The Observer

April 4, 2011

The Buddha was a master of analogies and similes. When he’d give a teaching, he’d often provide comparisons. So we’re very apt, very useful. But even he said that it was very difficult to find anything that was comparable to the way the mind could be so quick to change. We say that it changes in the flash of an eye, but even that’s too slow. It’s capable of all kinds of movements back and forth, thinking something good for one moment and then switching around immediately to something else that’s not so good at all. And so it’s only to be expected. It’s just to sit down and meditate, and things come into the mind. All kinds of stuff. Good, bad, indifferent. And you have to learn how not to be surprised, not to be upset, not to be afraid, of things that come up in the mind. And you need a safe spot from which to watch them. So this is one of the reasons why we try to develop this sense of the observer, or the watchman, the watcher inside, that doesn’t get involved with things that come up. Good things come up, you watch them. Bad things come up, and you watch them. But for that observer to not get sucked in, it needs a good foundation. This is why we try to stay with the breath. The breath here being not only the in-and-out breath, but just the sense of energy flow through the body as well, which can be felt anywhere in the body, all the way down to the tips of your fingers, the tips of your toes, on up to the head, and back and front. The sense of energy flow as you breathe in, breathe out. Try to make that your foundation. Get used to being in touch with that aspect of your awareness. Then tie the word for breath and the word for wind to the same thing. As the Buddha once said, try to make your mind like the wind. The wind blows good things around. It doesn’t get excited. It blows bad things around. It doesn’t get upset. It’s not quick. It’s quick to react in those kinds of ways, quick to react to likes and dislikes. You want it to be sensitive. And if you see something unskillful coming up in the mind, you learn how to drop it. That’s a quick reaction you want to develop. Or if you see something good, you try to learn how to maintain it. So as soon as something good comes up in the mind, you protect it. That kind of reaction is good as well. But just simple likes and dislikes, you want to learn how to be impervious to those. You want to be non-reactive to those. Which means you have to be able to make that distinction between what’s something you simply like or dislike, or something that’s skillful or unskillful. That’s going to take time, and you’ll have to learn how to watch to see if there may be something you like. But actually, if you do it, it’s going to lead to bad results down the line. If something you don’t like, it’s going to lead to good results. You have to learn how to foster that so you can’t have your immediate knee-jerk reactions get in the way. You have to be willing to watch things and not get overwhelmed by whatever comes up. A thought comes, think of it just as a windstorm blowing through. You sit right here, you’ve got the shelter of the mind. The building. The wind comes and you’re not blown away by the wind. Just try to stay here with the breath. Find some spot in the body where you can center your awareness. If it seems too vague to be able to stick with the whole body as your frame of reference to begin with, try to find at least one spot where you can stay in touch with the energy flow. And try to choose a spot that tends to tighten up quickly when there’s fear or anger, and very consciously keep it open all the time, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. That gives you your beachhead. That gives you your safe spot. And you’re learning that habit of not to be so quickly reactive to what you’re afraid of, or what you’re angry about, or what you’re upset about. You can breathe calmly through whatever arises. When you have that sense of steadiness, something you can depend on, something you can hang on to, then you feel a lot more secure in the present moment. Because things will come up in the present moment from past karma, good or bad. And the fact that they come up is the result of past karma. What you do with them right now is your present karma, and that’s important. The Buddha has an image of a field filled with lots of different seeds. Some of the seeds get watered and other seeds don’t get watered. The ones that get watered are the ones that grow. You have the choice in the present moment of which seeds to water. Because at any moment there are all kinds of potentials in the mind. You may be suddenly hit by the fact that there’s a bad thought or an unskillful thought coming up. But that’s not the only thing that could come up in the mind. The fact that you’re aware of these things means you don’t have to fall in with them. A part of your mind may be thinking something unskillful, but the other part is just watching. The part that’s just watching, that’s something you want to maintain. That’s a skillful state of mind. It’s not jumping in right away. It’s watching the process as you try to train that watchman. Not to get upset, but to look for other good potentials. It, in and of itself, is a good potential. So try to maintain that sense of the observer. Because that’s going to be crucial for any prospect, any project in training the mind. You can learn what’s good, you can learn what’s not good, only if you can sit with things and watch them over time, not get blown around. You stay right here with the breath. That’s the good wind to stay with as far as the bad winds are blowing through. Just let them blow on their way. You don’t have to get involved. You don’t have to chase them away. They’re going to go away on their own. Just try to maintain this sense of the observer that can keep on observing and learn how to let go, let go of anything that’s going to be unskillful. Then develop the qualities that can keep this observer solid and strong, clear-sighted, discernment, mindfulness, alertness. These are the things we’re working on to maintain this sense of the observer. Those are the skillful potentials in the present. Those are the ones you want to water, to learn how to have confidence in these things. Jon Suwat would often begin his meditation instructions by saying, “Come with a sense of confidence. Come with a sense of feeling inspired by what you’re doing. You’ve got something really good here.” The human mind, which is so changeable, does have good potentials. It has bad potentials as well, but you want to foster the good ones. So have confidence in the fact that, yes, you do have these good potentials in mind. And with the right training, you can develop them and they can become dominant. So this very changeable mind of yours gets more solid, more reliable. It’s something you really can take refuge in because you’ve developed the qualities of refuge, discernment, compassion for yourself and for others, and purity in your actions. In other words, even though you may be faced with all kinds of unskillful choices, you learn how to drop them and focus on the things that are skillful. These are the qualities that give you a good, solid foundation. So this changeable mind can become a more steady mind, a reliable mind, a mind where you can find refuge.

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