The Problem Lies Inside

February 27, 2012

It’s cold, rainy, windy outside. It’s a good time to turn your attention inward and focus on the breath. Focus on your awareness right here. See how far down into the body you can feel the breathing process. Think of the whole body being nourished by the breath. Take an interest in what’s going on inside right now, both with the breath and with your awareness. The breath here is home base in the meditation. As Ajaan Lee calls it, viharadhamma, the place where the mind takes its residence. The place you call your home. It’s good to have a home that you can access wherever you are. For some of us, we’re on the other side of an ocean from where we normally live, but we still have this home with the breathing. That’s one of the good things about meditation. It’s a home you can take with you, a place you can call your own, even in foreign lands. So you evaluate the breath to figure out which kind of breathing feels good right now. Keep your attention directed to the breath. Don’t let it wander off. The Buddha gives an example of a quail. He normally lived in a field where all the dirt was turned up by the plow. As long as it stayed in the field, it was safe. If any hawks came down, it could hide behind the stones. They were turned up by the plow. But one day, this one quail wandered out of the field. Immediately, it was caught. As the hawk was carrying it away, the quail bemoaned its fate, saying, “Only if I had been staying in my ancestral ground, in my home territory, I’d be safe. This hawk would be no match for me.” The hawk was a little scared. It was taken aback by this quail and its pride. So the hawk let it go and said, “Okay, go back to that field. But don’t think that you’ll be able to escape from me there.” So the quail gets down in the field and stands on a stone and says, “Okay, come and get me if you can.” So the hawk swoops down. As soon as the hawk is coming at it at full speed, the quail immediately hides behind the stone and the hawk hits the stone instead and dies. So as long as you’re with your breath, you’re like the quail in the field. You’re safe. You have the opportunity to develop this home and settle in. The problem is when you start wandering off, that’s when the mind can get into trouble. That’s why the Buddha has supplementary meditation techniques, what Ajaan Lee calls “foraging places.” These are things you can think about that are not focused here in the present moment but can help when the mind is beginning to get distracted. The two big problems, of course, are lust and greed on the one hand, and anger on the other. And the Buddha has antidotes for both. For lust, he has contemplation of the body. Some people complain about the contemplation. The Buddha says it’s full of all sorts of unclean things. He’s not saying it’s morally unclean or ritually unclean. It’s just a change of perception. The body in and of itself is not a problem. It’s just a body. It has to function. It does its things. It has its processes that it needs to do in order to stay alive. The problem is with the mind. It’s the lust that goes into the body. From the lust, we do all sorts of unskillful things. It’s because of our perception. We apply the perception of beauty to the body. We apply the perception of desirability to the body. And when we see it as something desirable and something beautiful, we want it—our own body and the body of others. It’s interesting that one of the Buddha’s analyses is that we’re trying to be attracted to other people’s bodies because we’re attracted to our own body first. Some people may have a really negative body image of themselves, but deep down inside we feel the human body is at least something you can look at, something you can desire. Sometimes it’s because we have a thwarted body image of ourselves that we look for the things that are beautiful in other people’s bodies, both out of desire and out of jealousy. Neither of which are skillful mind states. So it’s the mind state you’ve got to watch out for. Sometimes it’s hard to focus straight on the mind state, so you try to focus your attention on the things that you see as beautiful and desirable, and learn to see them in another way. As Ajahn Lee once said, “Don’t be a person with one eye. Be a person with two eyes.” See the body from both sides as both beautiful parts and parts that are not beautiful. When you find that your lust is strong, you have to focus on the parts that are not beautiful, otherwise the lust takes over. So try to think about the body. Take it apart. Take the skin off first. Put the skin in one pile. And then there are the muscles. Put those in another pile. Then you go through the blood vessels and all the other little parts. Do you realize there’s nothing in there? There’s nothing that’s really clean. There’s nothing you would like to see on your floor. You sweep it out immediately. Wash it away. And yet when it’s all nicely wrapped up inside the skin, it’s okay. It’s desirable. That’s the way the mind is. This shows you how unfair the mind is, how its perceptions play tricks on it. So again, the problem is not with the body. The problem is with our actions. The attitude toward it and the things we do based on that attitude. That’s another contemplation you need to do. Think about lust and all the crazy, unskillful, harmful, cruel things people do under the power of lust. You’ve got to see the drawbacks of the lust, either by focusing on the objects or focusing on the lust itself. That’s a way of pulling the mind out of that line of thinking