Back & Forth Right Here

February 21, 2013

John Lee compares the path of practice to a path that you walk back and forth over many, many times. One of the advantages of walking back and forth along a path like that is that the path gets smooth. Any weeds or grass that would grow on the path are going to die, and at the same time you get really familiar with the path. You know where all the roots and the rocks and other disturbances in the path might be. And you get really familiar with all the plants on the edge of the path. You get to know which ones you can eat, which ones you can’t eat. That’s what we’re doing as we stay with the breath. How many times have you focused on the breath? You don’t want to keep count. But it’s not that you’re going to go anywhere else. You stay right here. The in-breath, the out-breath, the in-breath and out-breath, over and over and over again. The purpose is that you get really familiar with what’s here. You’ve got the body, you’ve got the mind, you’ve got the breath. You’ve got all the various elements that make up your sensation of the body. And, unlike a path, the balance among these elements is going to change. The balance within the mind is going to change. But if you keep this point right here, where the mind and the body meet at the breath, and it’s not just one point, this space in the present moment, keep this as your anchor point. Then there are changes in the body and changes in the mind. You’ll know them. And you’ll get a sense of what range of changes there can be. So try to get really familiar with what you’ve got right here, right now. We have the maps in the books, but they aren’t just maps. And you have to learn how to relate the map to what you’ve got here. Because right here is where the real Dhamma is, the maps that are in the books, which are just the symbols of the Dhamma. The genuine thing is your experience right here, right now. So when you’re sitting here with the breath, what really does feel good right here, right now? You have to be sensitive to your own sense of pleasure and pain. And don’t be worried if it does or doesn’t fit with what’s in the books. For the time being, your main concern is settling down right here, getting familiar right here. As I say in the forest tradition, “Don’t lead forward, don’t lead back.” That refers not only to your physical posture, but also to the posture of your mind. You want to learn how to settle right here. The past and the present will come in right here. You don’t have to go looking for them. But your main concern should be settling down right here and getting really familiar with what feels good and what doesn’t feel good. After all, what did the Buddha take as his standard? He wasn’t following texts. He was taking his direct experience as his standard. And as he focused on the direct experience, he began to notice that there were certain patterns. And these were the patterns that he wrote down in the books and the maps that he left behind. But you have to be careful when you’re sitting here meditating that you don’t pull out the map while you’re driving and spend all your time focusing on the map and not on the actual road. The road right here is the breath coming in and going out right now. Your sense of the body as you feel it right now. So allow yourself to settle in right here. Figure out what’s needed to settle in and then what’s needed to stay settled in. There are two different sets of skills. Then you find that the amount of tension you have to apply to the concentration in order to stay right here will diminish as time goes on. In Chan Phuong’s images of pouring concrete, when the concrete hasn’t yet set, you need a mold. But when the concrete is set, you can throw the mold away and the concrete’s not going to go flooding off anywhere. It’s going to stay right where it is. That’s how the different levels of concentration develop. Not that you punch in a time clock and say, “Today is first jhana, tomorrow is second jhana, or the first five minutes is first jhana and the next five minutes are the second jhana.” Concentration starts out as an adjustment, adjusting your mind so it settles into the breath and feels good. The breath feels good in the body, everything gets worked out, it feels good. Then you can just settle down. You make your nest, you make it well, and then you can settle down in it and be comfortable. And as you’re settled here, don’t be worried about getting stuck here. I was talking today to a person who was concerned, after five minutes of getting the mind in concentration, that he was concerned about what to do next because he was afraid he was going to get stuck where he was. So I told him it was like giving a new position to one of his underlings in his office. The person who got the new position comes the next day and says, “Okay, how can I get to the next position? I’m afraid of getting stuck in this one.” Well, you have to stay where you are. Really learn how to master the skills that are needed for the position you’re in. And then you’ll be ready for the next one. So even though we talk about accelerating your attitude, that doesn’t mean that you’re trying to push through things. What it means is that you just give more and more time to what you’re doing and more and more attention to being right here, right now. And getting a sense of what kind of actions you’re doing right now are giving good results and which ones are not. And the fact that you’ve got the breath here as your anchor gives you something to compare things with. So you go back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, over the breath, back and forth, back and forth, over the present moment, until things get really clear and you get really familiar with what’s here. Because everything you need to know, after all, what is discernment? It’s all around knowing fabrication. What’s fabrication? It’s the intentional acts of the mind. Well, they’re happening right here. As you’re learning to bring the mind to a sense of feeling really at home right here, don’t worry too much about what you should or shouldn’t be doing to feel at home right here. What do you feel right now would help you settle down with the breath, with a sense of belonging here, settle down with the body, in the sense of the body, belonging here? Where do you feel a sense of comfort? These are all individual things, personal things. Make the Dhamma personal. Don’t get too carried away by the abstractions. Then you’ll find the Dhamma that’s here, where it’s always been. Simply, you hadn’t settled down comfortably enough, you hadn’t settled down long enough to be really clear about what’s here. So develop your sensitivities to what’s happening right now in the body, what’s happening right now in the mind, and how you can herd the mind and the body and all the other elements and movements of the mind in the direction of settling down here and really feeling at home. As Ajaan Lee says, when the path is really smooth, you can lie down on it. Of course, lying down here doesn’t mean that you’ve fallen asleep on it. What it means is that you can feel really comfortable here. And it’s out of that sense of comfort that you begin to gain a sense of where there’s still a disturbance and what kind of subtle disturbances there might be. If there’s a lot of pain and a lot of turmoil, a lot of pushing and pulling, you’re not going to see the subtle things. So develop your own sense of what feels comfortable here and what feels comfortable over the long term. Just don’t get heedless about the comfort. Remember, this is a path. Even though you may lie down to rest on the path, you’re not going to stay there. But the better you get to know the path, the more clearly you’re going to know where it goes.

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