Anapanasati Day

November 2, 2009

As you get more and more sensitive to your breath, you find that you get more sensitive to other things in the present moment as well. The feelings that go along with the breath, either feelings of ease or dis-ease, and the state of your mind. Is it able to stay with the breath or not? We often think that our minds are well-concentrated and alert, and yet when you give the mind something very basic like this to watch and stay with, you begin to get a sense of how often the mind slips off, how quickly it can forget. This makes you more and more sensitive to the qualities in the mind, the qualities that help make the mind skillful, particularly skillful in dealing with the breath, and the qualities that make it unskillful. So as you’re focused on the breath, you find that all the frames of reference are here. The breath is a part, and there are feelings that go along with the breath. The mind states, and then the individual qualities within the mind—skillful and unskillful—they’re all right here. This is why the Buddha makes the point that when he talks about breath meditation and divides it up into sixteen steps, there are four steps. He divides the sixteen into sets of four, and he says that you take any one of the four and it develops one of the frames of reference, and that frame of reference can develop the seven factors to awaken and lead to clear knowing and release. So you don’t need all sixteen, although it so happens that all sixteen get involved. And you’ll find that you will be going among all sixteen, not necessarily one through sixteen. But there’s a general pattern that gets followed in each of the tetrads, and that’s important to notice. Each tetrad starts with your getting sensitive to a certain level or a certain aspect of your present awareness—either body or feelings or mind states. Or dhammas, mental qualities. And you want to learn how to sensitize yourself to that particular aspect. For instance, sensitize yourself to the breath. What’s it like when you breathe long? What’s it like when the breath is short? This requires a certain amount of concentration right there, just to stay with that particular level. It’s like staying tuned on a particular radio station. If you want to hear what’s being said on the radio station, you have to stick with that one station. You can’t go just spinning the dial back and forth and hoping to make sense of anything. So you stick with the breath. Other thoughts come up, other ideas come up, whatever else comes up. Try to relate it to the breath so you can maintain this frame of reference. Because that gets you to the next step, which is to see the breath as a kind of dhamma. That means several things. One, seeing it as part of a causal network. Particularly, you want to see how the breath has an impact on your body, how you experience your body. You can breathe in ways that are tense. You can breathe in ways that are relaxed. But you want to see it as part of a causal network. You see it as a fabrication, a sankara, something that has an intentional element. This is important. This is probably why the Buddha used the breath as his most basic topic of meditation. It’s the only bodily process that you can actually have intentional control over. If you’re going to have control over your heartbeat and control other aspects of the body, the way some magicians do, they do it through the breath. This means that you can experiment. Because if you’re going to understand any causal connection, you have to play with the causes. If we couldn’t act on causes, we’d have no true knowledge of anything in the world. Things would just pass by, pass by. This would come, that would go, this would come, that would go. And we wouldn’t really know which coming and going was connected to which other coming and going, and which things just happened to be random. This is the basic principle of scientific experiments. You try alternative causes to see what kind of effect they have. And so it’s the same with the breath. If you want to see the breath as a Dhamma, you play with it to see how it has an impact. You play with it to see how it has an effect on the body, to see how it has an effect on the mind, through the different feelings that it creates. Then when you get a sense of its range, it’s like when you get a stereo and you’ve been playing with the dials. What is it like when you turn the bass all the way up? What is it like when you turn the treble all the way up? What’s the right balance? After you’ve gone through the extremes, you learn how to adjust things to get them in the right balance. In the case of the breath, the right balance is calming the bodily fabrication, calming the impact that the breath has on the body. John Lee analyzes this into different levels of breathing. There’s the heavy breathing, or ordinary or coarse breathing, he calls it. Then there’s the more refined breathing, and then there’s the subtle breathing. The refined breathing consists of the refined sensations that you feel going through your nerves, going through the blood vessels, going through your muscles, as you breathe in, as you