As You Like It

April 18, 2010

Ajahn Suwat would often talk about how important it is to bring the right attitude to meditation. You’re here in a very special institution, he said, or he would say, the institution of the Noble Ones. You’re doing the work of the Noble Ones. It’s an ennobling work that you’re doing here. So you want to come with an attitude of respect, an attitude of confidence, giving it your full attention, bringing your full level of skill. Because it is demanding work, it also means that it needs good nourishment. The Buddha gives an example. He says it’s like having a fortress at the edge of the frontier of your kingdom. Then you’re going to need a good gatekeeper. The gatekeeper here is mindfulness, which is very careful to let in only the people he knows and to keep out the people he doesn’t know. That stands for the function of mindfulness, which is to remind you of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful, so you can exercise restraint. And you need a good wall. The wall here stands for discernment, to protect you from the forces of Mara. And you need food. So that soldiers in the fortress can live in comfort and have the strength to do their duties. After all, what is the duty of the mind? It’s to look into itself and to see where it’s causing suffering, where it’s causing stress. And it’s hard for the mind to look at its own faults or its own mistakes. You need to give the mind a sense of encouragement, a sense of well-being. When the mind feels at ease, when it feels confident, then it can look at its mistakes with a lot more equanimity, a lot more understanding, and let go of them. Not out of neurotic hatred, but simply because, you see, you just don’t want them anymore. You don’t need to make those mistakes anymore. So this is the function of concentration, to feed the mind, to nourish the mind. To give you a sense of well-being. There’s a story they tell in Thailand of a young man working in the field, and every day his mother would come out and bring him the meal. Well, that day, it so happened that she was delayed at home. I’ve forgotten the reason, but it was a really difficult issue. It took her a long time to sort through it. So by the time she had brought the food, it was quite a bit later than she needed. In the meantime, the son had been working along and was tired and hungry, and started thinking, “Why isn’t she bringing the food? Maybe she doesn’t love me. Maybe she doesn’t care for me.” By the time she’d come, he was so worked up and so angry that he struck her down. He didn’t even give her a chance to say anything. Then he ate his food. And then when he was strong again, he came back to his senses. But it turned out he had struck her so hard he’d killed her. The message of the story, of course, is not to believe everything you think when you’re hungry. And it’s the same with meditation. Things will come through the mind. Sometimes you’re discouraged. Sometimes you’re upset about yourself and what’s going on in the mind. You have to keep reminding yourself, “I don’t believe anything you think,” until you’re better nourished. This is why concentration is so important. It gives you that sense of well-being. It gives you strength. So when you’re focusing on the breath, it’s purely a personal matter what kind of breathing you’re going to like. This is an area where you can see if you’re comfortable. Indulge your own ideas. Indulge your own preferences. Sometimes people take the instructions to breathe in a comfortable way as one more task, one more imposition. Somehow there’s an objective standard as to what counts as comfortable breathing, and you’ve got to find it without much guidance. But actually, what Jon Lee has pointed to when he talks about breathing in a comfortable way is simply finding what kind of breathing you like, what feels good to you right now. And you may learn after a while that what feels good to you right now may not necessarily be good for the body, but you learn by experimenting. There’s room to experiment. There’s room to learn from your mistakes. Ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would you like to breathe?” And see how the body responds. You might just pose that question to the mind, “What kind of breathing would feel really good?” See what the body does. If it doesn’t do much of anything, you might try on your own to induce long breathing or deep breathing or subtle breathing, heavy breathing. And see if you like it. If you like it, stick with it. If you don’t like it, you can change. The whole point here is that you want to base your concentration on a sense of well-being, a sense of pleasure, a sense of satisfaction. So this is the area where your preferences do play a role. This way the breath is not only food for the mind, it’s also a home, a place where you can settle in, and as with your home. How comfortable is the furniture? Well, it’s up to you. You have the choice. When you have a sense of being nourished and a sense of having a safe, secure place to stay, then you can do your work. And the stillness of concentration not only gives you a sense of well-being, but it also gives you a sense of strength and security in your work. But it also sensitizes you to what’s going on in the mind, what’s going on in the body. The more you can bring the mind to stillness, the more you can bring it to a steadiness, the more refined your perceptions are going to be, the more clearly you’re going to see subtle levels of stress that you would have missed otherwise. This is why concentration is so important for developing your insight, your discernment. So on the one hand, it gives you a good, solid