Being Observant

August 22, 2012

John Lee has an analogy for the work we do in concentration. The director of thought and evaluation, he says, is like sifting flour. If you want to make really fine pastry, you have to have really fine flour. And so you need a very refined mesh. You start out with a coarse mesh and sift the flour, and then you take that flour and you sift it again in a finer mesh. You get really, really refined particles. And it’s in the refinement that you come across the pleasure and rapture that we hear so much about as being the factors of jhana. Nothing from another dimension. The potential is right here. It’s simply making your awareness refined enough to see it. There are already spots in the body that are potentially very pleasant. They may seem neutral at the moment, but you give them a little space and they can show their stuff. The same with the breath. Each time you breathe in, there’s a part of the breath that’s comfortable. If it weren’t comfortable, you wouldn’t breathe. You prefer not to breathe. But because not breathing is very uncomfortable, you’ve got to breathe. And so, relatively speaking at least, there’s going to be at least one patch of comfort in the breath. And when you catch that, try to keep the breath within that patch. Maintain that sense of fullness, refreshment. It may be very subtle to begin with, but as you work with it and allow it to spread, both throughout the length of the breath and throughout the breadth of your body, you find that your concentration gets more solid, has a better foundation. This makes the concentration even more attractive. And then the trick, of course, is learning how to maintain that throughout the day so it’s not just something you can find, hit or miss, while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but something you can tap into. Something you can remember. When you focus in this part of the body or these parts of the body, it allows the sense of ease. Even if it’s not a great ease, just okay. That okay-ness. Allow that to be there for a while and not be disturbed. Think of it connecting with other spots in the body that are also okay. You find that your sensation of the body is going to change. Now, these things don’t come labeled with little post-it notes. You have to make yourself really sensitive to where they are and what you can do with them. This is why there’s so much emphasis placed on the forested areas. You have to be observant, not just listening to the words of the teachings, but being observant of how things are done and what things need to be done. Jon Foon would often criticize me. He’d say, “Do I have to tell you?” Of course, I was there expecting to be told everything. But then I realized he was right. As he once said, “If I have to tell you everything, I’m going to die.” There’s so much to pick up, so much to notice, even subtle things about keeping the monastery clean, keeping things in order. There’s a lot of work to be done that people are missing. Every day I stay until everyone’s left the sala, and then I have to go around and clean up after everybody. And I haven’t seen anybody’s notice of that. It’s always the same things, again and again and again. The table isn’t wiped, the sink isn’t cleaned, this isn’t in order, that’s not in order. If you’re going to be observant of what’s going on with the breath and the body, you should be more observant of what’s going on in the monastery. As Ajaan Lee once said, “If you live in a monastery, your eyes should be as large as the monastery.” Try to notice. Be observant. As Ajaan said, one of the words that Ajaan Foong used most often in his meditation instructions was, “Be observant. Watch. Use your powers of observation.” Because there’s nobody going to be sitting and whispering into your ear. Even if you had a teacher who could read your mind, he couldn’t be doing that all the time. You’ve got to notice what’s going on in your mind. You’ve got to notice what’s going on in your breath. Important things don’t come with little labels or little flashing lights. They’re subtle things. And you have to develop the habit of being subtle, both inside and out, if you want to pick up these things. He said—I think it’s the commentary that recommends breath meditation is appropriate for everybody—that’s not the case. It’s for people who have subtle powers of observation. It’s only then that you can make the most of it. Otherwise, it’s just in, out, in, out. Once one of the Ajaans who criticized Ajaan Lee said, “Why do you teach people to focus on the breath? There’s nothing to it but in and out, in and out.” That’s all you see, and that’s all there is. The implication being that the really good parts of the breath are the subtle things. There’s lots of ins and lots of outs. So try to be sensitive. It’s like listening to a piece of music playing far off. You have to get yourself really quiet. So you can notice, so you can observe, so you can detect what’s going on. The potential for ease, the potential for rapture, is already there. Sometimes the rapture is felt as a fullness in the body; sometimes it’s a fullness in the body, a flowing energy moving around in the body; sometimes it’s a thrill that goes up the spine. When it gets strong, it can be really strong. In fact, it’s so strong that some people encounter it and get overwhelmed by it. But where does it come from? It comes from subtle things, allowing the energy to flow in a place where it hasn’t flowed before, or allowing it to be unnoticed. And to stir it for a while, so it can feel full. Language is not really well suited to describe these things, because they’re part of your nonverbal experience. So try to learn to be observant. It’s only that way that you’ll get to see and then make sense of it. the most of what’s already there.

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