Shelter from a Stormy Night

April 13, 2012

It’s on windy and rainy nights like this when you really appreciate to have a place to be warm, protected against the wind. You can’t stop the wind, you can’t stop the rain, but you can provide a safe place for yourself. We’re doing that as we meditate, creating this safe space inside where we learn to resist influences from outside. It’s an important skill. Part of having this quiet spot, of course, is having a comfortable place in the body. This is why we work with the breath. But when you’re working with the breath, it’s not just the breath, of course, that’s here. You’ve got feelings, you’ve got your awareness, different events going on in the mind. And you want all of them to be a safe place, too. And they all work together. The way you breathe, of course, is going to have an influence on the way you feel inside. One of the basic steps in the breath meditation is to breathe in and out, to train yourself to breathe in and out, aware of the entire body. So when you’re aware of the entire body, what are you aware of? Well, there’s the wind element, they call it, and there’s the fire element, the liquid and the solid elements. It’s the wind and the fire. The wind and the fire elements are the ones that are most responsive to changes in the mind. After all, you’ve got up-flowing breath and down-flowing breath. There’s the breath in the stomach, the breath in the intestines, and then there’s the breath that goes throughout the entire body, all the parts of the body. As the Buddha says, when you make yourself aware of the entire body, the next step is to calm the bodily fabrication, which is basically calming down the way you breathe. But he says elsewhere that the best way to calm things down is to try to develop a sense of rapture. Now, the word rapture here may be a little bit misleading, because we tend to think of Saint Teresa and her raptures. It can range anywhere from something really intense, like chills going through the body or hair standing on end. To a simple sense of fullness, a lack of hunger in the present moment. Everything feels just right as it is. Everything is in its right place. Nothing feels squeezed, nothing feels distorted. When you can develop that sense of fullness, then it’s easier for things to calm down. Because the calming there is not coming down out of a lack of energy. It’s calming down from just the opposite, a sense of being nourished. So you try to notice how the way you breathe in and out has an impact on the other breath energies in the body. So you can create that sense of nourishment. The same with the fire element. The parts of the body that are warm, they talk about their digestion and just the general warmth throughout the body. If you’re feeling cold, where are the warm spots in the body right now? Then you can do something very similar as you did with the breath. Think of the warmth spreading, connecting throughout the whole body. That gives you a sense of well-being on a night like this. Of course, if you’re in a hot place, then you want to focus on the opposite, which is the sense of coolness. So Jon Furon would equate that with the water element. I remember when I was stuck on a bus one day in Bangkok. The bus was stuck in traffic and the bus was really crowded. And the question rose in my mind, “Where is there any coolness here? There’s no breeze. We’re just very little breeze.” But I did notice that there were spots in the body that were cooler than other spots. So instead of complaining to myself about how hot and miserable the situation was, I just focused on the cool spots and thought of them spreading around in the body, letting the blood carry the coolness to the different parts of the body. It was very effective. Working with the elements like this is a really good way of seeing how your perception can affect things. It can affect your experience of the body. And when your experience of the body has changed, it affects your attitude towards things around you. Of course, working with the breath like this does change your feelings. And feelings and perceptions, you remember, are mental fabrications. They’ll have an impact on your mind. So, which feelings to focus on and how to perceive them. How do you perceive the breath as well? Because that can have an impact on how you allow it to calm down. If you feel that you’re struggling for breath, it’s very hard to get the mind to really settle down. There’s a feeling that there are only a few places where the breath can come in and go out, and they’re clogged right now. You’re going to be miserable. But if you can think of the breath energy surrounding you, it can come in and out through all the pores. And then it’s just waiting to come in, if you would allow it in. Simply holding that perception in mind changes how you feel the breathing and the state of your mind as well. It helps to calm down any restlessness, any antsiness in the mind. So they’re all right here. When you talk about the four frames of reference, you’ve got the body, you’ve got the feelings, you’ve got mind, and you’ve got mental qualities. And it’s really hard to divide the process of establishing mindfulness into four distinct things. After all, you’re remaining focused on the breath. The act of remaining focused creates certain feelings right there. And of course the breath is the object. The mindfulness and the alertness are what keep you there. And the various mental qualities that help keep you away from being distracted, what they call subduing greed and distress with reference to the world, require that you develop qualities of equanimity towards whatever you might be thinking about that would pull you away from the breath. So you’ve got all these things working together here. This is how mindfulness gets established. And when mindfulness is established, that’s how concentration develops. There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about focusing in on any of the establishings of mindfulness. And once you’re there and things begin to calm down, then he says, “Stay with the body or with feelings.” Or with mind states or mental qualities. But don’t think any thoughts about them. In other words, just be right there with them. Have that one label in mind. And you go into the second jhana, which means that up to that point you were settling into the first, if you were doing it well. So there’s no clear line between mindfulness and concentration. They work together. In fact, this is the way it is with all the factors in the path. There’s no clear dividing line. Right resolve, the resolve for renunciation, that connects directly with the resolve to settle down and focus on the breath rather than getting involved in sensual things or being resolved on non-ill will. That connects directly with good will, which can be an object of concentration. Of course, right resolve builds on your understanding of what’s called mundane right view, on the one hand, and transcendent right view. If you understand mundane right view, you realize your actions have consequences. And so you don’t want to have ill will to anybody, because that’s going to cause you to do unskillful things and then to suffer as a result. And then from right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood all come. Right effort is what acts on your right resolve and your right view. If you want to avoid unskillful behavior, you’ve got to learn how to uproot unskillful mindstates. If you want to develop skillful behavior, you’ve got to develop skillful mindstates. And when you find that the practice is slacking, you want to develop the desire to keep going with it. In the qualities of right effort, there’s desire, there’s persistence, there’s intent. All of those are bases of power which lead to concentration. So they’re all connected. You can’t divide up the Eightfold Path as if it were distinct slices of a pie. All the different factors come together. So it’s when you bring things together like this that there’s a sense of real balance and real strength in your concentration. This gives you that safe place inside. That’s for anything that would pull you away. You’ve got a good place to look at these things. As I’ve mentioned many times, when I was first ordained, sitting up on the hill alone in Rayong, a lot of old issues from school, from grade school, high school, college, family life, came flooding in. And part of it was just because there was a lot of empty space in my mind, not much activity. But fortunately I had two things. On the one hand, I had the practice to give me a grounding so I wasn’t blown away by these mindstorms. And secondly, I had a really sane person nearby. If something came up, I could talk to him about it. Often he wouldn’t have to say anything. He’d just kind of look at me. In other words, if it was John Foo, he’d just look at me and begin to realize how really ridiculous a lot of my attitudes were. So having this still place here is not just a spot of comfort, but it’s a space where you can look at the other things that come into your mind, the attitudes you’ve picked up from who knows where, this strange culture we have here. And it’s a good place to protect you from that as well. So do your best to pull all these qualities together. Because when they nurture one another, they really are strong, and they really do provide safety and security. So that when winds and rainstorms are howling through your mind, you’ve got a good, warm place to stay.

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