Finding Shelter in the Aggrgates

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Sometimes the breath is like a wild animal. If you stare straight at it, it runs away. You have to look out of the corner of your eye. In other words, sometimes when we try to tackle the breath, that’s the problem. We’re trying to tackle it as we relate to the breath energies in the body. The ones that we’re using to create changes in other parts of the body may actually be the uncomfortable breath energies—the ones that are tight, the ones that are stiff. Of course, you use stiffness in order to spread some ease, so the body’s just going to all get stiff. This is why, in some cases, it’s good to start the meditation reflecting on something that puts the mind at ease. Some Dhamma theme that might be good. For example, thinking of the Buddha, thinking of generosity. As you let your mind relax around that thought, notice what the body does. There’ll be a change in the energy. That good change in the energy is good breath energy. Just let it bathe the body. In the beginning, don’t be too much in control of where it’s going to go or how it’s going to go. Just see if you can allow it to have that attitude of allowing, allowing, allowing the energy to come. Just place one thought in the mind, which is that whatever energy is going to be good for the body, allow it to come. Allow the body to do its own thing. See if you get a different sense of what it means to have good breath energy in the body. Then you can take that as your touchstone the next time you meditate. I know that when I was first meditating with the breath and reading about the different breath energies, this was my problem. As soon as I thought of focusing on the breath, it was like I had a stranglehold on it. The whole body tensed up. It was only when I was doing things where I wasn’t specifically trying to meditate, where it just happened that I happened to be with the breath, that I began to notice, “Oh, okay, there are these comfortable energies there.” In one case, that happened on a bus in Bangkok. I’d been listening to a jonfro and talking about catching the breath. I’d been trying to catch it and realized I was tensing up my shoulders, tensing up my arms. I realized that if I just allowed those parts of the body to relax, the breath energy was perfectly fine. Being an American, I went back and I complained to him about why he had used the word “catch.” He laughed and said, “It just means to stick with it.” As in the time when they say “japta,” which literally means “to catch with your eyes.” You keep your eye on something. You keep your gaze on the breath, but you don’t have to catch it. You don’t have to mold it. You don’t have to push it around. Just stick with it and see. When you have comfortable energies, notice what they’re like. When they’re uncomfortable energies, notice what they’re like. Then try to develop an attitude of allowing the comfortable ones. That’s how they stay comfortable. This way you can get back into your body in a comfortable way. So that does feel like home. That does feel like shelter. We’re trying to create a shelter here for the mind, a place where it can be safe, where when the winds blow through or the rain falls, you’ve got your safe place to be, both in terms of difficult issues coming in from outside and difficult stuff coming up from inside. You need to have a part of your awareness that’s not involved in anything. And if you can get the breath as your ally, that makes it even better. Because you have your safe place to stay. In Thailand, some of the Chan Fung students were talking about having an air-conditioned room. When things get hot outside, they can stay in their air-conditioned room. Of course, here sometimes it’s cold outside. You have your warm room. But in every way, it’s the comfortable room, the comfortable space inside. It gives the mind some stability, gives it a sense of grounding, so we can see things more clearly. Step back from what’s bubbling up from within, all those asavas and floods that can come flooding the mind if you’re not careful. This is why the Buddha used the image of the island, the island above the flood. Sensual desire comes bubbling up. Your views come bubbling up. States of becoming come bubbling up. Ignorance bubbles up. These are like springs of water. And if you’re not careful, they can start turning into gushers and then they can be whole rivers and floods. And sometimes you can nip them in the bud, and other times, by the time you’ve realized they’ve happened, they’re already pretty large. But if you have a safe place to go, at least you can step out of them so they don’t carry you along with the realization that whatever comes up in the mind, a lot of it has to do with past karma. And so it doesn’t mean that there’s something going on in the mind right now. It’s your involvement with these things that turns into present karma. So you can decide. You have the choice. You have the right to say, “No, I’m not going to go with that anymore,” because otherwise these floods just run around in circles. They turn into whirlpools. There’s a teaching—it’s not in the Canon, it’s in the Commentary—but it’s a useful one. The cycle of action, the cycle of results of action, and the cycle of defilement. These three things feed one another. And if you’re acting under the power of a defilement, it’s going to create bad results, and then you’re going to not like those results. And if you’re not careful, that unpleasant state is just going to come around and turn into another defilement. And you keep spinning around and around and around. You know what happens with whirlpools? They suck you down. What you want to be able to do is step out of the cycle. At the very least, learn how to develop a resistance to the results of actions so you don’t feel like you’re being right in the line of fire. They come, but they go past you. We’re in that image of the person sitting in the back of a station wagon, the old kind of station wagon where the back seat is faced backwards. You’re riding down the road, and as soon as you’re aware of something, it’s already going away, rather than coming at you. And if you have that attitude toward pains and other unpleasant things that come up, you can deal with them a lot more effectively. You’re not feeling threatened. You’re not in the line of fire. As the Buddha said, your duty with regard to any kind of pain, any kind of suffering, is to comprehend it. And you’re in a much better position to comprehend it when you’re not feeling threatened by it. So learn how to perceive it as something that’s going away. You’ve seen it, and it’s disappearing. You see it, and it’s disappearing. Now it may come back again and again, but again, each time it comes back, it’s going to disappear. That’s where you’ve got your safe place, you’ve got your safe perceptions. You’re turning all five of your aggregates into a shelter. The sense of the body feels secure, if not the whole body, at least the aspects of breath energy that are soothing. When you need to be soothed, energized. When you need to be energized, the feelings of pleasure that come from that. The perceptions you hold that help you sidestep things that are coming up. Your understanding about karma. In other words, the karma of the mind is such that things arise through the power of old actions. And the way you attend to them is going to determine whether you create new karma around it. But you’ve got that choice. You can step out of that cycle of action and result and defilement. Cutting it at the connection between the result and the defilement or failing that. At least if there’s defilement, the mind doesn’t act on it. And don’t feel like you’re getting bottled up with these things. Breathe through it. Allow the comfortable breath energy to ease through these things and dissolve them away. And you’ve got that sense of awareness, the observer. That’s your consciousness, combined with the fabrications that help you understand these things. You’ve got all five aggregates working as a shelter. Because they, too, are actions. We are owners of our actions, heirs to our actions. So try to do your actions well. Meditation is a kind of karma. It’s learning how to be skillful in how you relate to your actions. Relate to past karma, relate to present karma. But you can use your actions to make a shelter, something you can depend on. Even when other things are going really wrong, you may have some bad karma coming up, don’t get embarrassed about the fact that bad karma is showing up in your life. We all have things from the past. It’s just that some people’s bad karma shows now, other people’s bad karma is going to show tomorrow, or maybe next year. We each carry a field of karma seeds, and we can’t see one another’s karma seeds. All we see are the few that are sprouting right now. So don’t look down on people who are having some bad karma seeds sprouting, and don’t get proud of the fact that you’ve got some good seeds. You want to make good use of what you’ve got, rather than just sit around and enjoy the results of what you’ve done in the past. If anything bad is coming up, think of yourself as a cook, a really good cook, and take things that are even a little bit rotten and turn them into good food. So take your aggregates and, even though some day you’re going to have to let them go, turn them into something useful, a shelter for you, a safe place in the mind. It may be a little rickety, but work on it, and you’ll find that this sense of shelter will get stronger and stronger.

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