The Power of Perception

January 24, 2013

May all living beings look after themselves with ease. It’s probably the most interesting of the different phrases in that expression for goodwill. It’s not saying, “I’ll be there for you,” but “May you be there for yourself. May you have the skills that you need in order to look after yourself. May you have the strengths.” May you have the discernment to know how to look after yourself. That is a necessary part of well-being, that you have those skills. You don’t have to depend on others. Because when you depend on others, there’s a lot of difficulty. There was a cartoon in the funny times tonight. This couple is embracing, and the man is proposing that they get married. And the woman says, “And of course, you know, the only way that you’re going to be in this relationship without suffering is going to be the first to die.” Reality comics. So given that that’s the way things are, you do want to learn how to be self-reliant. And this is what the skills of meditation are. One, asserting the fact that you do have the potential. And two, giving you instructions, giving you advice on how to look after yourself, drawing on the resources you have right here, right now. You’ve got this body, you’ve got this mind, the breath coming in and going out. And the teachings give us means for exploring what we’ve got right here, right now. We’ve got the breath element in the body, we’ve got the water, fire, wind element, earth element, space, consciousness. These things sound very exotic to us, but they’re actually a vocabulary for describing the different kinds of sensations we are experiencing already, many of which, though, we don’t pay much attention to. It’s like the vocabulary you have to develop if you’re going to become a professional food taster. You may have a sensitive tongue. But it gets even more sensitive when you have an extensive vocabulary to describe all the different kinds of tastes there are. So when the Buddha talks about the wind element, the earth element, these are sensations that are right here, right now. He talks about them because you can make use of them to help look after yourself with ease. For instance, with the breath. The Buddha says just a few things about the breath element. Ajahn Lee has a lot more to say. But even in Ajahn Lee, you get the sense that he was still exploring up to the point where he died. In his instructions on how to start out with breath meditation, he has you breathe in the back of the neck and think of the breath energy going down the spine, out to the soles of your feet. Several years later, he gave a Dhamma talk in which he talked about the breath energy that starts at the soles of your feet and comes up through the spine, and another one that starts at the navel and comes up through the nose. He talks about breath energies that come in and go out, breath energies that stay in place, and breath energies that circle around. There’s a lot to explore here. And the way you sense your own breath is going to be something very idiosyncratic. And the different ways of conceiving the breath energy are going to be useful for you. There are different problems. I’ve found that when he’s talking about the breath energy going down the back, it’s very useful when you’re having a headache. Think of it going down the back. And Ajahn Fuang talked about thinking of the breath energy going out the tailbone, sort of draining the pressure off the head. I’ve also found that when you’ve got a backache, it’s good to think of the support that comes up from the upcoming breath from the soles of your feet. In fact, one of the best times to learn about the breath energy is when you find that you’ve got a pain or some sort of imbalance or some sort of illness in the body. And you can ask yourself, “Okay, what would be a healing breath right now?” And allow yourself to think outside the box a bit. In his very first drafts of the book on breath meditation, Ajahn Lee talked about breath energies outside the body. The reason those got cut was when he made later revisions. But it’s good to keep that possibility open. There is a cocoon of energy around the body. And even before you sense it, you may want to simply hold in mind the possibility that it’s there. And if it were there, what would it feel like? And if that energy could be helpful, what would it feel like? What direction would it be coming from? What kind of breath energy would be most helpful now? A solid breath energy that’s still? Or a moving energy? And when it moves, what direction would it be best to move in? Would it feel better if the breath were coming in your eyes or out your eyes? Or if you had a headache? In your ears or out your ears? Coming down from the top of the head or going out the top of the head? These possibilities are all there. And it’s just the head. There are lots of other things you can do with the different parts of the body. If you’ve got a wound, ask yourself to what extent there’s a pattern of tension spreading through the body from the wound. How can you think of breath energy coming into the body right there at the spot of the wound and soothing all the tense parts, all the branches and webs of tension that develop around that? There’s lots to play with here. And to make sure that you’re not just simply pushing the blood around in different ways, trying to do most of the playing in your visualization, in your ideas, or in your mental picture of what the body is like and where the energies flow when you breathe in and when you breathe out. If you find that you’re controlling the breath too much, back off a bit. Say, “Okay, the body can breathe on its own. It knows how to breathe. It’s been breathing without your attention or without your help for a long time.” That’s one good way of bringing things back into equilibrium if you find that one of your experiments isn’t working. Another default mode for undoing some unsuccessful experiments is to think of the breath energy going out through the palms of the hands, out through the soles of the feet, both as you breathe in and as you breathe out. Otherwise, it’s a matter of what Ajahn Fuen would always say, “One, be observant, and two, use your ingenuity.” Try to notice as sensitively as you can, as you’re breathing in, as you’re breathing out, where do you feel some motion? Where do you feel stillness? Does it feel good? Does it feel balanced? Would more stillness feel better, or more motion? Where? It’s one of the best lessons in the power of thought, the power of perception. If you hold a different perception in mind, you will be breathing in a different way. You’ll experience the breath in a different way. It’s simply a matter of getting a sense of what your body’s ailments are, where its imbalances are, and what you can do to bring things back into balance. This is something that’s right here, the way you sense the body sitting here breathing, the way you picture it to yourself. You don’t have to borrow them from anyone else. You don’t have to buy them from anyone else. They’re right there. It’s simply a matter of learning how to use these things that are so close to the mind, so close to the body, to help you look after yourself. Because it is, in this way, a very lonely world. You’re inhabiting your own body. You moved in, and at some point you’re going to have to move out. And before you move out, that’s going to beat you around a bit, unless you have some skills. As you work with the breath, you’re learning some of the basic skills, particularly that skill of perception. Because so much of the Buddha’s teaching on discernment is a matter of perception, how you perceive things, the way you frame things to yourself. In this way, you learn to develop the powers of learning to play with perception. So if you find yourself enmeshed in a perception that’s really causing you to suffer, you can undo it. You don’t have to go running to someone else, who may or may not be there or may or may not be able to help you. It’s little things like this that help you look after yourself with ease.

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