and begin to see that the mind is still and at ease, with a sense of well-being in the present moment. That mind state is much preferable. Similarly, with anger, when the Buddha says not to be angry about other people’s behavior, he’s not saying that their behavior is good. Some of the things they’re doing really are despicable. They really are harmful. They really are cruel. And yet if you let your mind get burned up with the anger, you can’t see straight. You end up reacting in ways that are harmful for everybody else. It doesn’t right the wrong. So the Buddha’s not asking you to see cruel things as okay. He’s simply saying that you’re not worth the anger and that you’re better off more effective in dealing with unskillful behavior on the part of other people if you don’t let your anger take over. So we’re not condoning their behavior or saying that you should love people’s misbehavior. We’re saying that if you want to behave skillfully yourself, you have to see the harm of the anger. One of the ways of doing that is to look at the object, the person you’re angry at, and remember that this person has some good habits, this person has some good qualities. And even if the person has no good qualities, all you have to do is feel pity for the person. As the Buddha said, someone with no good qualities is like a sick person on the side of a road in a desert. Even if you don’t know the person, you feel pity. In other words, a person who has no good qualities is creating a lot of bad karma for himself or herself. And it’s not good to see people doing that. So you have to have pity for them, even if they’ve been very harmful to you or to people who are weak. You’re trying to counteract your anger with a sense of pity. You’ve been able to see the object of your anger, again, from both sides, having two eyes looking at that person. Then you turn around and look at the anger itself. Realize that a lot of times the mind is attracted to anger and goes looking for things to get angry about, just as it goes looking for things to get lustful about. You have to ask yourself, “Why? What’s the attraction?” That right there is where the danger is. We’re attracted to lust, we’re attracted to anger, we’re attracted to lots of unskillful mental states. We’ve got to do what we can to see their harm. Otherwise they can destroy our concentration, destroy our discernment. So, as the Buddha says, the real problem lies inside. We have to look at the allure of these things, why they’re attractive to us. Then we also have to look at the drawbacks to see that the drawbacks way outweigh the allure, the attraction. Then we want to watch how these things come and how they go. Because lust doesn’t always stay. Anger doesn’t always stay. They come and go in waves. And you want to look to see what is it that suddenly makes lust attractive, what suddenly makes anger attractive, that makes you want to go out and find something to get lustful for, find something to get angry about. Watch how it comes, watch how it goes. What’s the difference? What happened? What changed? What perception changed? It’s that way you can handle on these things. So when the Buddha talks about the unattractiveness of the body, it’s not because of anything wrong with the body. It’s that there’s something wrong with our perception. The perception that leads from a sense of beauty to a sense of desire and lust, and then the things we do under the influence of that desire and lust. Those are the problems. It’s the same with anger. It’s the things we do under the power of anger that are really harmful. So we have to trace these things back to their causes. And we have to uproot them as best we can. Otherwise, as you try to stay with the breath, they’ll allow you to stay only when there’s nothing else on the agenda for the evening. And then when there is something about lust or anger on the agenda, then the breath doesn’t stand a chance. So you have to do what you can to understand these things. Sometimes you just put them away, put them aside. As we’re saying today, you can clamp down on them and they’ll stay for a while. But that means you clamp down on a lot of other things, too. And of course, these things will come back. And in the beginning, that’s the way you have to operate as you’re trying to get some sense of getting established with the breath. But as your home with the breath gets more and more solid, then you can look into these things, try to understand them. And as the Buddha says, when you really comprehend them, that’s part of the comprehension. When you really comprehend them, there has to be a sense of dispassion. You see that they’re really not as desirable as you thought they were. And letting go in that way is a lot more effective. It goes a lot deeper. It’s much more reliable. So the danger lies inside. That’s why we’re looking inside. It doesn’t lie outside with the rain or the wind or the cold. It’s right here, right next to where the breath is. And that’s one of the reasons why we work with the breath, both to give the mind a good, solid foundation from which it can watch these things, and also because it’s very close to these things. And that’s how we get past the danger. We learn how we can trust ourselves more, that we not only know what’s skillful and what’s not skillful, but we know how to wean the mind away from unskillful things and make it more attracted to the skillful ones. That’s the way the mind becomes more safe and secure. cure.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2012/120227_The_Problem_Lies_Inside.mp3>