Keep It Simple

July 10, 2014

When you meditate, it’s good to keep things simple. There’s your awareness, and there’s the breath. The only other things you need are the perceptions, the alertness, and the evaluation that keep you with the breath. Try to keep things pared down as much as possible. You may remember some things that have worked in the past, but just leave them right by your side right now. You don’t have to focus on them. Bring them in only when they’re really necessary. Because the more complex things get, the easier it is to slip in. A little greed, a little aversion, a little delusion. They hide in all the gingerbread of the mind. When you keep things spare, then it’s very easy to see when the mind is going out of line or when a little voice is coming in and says, “How about thinking about something over here?” Or, “I don’t like this. Let’s think about something else.” Ajaan Lee’s images keep things short. When things get long, they tend to curl up, and then you get lost in the curlicues. So you’re right here. Any other voice that comes up that has nothing to do with the breath, you can just drop it. When you keep things simple and basic like this, really good and basic things get to grow. Ajaan Mun, shortly before he passed away, said there were only two things that he taught, the Four Noble Truths and the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. That was it. Of course, he gave long Dhamma talks, but still it all came down to just a few basic teachings. The extra details were because each person’s mind has its own particular ways of straying off, and you need particular instructions to get back on path. But once you’re on the path, things get pretty simple. I noticed with Ajaan Foon, when he was teaching people to meditate, at the very beginning there’d be lots of different ways of teaching. But then gradually things would gather in and gather in until you got everybody to the same spot, the spot where you’re alert, fully aware of the body. The breath energy fills the body, it’s all connected, and the in-and-out breathing just gets gradually softer and softer until you don’t feel like you’re breathing at all. Once you got you to that point, then everything followed in very clear steps. So the more you’re able to bring the mind into that spot yourself, the less you need to worry about reading this or reading that. Learn how to read your own mind. And to read it, things have to be steady. It’s like trying to read a book by the light of a flame. If the flame is the flame of a fire in a fireplace, things flash and flicker and it’s hard to read. But if it’s the flame of an oil lamp, the light is steady and you can see things clearly. So try to keep your awareness as steady as possible. If there’s anything else that comes in that would have any stories to tell you about anything else aside from what you’re doing right here, right now, just let it slough off. Don’t get involved. Don’t try to straighten it out. As Ajahn Lee says, if you try chasing down your thoughts to straighten them out, they’ve already got you. They tempt you with half-formed thoughts, half-formed thoughts. Half-formed sentences tempt you to finish them off. But you don’t have to. Leave all these other things just as scraps, incomplete pieces. You’re working on completing only one thing, getting the mind snug with its object. The more seamlessly they fit together, the better the concentration, the more solid your state. And then the more clearly you can see anything that doesn’t fit in. That’s what we’re trying to do here, is to catch things that otherwise would slip into the cracks, slip into the seams, and burst them apart. So be very particular in noticing how the breath is going in the body, where it doesn’t feel quite right. But you can do it and make it better so the mind can settle in and feel secure at home, with everything fitting nicely. Then you might ask, “What am I going to do with the rest of the hour?” Well, just stay right there. The skill lies in the staying. And again, other voices will come up saying, “This is boring. Nothing’s happening. Where is the insight?” And whore those too. Because again, they’re voices that you tend to identify with when they slip into the cracks. But here you’re trying to make sure there are no cracks at all. And then you can just see them as members of the committee, but you don’t have to identify with them. That way they can slough off. There’s not a whole lot to concentration practice. It’s like some pieces of music that are very simple, but to play them really well you have to be really, really skilled. So you keep coming back to the same things over and over and over again. And part of it requires learning how to motivate yourself so that you find it interesting. But the real interest should be in keeping it simple. Because that’s when things become clear.

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