Exploring the Present

December 24, 2012

There’s a famous Ajahn who one time asked Ajahn Lee how he could be teaching people the breath as their topic of meditation. He said, “All I can see is just in and out. How are you going to develop any discernment with that? Just in, out, in, out.” And Ajahn Lee said, “Well, if that’s all you see, then that’s all there is.” The difference being is that there’s a lot more there. One of the challenges of meditation is to use that lot more there to engage yourself in the breath. Interest is one of the causes of concentration. If you can’t get interested in the topic, the mind is not going to stay. So remind yourself what the breath is. Is the energy flowing in the body? Have you ever done bodywork? You know that you’re trying to figure out how the energy is flowing in your patient. You can do the same here with your own body, the breath in your own body. How is the energy flowing now? In fact, if you’ve had trouble staying with the in and out breath, start focusing straight on the breath energies in the body. Does the body feel balanced? Make a survey. As you breathe in, notice as you go down through the body how the right side compares to the left. Your shoulders, upper arms, elbows, lower arms, wrists, hands. Then down through the back, down to the hips, down through the legs, out to the toes. Just compare right and left, right and left, right and left, as you go down. As you breathe in, notice where the tension builds up as you breathe in. Try breathing in as long as you can. Notice, where does the tension become noticeable first? Try to relax that. See, can you keep on breathing in without having the tension build up there? Then notice where you feel the tension next and next. In other words, you’ve got to learn how to survey the body. Again, a sense that you’re here to treat the body with the breath, treat the body with the mindfulness and alertness that go along with the breath. As John Lee says, the breath is kind of the solvent for the medicine you’re using here, and the alertness and the mindfulness are the actual medicine. Because a lot of the patterns of tension that you carry around are there because you’re not paying attention to those parts of the body. As soon as you bring awareness to them or bring alertness to them, you say, “Oh, this doesn’t feel quite right.” Or, “That doesn’t feel quite right.” And then the question is, how do you breathe so as to correct for that? And the question may deal with the length of the breath or the depth of the breath or may have nothing to do with the in-and-out breath. That’s just a matter of how you allow the energy to flow through the body. Where are you holding on to things? And the place where you’re holding on may not be the spot where you feel the tension or you feel the tightness. It may be something else. For instance, some heaviness in the head may actually be caused by tension around your tailbone. So think of relaxing that spot and see what it does to the rest of the body. In other words, if the mind is inquisitive and gets bored, if there’s nothing to explore, then you use it to explore. Allow the exploration to become the cause for your concentration. Another one of the tanchans uses this example. He says you’ve got a bird in a cage. As long as the bird is flying around in the cage, it’s okay. It’s when it gets out of the cage that it gets into trouble. In the same way, you’ve got your mind here in the body. Even though it’s moving around in the body, not quite settled in, not quite really solid, but at least it’s here within the confines of the body. Then it’s okay. You can explore as much as you want. You’re here in the present moment. The breath energy in the body. So it’s up to you to decide what needs doing in the body, what needs to be treated, what needs to be corrected for. That gives you a sense of purpose. You’re not just here chilling out or relaxing, because relaxing gets pretty dull. And it’s easy to start slipping off as soon as you start lounging around in the breath. But if you’re constantly alert to where the patterns of tension may be right now, right now, and then you release this pattern of tension, what does it do? How does it realign things in the body? Once things are realigned, is that okay or does it need further work? As long as you feel you’re getting somewhere with this, keep it up. In this way, you use the factor of interest as a cause for concentration. The basis for power list four factors. There’s the factor of desire. There’s the factor of persistence. There’s citta, which means the intentness that you apply to the practice. And then there’s vipassana, which is your more analytical side of the mind. In some cases, simply the desire to stay with the object is enough. You want to stay with the breath and you find that it’s okay. Other times you have to really apply energy to stay there. And other times you have to take an interest in it. What’s going on with the breath? Think of it as something you’re exploring. Because that’s the whole nature of the practice we’re doing here, is you’re exploring things. You’re not trying to clone awakening. Sometimes you hear meditation being described as, well, learning to see things in a way that makes sense. And once you see things in that way, then you’ve won the bingo game. And you can make the mind see things. I don’t know how many people have said they’ve proven to themselves that there is no self. The question is, well, who proved it? Who is it being proved to? And is that the conclusion the Buddha wants you to come to? There’s never any place where he says that that’s what we’re here for. He himself says that views are not the goal of the path. They’re a means on the path. But there’s a point where you have to overcome the views, overcome