Directed Thought & Evaluation

April 19, 2011

In a few days, we’re going to be marking the 50th anniversary of Ajahn Lee’s passing. I’ve been thinking a lot recently about what a really special person he was, what a special teacher. And for me, one of the most useful parts of his teaching was his discussion of vittaka and vijjana—directed thought and evaluation, two other factors of jhana. It’s the most useful explanation I’ve found. And it fits very neatly with what the Buddha had to say about how to get the mind into concentration. You direct your thoughts to the breath, you keep the breath in mind, and then you evaluate it. And you evaluate what’s the best way of using the breath to get the mind to settle down. The process of directed thought and evaluation is illustrated in the Buddha’s analogy. For the first jhana, you have the bathman who’s working water into this pile of bath powder to make some dough. In those days, they didn’t have soap. They would take the powder, mix it with water until you had a lump of dough, the consistency of bread dough. Then you’d rub that over your body. And in the image, the bathman or his apprentice is working the water through the dough so that everything gets moistened. And throughout the analogies for the different levels of jhana, water stands for pleasure. So you’re working the pleasure through the dough. You’re working the pleasure through the body. This is what you’re doing with the pleasure that comes from getting the mind separated from its concerns for sensuality and being right here in the sense of form, i.e., the body as you feel it from inside. In terms of the four properties, there’s earth, which is the solidity, water is the liquidity, fire is the heat, the warmth. And then breath is the energy. And so you’re looking at the energy throughout the body, and you use that quality of breath energy to allow the rapture and the pleasure to permeate throughout the whole body. That’s what the Buddha says you do with it. There’s a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of fullness and refreshment. That is, the description says, when the mind is secluded from sensuality and secluded from unskillful qualities. Sensuality means your plans and obsessions with sensual pleasures. It doesn’t mean that you’re abandoning the senses or that you’re trying to find a place where there’s no sensual pleasure. Sensuality means the mind’s obsession with planning about what kind of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations you’d like to experience or the ones that you’ve had in the past. You drop all that. Unskillful qualities means wrong view, wrong resolve, all the way up through wrong mindfulness. In other words, you bring right view, right resolve, and everything up through right mindfulness to bear on getting the mind to settle down. The role of right mindfulness here is to keep the body and mind ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. So you’re alert, you’re noticing what the breath is actually doing, you’re mindful, you’re keeping the breath in mind. The ardency is trying to do this skillfully. Whatever needs to be done to get the mind to settle down, that’s the work of direct thought and evaluation. It’s providing the mind with a good place to stay. I’ve heard some teachers say that direct thought and evaluation is simply sort of an outside layer of distraction that hasn’t yet been eliminated in the first level of jhana. But as the Buddha’s analogy shows, it’s an essential part. You have to think about how to get the pleasure to spread. How do you spread pleasure in a way that doesn’t turn it into pain? If you force it too much, if you put tension on it, it’s not as easeful and refreshing as it could be. So how do you breathe in a way that feels really good? If there’s that feeling of pleasure, how do you let it spread? John Lee describes some breath channels for the body. Down the spine, out the legs, in at the back of the neck, and down the shoulders and out the arms, in the middle of the chest, and down through to the bladder and the colon. That’s description and method two. But if you look in his other Dhamma talks, he has lots of other descriptions for how the breath can move in the body. What it comes down to is how you feel the breath move in your body. He gives you basic ideas to start with, but your sense of the breath energy and your sense of how the energy flows in a way that feels really good, refreshing, nourishing, energizing. That’s going to depend a lot on how you hold your body, how you’ve been relating to your body. So it’s something you want to explore. And so in this way you develop concentration based, one, on the desire to do it well, which is part of the ardency, and also based on your powers of analysis, figuring out what’s working. And for most of us who’ve had a lot of education in terms of school, formal education, the mind is very rarely willing to just drop things or stay with something and not think about it. So John Lee gives you something to think about. How does the breath feel? How do you relate to your breath? How do you perceive your breath? And how can you use that perception in a way that’s going to help spread a sense of well-being and ease, refreshment, fullness, throughout the body to the point where things feel really good and you’re feeling well-centered enough that you can eventually drop the direct thought and evaluation and just be there with a sense of full breathing? There will be some thinking at that point, just enough mindfulness to remind yourself to stay here with breath or stay balanced with how the breathing feels right here, right now. But the more refined your direct thought and evaluation, the better the results you’re going to