place to stay, a good sense of comfort, a sense of well-being, so that when you look at the mistakes the mind makes in causing suffering when you don’t intend to, you can have a more mature attitude toward it. And at the same time, it enables you to see clearly subtle levels of stress you would have missed otherwise. There’s a passage where the Buddha says that even though you may understand the drawbacks of sensual desires, sensual pleasures, if you don’t have an alternative pleasure that doesn’t depend on sensuality, you’re not going to be able to let go of your sensual passions, your sensual desires. It’s when you have a better form of happiness, something that you really like better. You see this is more solid, more secure, more reliable. And the pleasure of concentration goes deep. It’s gratifying not only physically but also mentally. And when you have this kind of nourishment, you have this kind of security, it’s a lot easier to look at your other ways of feeding. You realize you don’t want that kind of food anymore. You’ve got a better house to live in. You go back and look at the hovels that you used to build around sensual pleasures and say, “I don’t want those anymore. I don’t need those anymore. I’ve got a better place.” So the pleasure of concentration is an important aspect, an important part of the path. It’s an area also where you can decide what kind of pleasure do you like, what kind of breathing do you like. It’s totally up to you. There’s a pleasure that comes from just inhabiting the sense of the body from within, exploring how the energy flows in the different parts of the body, how it flows in your hands, how it flows in your feet. The breath coming in the back of the neck, going down the back. The breath going down the shoulders and out the fingers. The breath in the more sensitive areas of the body, say around the heart and the throat. You can ask yourself what would feel really gratifying there. As the Buddha said, this is a perfectly blameless pleasure. Blameless in two ways. One is that it doesn’t harm anyone. And two, it doesn’t blind the mind. It actually makes the mind clearer. Most sensuality creates a lot of blindness, because usually somebody, someplace is being oppressed, and you have to turn a blind eye to it. Or it’s a pleasure that comes from just sitting here breathing. It harms no one. There’s a comedian who once said, “What is this about Buddhism? You wrap yourself up in a cloth, you go sit under a tree and you breathe? That’s it? Well, if you can find happiness that way, what’s wrong with it?” Happiness that keeps the mind still, clear, sharpens your powers of perception. There’s pleasure that comes from exploring the internal form of the body as an important element of the path. Remember, when the Buddha discovered the path, the first thing he discovered was right concentration. He’d been going through years of self-torment and finally realized, “This is not working.” So he posed the question in the mind, “Is there another way?” He remembered how he had spontaneously reached the first jhana when he was a child. So the question arose, “Could this be the way?” And the answer that came to his consciousness immediately on that memory was, “Yes, this could be the way.” “Why am I afraid of that happiness? Why am I afraid of that pleasure?” As he contemplated, he realized there was nothing to fear. It was blameless. And so it’s with right concentration that he discovered the path. Some people ask, “Hadn’t he attained concentration of the sort when he was still studying under the other teachers?” This is not necessarily the case. It turns out there are descriptions in the Canon of how you can attain those formless states that he attained—dimension of nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception—without going through the first jhanas, the four jhanas. Simply by holding a certain perception in mind, you can induce these formless states, kind of bypassing the pleasure of the jhanas. You realize you have to nurture and immerse the mind without sense of well-being if he’s really going to understand how the mind creates happiness, how it creates suffering, how it creates stress. And getting the mind into this sense of well-being finally enables you to see a happiness that’s not created, that goes beyond. And it’s found right here. The reason you don’t see it right here is that your sensitivity is not subtle enough. Your sensitivity, this process of fabrication, isn’t subtle enough. And the way to make it more subtle is to do just this. See what levels of happiness, what levels of pleasure and gratification can be developed right here, right now. And as you get more skilled at this, develop more precision, you begin to see things going on in the mind that you didn’t see before. They’ve been going on all the time, but they’ve gone right past you. This is where the path is gradual. It takes time to develop this sensitivity. But once you see the possibility of an unfabricated happiness, the insight is sudden, the attainment is sudden. This is why the Buddha’s analogy for the path is like the continental shelf off of India, a gradual slope and then a sudden drop-off. So right now we’re working on the gradual slope. It requires patience, but at the same time it allows you to experiment with pleasure. What do you really want right now in terms of the breath? What would feel really good? What parts of the body feel starved for breath energy? Can you breathe deeply into them? Explore those possibilities. For it’s through the exploration that we learn, and then we find the nourishment to keep on learning.

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