your attachment to the views. So he’s not telling you to see things in a certain way. He’s saying there’s something really valuable in here. And he gives you the tools for exploring in here, starting with the ways you work with the breath. Try to understand the breath energies in the body. See them as bodily fabrication, the way you sense your body right now. In the process of doing that, you get involved in the other forms of fabrication. There’s verbal fabrication, your directed thoughts toward the breath in your evaluation of what’s going on with the breath. And then there’s feeling-perception. Those are mental fabrication, the feelings that arise—pain, pleasure, neither pleasure nor pain. And the perceptions that you use, first to stay with the breath, and then the way you notice how you perceive the breath energy in the body, what effect that has on the way the breathing flows. You should find you’ve picked up, ever since childhood, certain ideas about what you have to do in order to get the breath in. And sometimes they’re helpful and sometimes they’re not. And it’s good to be able to question them, to see if holding different perceptions of the body to holding different perceptions of the way you breathe and what has to be done when you breathe and what a good breath feels like. It can really be helpful. So you try to experiment. Experiment with different ways of perceiving different labels for how the breath should flow. If allowing the breath to flow down the arm doesn’t feel right, we’ll think we’re coming back up from the other direction. Those examples that Ajahn Lee gives in his instructions on meditation are starting points. If you look at his own talks on meditation, notice that he came up with lots of different ways of experimenting with the breath. None of them are final. And the message, of course, is that you’ve got to explore on your own. He talks about the breath energy that comes up from the soles of the feet, up the legs, and up the back. And what times is it good to focus on that, and what times is it going to give you headaches? That’s something you’ve got to explore. And you see all these different fabrications working in the body and in the mind. And as you get a sense for them, you don’t have to use the words inconstancy, stress, and not-self, but you begin to realize that there are certain limitations on what you can do. And that’s when the practice of exploration gets more and more directly related to insight. Insight is there all the way along. There are some forms of concentration where it’s just a matter of forcing the mind to stay down, and it stays there, or you just kind of gradually lull it to settling down. But there are other times when the mind is only going to settle down when it’s got something to be interested in, something to work with. That kind of concentration has an element of insight, has an element of discernment already in it. You’re already looking for something more solid, something more reliable. Because what those teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self are basically standards for assaying the gold you get. Is this fool’s gold when things are really nice, or is it something more genuine? If there’s any variation, if there’s any instability, any stress in the sense of ease you get from working with the breath, okay, that’s a sign you haven’t hit the ultimate. There’s something deeper, something more valuable. So you look deeper, you dig deeper, you raise your standards as to what counts as an acceptable state of mind. So we’re following the Buddha. There’s one of the terms they use for the people who awaken. They’re practicing the Buddhist teachings, Anubuddha, following the Buddha. Anubuddha is an awakened person. You’re awakened following the Buddha’s example. He was an explorer. You want to be an explorer too. So it’s not just a matter of forcing the mind to stay down. You have to lure it in to the present moment, through its desire for health, through its desire for a sense of well-being. Whatever it is that’s got you interested in the present moment, whatever your concerns are about the health of the body, use those as tools to draw you into the present moment. That way, by exploring and testing things, you find the genuine gold. It’s in here. And the Buddha gives you the tools for finding it. So if you have trouble getting interested in the present moment, find some reason, either in terms of the health of the body or the health of the mind, to keep yourself motivated, to keep yourself on track. And don’t be worried about whether it’s going to get really quiet or not. The image of the bird, you’re flying around in the cage. As long as you don’t leave the cage, you’re fine. Ultimately the bird will get tired of flying and it’ll settle down and be still. Now, whether it takes a long time or a little time, that’s not the issue. And even before the mind settles down, you’re going to find, if you keep exploring, there are a lot of interesting things that you’re going to learn here. In terms of a John Lee’s image, it’s like walking along the path. You ultimately want to get to the end of the path, but not everything good on the path is at the end. There are plants along the side of the road. Some of them are edible, some of them are medicines. So look carefully as you follow the path. There are a lot of good things right here. And if you look for them, you’ll see them. If you’re convinced that they’re there, you’re more likely to see them. And don’t think that everything that’s good about the path has already been described. You’ll find your own things to like. You’ll find your own things to work with. And just because they’re not in the books doesn’t mean they’re not dharma.

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