Stepping Out of the Waves

August 13, 2012

The forest tradition has its own way of interpreting two important concepts, indulgence in sensuality and indulgence in self-torment. You may remember these are the two things that the right path avoids. In their interpretation, indulgence in sensuality is indulging in pleasant moods, indulging in self-torment is indulging in moods of anger and dislike. In other words, you go for the things you like or you indulge in moods about things you don’t like. And it’s only to be expected when you meditate that you’re going to run into these things. And you have to learn how to let them go. Because we’re walking on a middle path, trying to get the mind to settle down and be clear. And there is a pleasure that comes when the mind settles down, and that’s actually part of the concentration. You don’t want to let that go quite yet, but the excitement that comes when the meditation is going well and the opposite mood that comes when the meditation is not going well, those are the things that you have to steer a clear course through. And it’s to be expected that you’ll run into them before you can learn how to get between them. But one of the things you’ll notice is that when moods like this come up, they come up like a wave. And you go diving into the wave. That’s where you’ve got to learn to catch yourself. No, you don’t dive into it. You back off a bit. And this is where it’s good to be sensitive to the breath energy in your body. Because as that wave comes over you, it’s going to have an effect on the body as well. A certain amount of tension will build up. It might be in your hands, it might be in your feet. Some people find that it builds up in different places. For some people it’s in the core of the body, the middle of the chest or the solar plexus. And so you have to learn how to let go, let go of those waves. Think of them scattering. Think of whatever tension builds up as just scattering, going back to where it was before. That helps get you past the moods. At the same time, you have to learn how to let go of whatever the mind is saying that goes along with the mood—saying to itself. Just stop whatever that sentence might be. Stop it in mid-sentence. You don’t have to complete the thought. Just notice, “There it is,” and stop it. It’s almost like you drop it, like you’re holding a dish. When you drop the dish, a part of you will be a little afraid that the dish will break. You don’t have to realize it. These moods, even though they hit the floor, they don’t break. But they will dissipate, they will disappear. And that’s actually what you want. It may sound like it’s kind of dry and dull, all these interesting waves of emotion that people like to ride. All of a sudden you’re being told to disperse the wave. But you find that a greater sense of well-being is there in the mind. When you’re not diving around through the waves, you step back a bit. You’re the framework in which these waves come and go. If you’re going to identify with anything, identify with the framework. You’ve got this larger sense of the body. You learn how to see that larger sense of the body as part of your concentration. It, too, is a form of breath energy. Learn to see it as energy rather than just as something solid. It does have its solid aspects, but you don’t have to focus on them. You can focus more on the sense of its being energy that can flow in any direction, that has no barriers, no boundaries on it. We can think in this way. It’s a lot easier for the mind to settle down. When things come up, you can just watch them pass, watch them pass. And you’ll find that the stability that comes from being able to watch events in the body, watch events in the mind as they come and go, gives a much greater sense of well-being, much more solid, reliable, much more resilient. We’re here to learn a skill. I know there is a certain excitement when the skill finally comes together. If you’re prey to that emotion, you’re also going to be prey to the emotion of getting upset when it’s not going well. And neither one is what you want to get involved in. They’ll come, but you can allow them to disperse. Think of them dispersing, dispersing, disbanding, disbanding. And you’re right back where you were. Otherwise, if you’re waiting for these things, it’s like having your sail up, waiting for any little breeze that comes your way. And all of a sudden the storm comes through. It knocks you over. So take down your sails. You’re here to watch. You’re here to master a skill. There’s work to be done. But in the course of doing it well, there is a pleasure that comes from knowing that it’s done well. Not the excitement of saying, “Hey, it’s finally going well,” but there’s a deeper pleasure that comes from seeing yourself handle it well. That satisfaction goes a lot deeper. So try to have the attitude that you’re mastering a skill. And whatever mental and emotional skills you’ve used in the past to master different skills, bring them to bear here. And that’s how the meditation progresses. (whooshing)

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