. The breath does a lot for you. It keeps you physically healthy and keeps you sensitive to what’s going on in the present moment, both in the body and in the mind. You can think of the breath as the point where the mind and the body meet. And we’re talking not only about the in-and-out breathing, but just the whole sense of breath energy throughout the body. If it weren’t for that breath energy, we wouldn’t be aware of the body. So learn how to put her first for a while. To see what the breath needs. Does it need to be longer, shorter, deeper? Look into it. Take the time to give it some space. And make it a priority. Throughout the day, you’re going to try to stay in touch with the breath as much as you can to see what it has to tell you. So you don’t go jumping into your thought world so quickly. If you really are in touch with the breath, you’ll notice that when a thought world forms, even before it’s clearly a thought world, there’s going to be a stirring in the breath energy. There’ll be a point where it’s hard to tell whether it’s an either mental or physical stirring. And then there’ll be the choice to make it either mental or physical. And then you go with the choice. That choice happens so quickly, and it’s so automatic, that we hardly realize that it’s a choice. But if you slow down and watch, and give priority to the breath, you’ll begin to understand this process a lot more precisely. And you won’t get hoodwinked into just jumping in with whatever comes along. It’s not that the thought hoodwinks you. You basically hoodwink yourself. There’s that lapse of mindfulness where certain decisions get made, and there’s a little wall put up in the mind so that you can deny that you’re responsible for the decisions. You want to learn to see through that, to let go of jumping into thought worlds. And as you try to resist that impulse to jump, you start seeing a lot of interesting motivations in the mind. Why do we go into those thought worlds? Is it fear? Is it lust? Is it anger? It’s right there that our defilements start to work, building on that little moment of ignorance. So if it’s fear, you have to ask yourself, “What are you afraid of?” If it’s lust, “What are you lusting for?” And part of the mind will deny that there’s any fear or lust or anything wrong going on at all. It’s all perfectly legal. It’s legitimate. But you have to learn how to question that. If you don’t question it, you can’t see through it. One of the things I noticed about Ajahn Phu, when he was a very skeptical sort of person, he didn’t take things at face value and watched people for quite a while before he learned to trust them. Now, that may sound unfair, but he had the same attitude, apparently, towards the thoughts that came up in his mind. He had to be skeptical about them. Where is his thought leading? When you have that measure of skepticism, that helps you see through a lot of the mind’s subterfuges. So where do you look for comfort in the midst of that skepticism? You look to the breath. Try to make the breath as comfortable and as refreshing and as nourishing as possible, so you don’t have to go jumping to your thoughts for your nourishment. This way you learn how to call into question a lot of your old assumptions, a lot of your old defilements, and put yourself in a position where you don’t have to be their slave. You don’t have to run when they say “run.” You don’t have to jump when they say “jump.” There’s the old image of the lion and the dog. You throw a stick and the dog immediately runs after the stick. Or if you have a lion and you throw a stick for the lion to chase, the lion doesn’t chase the stick. The lion turns around and looks at you, as if to say, “Do you expect me to get fooled by that?” You want to be a lion in your meditation. You want to be a lion in your life, not easily fooled by everything that gets catapulted out of the mind. So whatever thought processes start flowing out, getting thrown out, you stay right here and you turn around and you look at them. What is it that’s throwing out the process? What is it that’s the source of the flow? And that’s when you see a lot of really interesting things. And you put yourself in a position of more independence. When the Buddha talks about having an island in the midst of a flood, this is what he’s talking about. You take the breath in and of itself as your island, that state of mind that stays in the breath, mindful, alert, hardened. That’s your island in the midst of all this. This way you become independent not only from your own defilements, but also from other people’s defilements. As I say, it’s hard to fool somebody who’s not greedy. It’s hard to inflame somebody who’s not liable to anger. So the more independent you are inside, the more independent you’re going to be from other people’s pressures on you. Again, you become more and more the lion that can see the pressure that’s coming from other people for what it is, and not be so quick to run when other people say, “Run away? That’s so quick to jump.” And again, it may seem like a kind of skepticism, and it is, but it’s a healthy skepticism. You’re coming from a position of strength, and you’re coming from a position of fairness. It’s not that you believe everything you think and don’t believe other people. You treat all these pressures as if they were the same, whether they’re inside pressures or outside pressures. You’re trying to maintain this island. You’re trying to maintain your dignity. You’re the lion, remember? So try to have a sense of how valuable it is to take the breath as your foundation. Take some time to learn about the breath. As the Jana Fung said, to see why she’s been so good to you all along. She’s kept you alive. It’s time that you tended to her and looked after her. And you’ll see that the more attention you give to her, the more she has to offer you.

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