Alone with Your Defilements (outdoors)

August 30, 2015

It’s good to sit under the trees like this. It’s good to sit under the trees like this. The setting is more natural. You’re not surrounded by air-conditioned air or heated air or walls or a lot of the other signs of human companionship. It’s just you and the elements. And so what have you got here right now? You’ve got your awareness. You’ve got your mind. You’ve got your body. You’ve got a lot of thoughts coming up in the mind. And at the moment the thoughts may not be too dangerous. They may not be much of a threat, much of a problem. But you have to remember there are times in life when you would normally look for help from other people or help from the benefits of civilization. And they’re not there or they’re not providing all the help you need. Times when you’re really sick, times when you’re facing death, aging, illness, death, separation. It occasionally hits you that here you are. You came alone and you’re going to go alone. And we’re with other beings for a while, with other people for a while. We can comfort one another to some extent. But there are large parts of our awareness that nobody else can reach in to help. And if we’re stuck in there without any tools, without any skills, we’re going to suffer a lot. Years back, someone came here to sit with a group. She had never meditated before. And it was a nice day. It was actually cooler than this, a nice breeze. And when she opened her eyes, she said, I’ve never suffered so much in my life. Being alone with her thoughts, just alone with the awareness of the breath of the body. And she suddenly found herself faced with all these defilements. Greed, anger, whatever. And she didn’t have any tools for dealing with them. That’s when we’re a victim of our thoughts and don’t have any tools to deal with them. That’s when we really, really suffer. So when we meditate, we’re getting the tools we need so that when we’re faced with our defilements, we’re not alone with our defilements. We have the skills we need to make the breath our friend, to make other thoughts in the mind our friend. So we can have internal friends to depend on. First, the breath. What way are you breathing right now? It might be aggravating and unskillful mental state, but you can breathe in another way. It’s one of the reasons we focus on the breath as the first topic of meditation in the body, because it is the part of the body that we have the most control over. If you learn how to breathe, the sense of the breath energy coming into the whole body, nourishing the whole body, you reclaim this much of your awareness. If you don’t reclaim it, the anger takes your breath. Greed takes your breath. The fear takes your breath. You’re not only face to face with your defilements, but you’re also face to face with what they’ve done to your body. So reclaim your breath to begin with. As long as you have this body, this is your space. You can occupy it. Try to occupy it fully and occupy it with a lot of awareness. Try to notice when you breathe in and breathe out what kind of breathing feels good now. What does the body need now? Which parts of the body have been starved of breath awareness, starved of good breath? You might focus on parts of the body you’ve never focused on before. Try focusing on the spaces between your toes for a while, spaces between the fingers. Allow those spaces to relax and see what impact it has on the rest of the body. We all have our spots in the body, the places where you focus and you think of relaxing it. The relaxation spreads as if it’s through electric wires to other parts of the body as well. And the spaces between the fingers and toes sometimes might just be those spaces, or the back of the hands, or your wrists, or the spot right in the middle of the chest. There are lots of different places you can focus, the base of the spine, the back of the hands. Learn how to get to know this space. It’s like knowing that you might be mugged at a particular corner on a street. So you go down, you get to know the corner, see where the escape routes are, see where the muggers might hide, so you can be ready for them when they come. Because this spot right here that you’re occupying right now is also the spot where you’ll be when aging comes, when wellness comes, when death comes. So if you’ve learned how to lay claim to this spot, you don’t get pushed around by these things so much. When separation comes, when you lose someone that you really love, you want to be able to come back to this spot. Because all too often our identity gets involved with the beings we love, the people we love, and then when they go, it’s like a big hunk of ourselves has been removed. It needs to be healed. Come back to the breath, come back to the body. Make this a place where you can feel at home, where you feel that you belong. That way you’ve got the breath as your friend, you have the breath as your foundation. When your awareness is solidly established like this, with a sense of well-being, then you can look at the thoughts that go along with the greed or the anger or the delusion or the sorrow and step back from them. In other words, you don’t feel like they’re coming right at you. You can watch them go past. It’s like seeing an army coming down the road at you. Will you step out of the road? Watch from the side. You’re not going to get trampled. Otherwise, if you take on the anger or the fear or the sorrow, the lust or the greed or whatever, they run right over you because you’re getting in their way. You’re claiming them as yours. But when you watch them go past, you begin to see, okay, what’s motivating these things? To what extent are they really true? To what extent are they helpful? When the Buddha talks about right speech, he’s talking about speech that is true and beneficial and timely. You can set up the same rules for