breathe out, some of which are affected by the in-and-out breath directly, and others which seem to be independent. And as you allow the in-and-out breathing to calm down, you become more and more sensitive to this other level of breathing, which is always there. But as the in-and-out breathing calms down, you get a clearer sense of these waves of breath energy going through the body. Then you allow those to calm down as well. There’s a subtle or profound breath that’s absolutely still, that doesn’t exert any pressure on any part of the body at all. See if you’re going to tune into that. And this way you’ve learned a lot, not only about the fact that the breath does have an impact on the body, but how you can gain some control over that relationship to give yourself a calmer and calmer place to stay, right here. There are similar principles in the other tattvas as well. First you start learning how to breathe in ways that give rise to feelings of ease and rapture. And then you notice how those feelings, together with the different perceptions that go along with the breath and the feelings, have an impact on the mind. These are mental fabrications, as the Buddha calls them. And then you try to calm the mental fabrications. In other words, where there’s pain, you try to turn it into pleasure. Where there’s pleasure, you might want to turn it into rapture. Or you might prefer pleasure without the rapture, which is more calming. And then there’s the very, very subtle pleasure of equanimity. These are all things you can play with. Again, if you can’t play with them, you’re not going to know them. Breath meditation is not a matter of just simply watching whatever comes and whatever goes. There was once a time when the Buddha was advising the monks to practice breath meditation. One of the monks said, “Oh, I’ve practiced breath meditation already.” And the Buddha said, “What kind of meditation do you practice?” And the monk said, “Well, I try to remain calm and equanimous about thoughts that have been in the past, calm and equanimous about thoughts in the future, and calm and equanimous about the present moment, as I breathe in, as I breathe out.” And the Buddha said, “Okay, there is that kind of meditation, breath meditation.” But that’s not the kind that gives the best results. The one that gives the best results is the one where you’re training yourself to sensitize yourself to these different aspects of the mind as it’s present with the breath. And you experiment so you gain a clear sense of what causes what. Discernment in the Buddhist teachings is always very pragmatic. To be pragmatic, you have to have a clear sense of cause and effect. And John Lee makes similar point. He says, “Discernment comes from experimenting.” Suppose you have some silver in your pocket. All you know is that it’s silver, but if you take it and melt it, you can make it into different things. That’s where you really understand silver. This principle applies to knowledge in all fields, knowledge in cooking. You don’t really understand eggs until you’ve tried to make different things out of the eggs, like omelets and soufflés and steamed eggs and fried eggs. There are culinary institutes in France where they actually have scientists working on eggs to see why it is that a soft-boiled egg—what’s the difference between a soft-boiled egg and a hard-boiled egg? It turns out it’s not the length of time that you boil it, it’s the temperature. If you keep the temperature at a certain level, well below boiling, you get a soft-boiled egg. And no matter how long you keep it at that temperature, it’s not going to get hard. They learned this by experimenting. So the only way you’re going to see cause and effect in your mind is by experimenting with the breath, by seeing what impact it has on the feelings, both physical feelings and mental feelings, and then watching what impact that has on the mind. This is what it means to see things as Dhammas. This is why the first three tetrads lead inevitably to the fourth. The texts all say that you can take any one of the tetrads and take it all the way to awakening, but you can’t help but spend some time in the fourth. This means looking at things as Dhammas and then noticing how inconstant they are. Regardless of how steady you can make the mind and how glad you can make the mind and how through the practice of concentration you can release the mind from one, say, factor of a lower level of concentration, the things that keep it from concentration to begin with. In other words, when you get to the first jhana, you’ve released the mind from sensual thoughts and you’ve released it from what they say are unskillful mental qualities, which the texts define as wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong all the way down the line through the Eightfold Path. Once you’ve released the mind from those things, you’re there in the first jhana. But that has directed thought and evaluation. So after the mind has set for a while, in the same way that concrete sets after it’s been poured and finally gets hard enough, you can take away the mold, and the mind has been still enough