An Elemental Mind

June 7, 2010

A lot of the practice consists of seeing things for yourself. This is not one of those teachings where you simply have to believe something that somebody says and hope that by force of belief you make it true. You actually don’t have to look. You don’t have to teach it. Look at yourself to figure out what’s skillful and what’s not. There are two categorical teachings in the Canon. One is the question of skillful and unskillful action, and the other is the related teaching on the Four Noble Truths. Those are the ones that are true across the board and true on every occasion. That means you have to make distinctions. It’s not just one teaching that you hold on to. You’ve got the question of what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. That’s a distinction right there. The Four Noble Truths. What’s suffering and what’s causing suffering. Sometimes we get the two mixed up. In other words, we try to abandon suffering, and that’s not the duty with regard to suffering. With regard to suffering, you have to learn how to comprehend it first. That’s another distinction you have to make. Another distinction is between what kind of desire is the craving that causes suffering and what kind of desire is the kind of desire you want to generate as part of right effort. There are a lot of important distinctions you have to make. We start out by listening to what the Buddha has to say on these topics. But then we have to confirm these teachings in our own practice. That’s when you see for yourself. That’s when you know. So it’s important you learn how to make yourself a reliable observer, someone who sees clearly. Here it’s important to remember one of the teachings the Buddha gave to Rahula. Before he taught Rahula about breath meditation, before he taught him other meditation topics, he taught him meditation on the four elements. Specifically, this kind of meditation is to make your mind like earth. When people throw disgusting things on the earth, the earth doesn’t shrivel away. It doesn’t recoil in horror. It just sits there and accepts these things. Make your mind like wind. When the wind blows disgusting things around, the wind isn’t disgusted by them. It just blows things around. Make your mind like fire. Fire burns disgusting things. It burns nice things, but it doesn’t show any preference for whether they’re disgusting or nice. Make your mind like water. Water washes away disgusting things. It can wash away nice things, but it doesn’t have any preference. In other words, you have to develop that kind of stability of mind. Not that you’re just going to sit there and accept things as they come and go and be content there, but it’s a prerequisite for seeing things clearly. Otherwise, if you’re always running away from things you don’t like and running toward things you do like, you suffer a redshift. In other words, you don’t see things clearly for what they are. Just like a redshift. Just like a train. A train is coming at you. Its whistle is higher in pitch, and when it goes away it’s lower in pitch. And neither pitch is the actual pitch of the train. So you’ve got to learn how to stand still and watch, and learn how to be reliable in how you look at things. And part of this comes from being aware of being around people who are more reliable. And part of it is simply learning how to train yourself. When you see yourself reacting with likes and dislikes, you have to remind yourself that this may not be the way things are. It just may be a vision that’s tinted, distorted. Because there are times when we do something and we want it to give good results. And it just can’t give good results. But we keep wanting, wanting, wanting, so we keep trying it again and again and again, and we don’t really see that the results are not coming out the way we’d like them to. And it just can’t happen that way. And there are things we don’t like to do that actually will give good results, and you have to buckle down and do them. You have to learn how to force the mind in these ways. It’s not just a matter of picking which teachings you like and putting aside the teachings you don’t like. There are some teachings that are really skillful, but we don’t like to do them. They’re hard. They require qualities of mind that we don’t have fully developed, or they require that we let go of things that we really like. And especially as you get older, it seems harder and harder to work on new qualities of mind. But you can’t help it. You can’t have that attitude at all. Otherwise it consigns old people to draspin. You have to resist that tendency to just want to do things that we’re skillful at doing and put aside the things that we’re not skillful at. So try to make your mind like the earth. Make it like water, wind, fire, make it like the elements. Make it an elemental mind that doesn’t get overworked about things, doesn’t get upset about things. It just notices that this is the way things are. And then when you understand how things are, it doesn’t mean you simply leave them there. When you really understand cause and effect, that means you can learn how to manipulate it skillfully. And this is what your powers of observation are meant for. You learn how to know when your concentration is giving good results because of something you’re doing now, as opposed to the times when it’s just giving good results as a fluke. When you find yourself going off course, say you’re focusing the wrong way, you’re bringing the wrong attitude, you’re being too pushy, you’re being too impatient, whether it’s with the breath or with the mind, you learn to read that and pull back a bit. Sometimes the problems in the meditation are problems with the breath, and sometimes it’s the way you’re going about trying to push for results before they’re ready to come. Squeezing the mango to make it ripe, make it soft, that doesn’t ripen it. It just turns it into mush. So it’s developing a certain amount of patience, resilience, a steadiness of your gaze, so you become a reliable observer. If you don’t develop these qualities, no matter how much you observe your meditation, you’re not really going to gain any true insights. So remember that. That’s the beginning skill in learning how to observe things for yourself. Make your mind into an elemental mind that’s willing to learn whatever lesson is necessary to see truths that you wouldn’t otherwise have seen. Then you can gain skill. You’re willing to accept things as they are and accept causal connections as they are so that you can figure out how to make the most out of those connections. Notice that this is the prerequisite for breath meditation and any other forms of meditation. The breath meditation is not just watch the breath coming in, going out, leaving it that way. You train yourself. As you breathe in and breathe out, you train yourself to calm the breath. You train yourself to breathe in such a way that gives rise to rapture, ease, pleasure. You train yourself to breathe in a way that helps gladden the mind, steady the mind, release the mind. These things don’t happen just by sitting there and watching. You watch, and then you experiment, and then you watch again. You experiment again. You’re trying to master causality. And the steadiness is just to make you a reliable observer of causality so that you can learn how to influence those causal processes in the directions you want and make them part of the path.

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