thinking in your own mind. You look at a thought. Is it true? If it’s not true, if it’s just something you’ve heard about or you may have believed but you don’t really know for sure, well, remind yourself, you don’t know for sure. So that helps you put a question mark next to it right there. The next question, is it helpful? Is it really helpful to follow these thoughts? Say with the thought of sorrow. You can acknowledge the fact that you’ve lost someone. You can talk about how much you miss them. But there comes a point where it becomes self-indulgent. You’re talking more about your own wound than you are talking about the other person. That’s when you have to realize that these things have their time and place, but only for so much time, so much place. There are other things you have to do in life. The mind needs to be trained. You have other responsibilities as well. So you acknowledge your loss and then you move on through thinking rightly about your thoughts. You don’t have to believe everything you believe. In other words, you don’t have to believe everything that comes into your mind that you latch onto. Learn how to step back from it and say, “Well, maybe something in this is not true.” It was one of John Lee’s recommendations for any insight that comes up in the mind. As soon as you think, “Well, this must be really true,” ask yourself, “Well, to what extent might it be not true?” And you begin to see that every thought has its limitations. That helps you get out. You can step out of the way as the army goes past. And even though we can’t stop them from being armies in the world, at least we know how to get out of the way. So you have the breath as your friend. You have right view as your friend. The view that if anything comes up, you want to look at it to see, “Hey, to what extent is there suffering in here? And to what extent are the actions of my own mind adding to the suffering?” Learn how to step back from those actions. There are some things that will cause pain and distress in the practice that are part of the path. But there’s a lot of pain in the world that serves no purpose at all. It weakens you, makes you less able to help yourself or help other people. So ask yourself, “What am I doing to contribute to that?” And do you really want to keep on contributing when the mind is in a position where it can look at it and say, “No, I’ve got something better”? That’s when you’re more free. So even though there are times in life when you really feel alone, make sure you don’t have to feel lonely and make sure you don’t have to feel abandoned. Because you’ve taken care of the skills you need in order to provide for yourself. Because there will come a time when even the breath can’t be your friend anymore. You’ve got to move on. So that’s when Right View will help. And your ability to keep the mind focused on things that are useful, things that are true, and things that are timely. When you’re faced with death, for instance, the idea of missing things or being worried about things in this world, that’s not useful at all. Because you’re at a point where you can’t help those things. You can’t provide anything for those things. They have to look after themselves. But remember, the world has looked after itself a long time before you came and will be able to look after itself for a long time after you leave. But your responsibility at that point is looking after the state of your own mind. And the way you can help the world at that point is to take good care of your own mind. Otherwise, the people who love you will be gathered around and they’ll see you suffering and they’ll know that they can’t do anything to help. That weighs down their hearts. But if they can see that you’re handling the pain well, you’re handling the fact of loss well, you’re less of a burden on them. And at the same time, you’re providing for where you’re going the next time around. Because if you can keep your state of mind in good shape, then it’ll be inclined to go to good places. Places where you can continue practicing some more. So you want to work with the breath so you can have the breath as your friend as long as you’re able to stay with the breath. And work with your mind. Look at those thoughts. Learn how to step back from all the things you believe and ask, “Is this really true?” “To what extent is it not true?” “Under what conditions is it not true?” “Is it really beneficial?” Again, when is it beneficial? When is it not? He’s asking that question, “Is now the right time to be thinking these things?” Remind yourself, you don’t have to think everything that comes up and is offered in the mind to think about. Think of the thoughts that appear in your mind as if they’re on a menu. They’re being offered for your consideration, but you don’t have to take the liver and onions if you don’t want it. There are better things to take. And having the breath while we have the breath to work with, this helps us. It gives us a good place to stay, a place where we can step back from all the other things that would come crowding into the mind. They can crowd in, but we can step out. The breath is still here no matter how many thoughts go through your mind. You can still feel the breath coming in, going out. It’s still there. You can make it comfortable. If you’ve been working with the breath in your meditation, you have more and more of a friend here, more and more of a sense of what kind of breathing the body needs. You go right to that. This way when you come face to face to your defilements, greed comes up, anger comes up, fear comes up, sorrow comes up. You’re not alone. You don’t have to give in to them because you have your skills, you have your tools, you have your strengths that you’ve been developing. Things don’t have to overwhelm you. And you can come out safe.

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