for the breath, you don’t need that directed thought and evaluation. So you drop that. You release the mind from those factors and so on up the line. But to get to ultimate release, you have to see that even the stages of concentration you can bring the mind to in these ways require some fabrication. You have to keep at it. You have to intentionally keep it there, even if the intention is very subtle. Sometimes it’s so subtle you can’t even see it, but it’s there. Regardless of how solid a state of concentration may seem, the Buddha doesn’t ask you to see it, say, as the ground of being or anything of those metaphysical terms. It’s simply a result of an action, and you want to look at where the action is. Where is the intention? Then you begin to realize at some point that regardless of how steady the intention may be and how skilled you may be, there’s still going to be some wavering, there’s still going to be some inconstancy there. The happiness you gain this way from these things is still not the ultimate. That leads to a sense of dispassion. You no longer have the same passion you had for getting the mind constructed in this way. When you reach that point where you realize that no matter which direction you intend, there’s going to be some stress along with that inconstancy, then you can find the point where there’s no intention of any kind. That’s when things cease. With that cessation, you give up not only unskillful things, but you give up even the skillful elements of the path. That’s when things become truly calm. You’ve been tending the mind towards calm all along, allowing it to appreciate what a greater sense of happiness there is when things grow calm, even if it’s just the calming of the breath or calming of feelings. It’s not boring or dull, the way you may have thought before. There’s a great sense of well-being that comes with that sense of calm. But at this stage, you lead it to the ultimate calm, where there’s no fabrication at all. You let go of everything. There’s the term “relinquisher.” You give it back. All the things that you claimed as you and yours, you don’t need to claim anymore. You give everything back. So each of these tetrads, each of these sets of four, is related to the others. You may be focusing on the body or focusing on feelings, but it’s hard to be exclusively focused on them. After all, there are connections among these things, and an important part of seeing these things as Dhammas is to see the connections. So it’s simply a matter of which frame of reference is primary. The one that you hold to as your basic frame of reference. And then you notice how other things, say, if you’re holding on to the breath, you notice how feelings relate to the breath, what the feelings do to the breathing, what the breathing does to the feelings, what the mind does to the breathing, what the breathing does to the mind, what the subtle intentions that are related to the breathing. Even when you get the breathing really, really still, the intention to keep it still, that creates a sense of calm. But it is a fabricated kind of calm. When you finally decide that that’s not refined enough, okay, then you can go further. If it all heads in the same direction, it all follows the same pattern, sensitizing yourself to that aspect of the present moment, learning to view it as Dhamma’s fabrications, cause and effect operating right here, right here, and now. And now you can learn how to master that sense of cause and effect, or that pattern of cause and effect, to bring the mind to true calm. That’s the important lesson to take away from all this. This is how those different tetrads fulfill the factors of awakening. You’re mindful, then you see things in terms of Dhamma’s cause and effect, skillful and unskillful, and then you work at making everything skillful. This first gives rise to a sense of rapture, then it calms down. Serenity, concentration, equanimity. And the equanimity goes through many stages until it yields what’s called non-fashioning. There’s nothing done at all. You’re not making any self. You’re not making a world out of things. There’s just Dhammas, and you let them all go. That’s where there’s true knowledge and release. The next one is the time of the year in India when the moon is the clearest. There may have been some connection there. This is one of the few suttas, the Anapanasati Sutta, which tells us what date of the year the sutta was given. And the clarity of the moon. This is also the time when the moon is the clearest. The water lilies bloom. I went to India one time. It’s about this time of year, and there are water lilies everywhere. At night it’s really lovely. You’ve got the clear moon in the sky, you’ve got the white water lilies reflecting the moon in the water. And it’s a nice symbol for the mind that reaches fullness and clarity through the practice of breath meditation. It’s a symbol for the heart that blooms through the meditation. So see if you can get that clarity of mind, that blooming quality of the heart, as you get more and more settled here in the present moment.

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