get. John Lee gives the analogy of sifting sand. If your sifter has a coarse weave, you’re going to get lots of big lumps. And the sand isn’t going to be as useful, say, if you want to make tiles. That’s the analogy he gives. If you want to make clay tiles, you have to have really refined sand. So you want to get a sifter that has a very fine mesh. John Lee here is recommending that you try to be as really observant and sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. We’re not trying to get away from the body, we’re trying to get in the body. And we’re trying to sift and distill the sensations of the body so they become really nice places to be. Because eventually, in the second jhana, you’re going to become one with the sense of the breath. And you’re not going to want to become one with something that’s all lumpy, with lots of different patterns of tension or tightness. I mean, there may be things that depending on the way you’ve been holding your body or the physical condition of the body, that no matter how much direct thought and evaluation, you can’t soften them up, you can’t sift through them. But you know that only after trying. Some of us tend to hold a lot of tightness around the heart or around the neck area. And for a while you may have to live with that. Write that off as a part that’s resistant, that doesn’t respond to direct attack. So you work in other parts of the body. You go at it in an indirect way. It’s like someone who doesn’t trust you to be gentle until they see you being gentle with somebody else. It’s okay, this person does have the ability to be gentle. There’s a part of your mind that doesn’t trust your conscious relationship to the breath enough to allow you in there. And so you have to prove to yourself that you can handle things in a subtle way, you can handle things in a sensitive way. So you sift through whatever lumpy sensations you may have in the body, any patterns of tension, and you see what you can work with and what you can’t. And over time, you find that you can work with more and more parts of the body. But it’s in this way that your tendency to think, to think, to think and evaluate, i.e., your verbal fabrication, the kind of internal conversation we all have, is actually put to use for the purpose of getting the mind to settle down. That’s a large part of Ajahn Lee’s genius. And seeing that, that’s what the Buddha was talking about. So we have the advantage of the fact that it’s now written in books. We don’t have to discover it the way he did. We can take advantage of his discoveries and build on them, especially for us in the West. I think I’ve told you that comment from Ajahn Foon. There are two types of people. There are people who tend to think too much, and there are people who don’t think enough when it comes to meditating. And for the most part, we tend to be those who think too much. So instead of forcing ourselves not to think, we learn how to take that thinking and make it actually a tool, an aid, in getting the mind to settle down and getting out of our heads and down into our bodies in a way that feels really grounding, feels really secure, and that we begin to use as a touchstone for what right concentration is. If you find that you’re concentrating in a way that’s putting a lot of tightness and tension into the flow of energy in the body, or it’s creating lots of blockages as you’re trying to block out parts of your awareness of the body, okay, that’s wrong concentration. The more you block out in the way, the more you tense up in the way, the more parts of your own mind you keep hidden from yourself. If you find that you can open up parts of the body that were shut off before, you may notice that certain images come into the mind. You realize, “Okay, I’ve been holding this off here because of certain attitudes I’ve been holding.” And that gives you some insight into what you’ve got to work on. Because as you’re working this healthful, healing energy through the body, it’s not just a physical process. There’s a mental side to all this as well. You’re opening up some things that you closed off before in your mind. And you’re now developing a better place to deal with those things, a greater sense of well-being, a greater sense of belonging here, of fully inhabiting your body. So whatever closed off parts are now given a space in which you can look at them and not feel threatened by them, because you’ve got your tools, your powers of thought are now on the side of right view and all the way down through right mindfulness and right concentration. So instead of telling yourself not to think, not to analyze, you’re told to learn how to be sensitive in how you think and how you analyze and notice the impact it’s having on the body. So you gain some guidance in what kind of thinking and analysis really is useful on the path. It’s not just a matter of allowing things and accepting things and just hoping that that will dissolve the problem away. Some things you do have to analyze. But in giving your powers of thought some practice here with the direct thought and evaluation, learning how to work with a sense of pleasure, work with a sense of well-being, maximizing it throughout the body. You’re training your powers of analysis so they actually are useful parts of the path. So try to take advantage of this insight, because it widens your range of tools. It makes the training of the mind a training of the full mind. You’re not shutting off faculties of the mind. You’re not shutting off your powers of imagination or thought or ingenuity or creativity. You’re learning how to use them and bring everything together in a way where the whole mind gets trained.

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