Lift Your Mind

December 31, 2015

In Thay, the Ajahns like to say that when you’re directing your thoughts to the breath, you’re lifting your mind to the breath. You’re lifting it in several ways. One, if you can find some pleasure in the breath, a sense of the breathing coming in, the breath energy coming through the whole body. You’re moving the mind from the level of sensuality to the level of form. This is a pleasure of form. It’s a higher pleasure. It doesn’t have all of the drawbacks of sensuality. You don’t have to take anything away from anyone else. You don’t have to fight with people over things. All you have to do is inhabit your own body. Be sensitive from within, all the way down through the torso, all the way down through the legs and the arms. This is your territory. And the pleasure that comes from this is not as intoxicating as the pleasure that comes from sensuality. As the Buddha said, it’s blameless, both in the sense that it doesn’t require taking anything from anyone else and also in the sense that it doesn’t obscure the mind. In fact, this is a pleasure that allows you to see things going on in the mind, see things going on in the body a lot more clearly. And even if you’re not getting any pleasure out of the breath yet, the fact that your mind is directed in this direction, the Buddha calls this renunciant pain, which he said is the solution for sensual pain. For most of us, the solution for sensual pain, when you’re feeling painful sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, is you want to go for pleasure. Sensual pleasure. But that doesn’t solve anything. It just goes back and forth. Whereas if you have renunciant pain, that’s the pain that comes from realizing that there’s work that needs to be done, and training the mind. And this is a higher level of the mind than the mind that’s chasing around after sensual pleasures. So do your best to lift the mind to its object. Lift the mind to the breath. When the mind is up here, it’s like being on top of a mountain. You see things a lot more clearly. Your perspective is larger. We usually meditate to get the mind into the present moment, but there are times when it’s also good to get the mind lifted up like this so you can survey the past and the future. Here it is New Year’s Eve, and it’s a good time to look back on the year that has passed. Look at your actions, what you did, what were the results of your actions, and ask yourself what kind of actions you want to engage in in the year ahead. Especially look at your habits. What habits do you have that are not quite in line with what the Buddha had to teach? Which ones do you want to work on this time? You want to look at time as an opportunity for practice. In the Buddhist definition of heedfulness, thinking about a whole year like this, or the whole year ahead of you like this, may be a little bit heedless. But it’s a lot more heedful than the way most people spend New Year’s Eve, which is getting drunk out of their minds. At least you take time to reflect on the direction your life has been taking and the direction you want it to take in the future. Days and nights fly past, fly past. What are you becoming right now? That’s a question the Buddha has you ask yourself all the time. So take some time this evening to reflect on the year that’s passed, the things you did, the things you didn’t do that you wish you had done. Think about what you want to focus on developing in the future. Think in terms of the perfections. Generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, equanimity. Which of those areas are you lacking in? Which ones would you like to strengthen? Which ones do you realize you have to strengthen? There are what I call the Capricorn Virtues, the ones that involve determination, endurance, persistence. Those are among the least glamorous of the group. But they’re also the ones that get things done. So you might want to focus on those. Have you put enough effort into your practice? What more could you do? What would you like to determine on? This is the polyterm for what we in the West call resolutions. When you read, say, John Lee’s autobiography, you realize he spent a lot of time making resolutions like this, as a way of giving some direction and giving some energy to his practice. So as the mind is settled down and you’re in a much clearer place, a sense of ease that comes from being with the breath, or at the very least a sense of being centered right here and not chasing out after sensual things, what kind of perspective does that give you on your life, on your own mind? Then decide what you want to determine on. As the Buddha said, one of the ways of gaining progress in life is to direct yourself rightly. Because if you don’t give yourself direction, who’s going to give the direction? You just kind of bounce around like the particles in the air. They bounce off one another and they may go someplace and then they go back. If you drew a line on them, what they call brownie and marshmallow, they’re pretty back and forth. A lot of people’s lives are like that. They’re like little particles of air that just bounce off other particles. That’s not the kind of life that the Buddha led. He decided that he wanted to find a happiness that was really worthwhile. That was the question he started with. What is true happiness? How can it be found? He realized that for happiness to be truly satisfying, it had to be something that wouldn’t change into something else, i.e., wouldn’t change back into suffering. Where are you going to find something like that? He looked around and realized he was going to have to look deeper into his mind, because things outside didn’t offer that kind of happiness. So he was very demanding. That picture you sometimes get of the Buddha just learning how to be just accepting of everything that comes along. He was not that kind of person. His heart was very large, and it demanded something that was really special. Then you’re going to ask yourself, “If he can do it, why not me? Why can’t I have something that’s really special like that? Why can’t I dedicate my life to something that’s really above the ordinary? It’s an opportunity that’s available to all of us.” So the question is, are you up for the challenge? There is a good opportunity to look at your life as you’ve been living it for the past year. Try to measure it against the Buddhist standards. He set up standards that are reliable. If you want true happiness, this is what you have to do. There’s generosity, virtue, meditation. With the meditation, there’s concentration and discernment. These are all things that are really reliable. I’ve been reading recently someone talking about how Buddhism needs a theory of just war. If you send someone else to conduct a just war, can you guarantee that they’re not going to go to hell for doing what you’re telling them to do? That’s not the kind of teaching the Buddha would give. He would give teachings that, if you follow them, you’re going to find happiness. You will not go to hell for doing anything that he recommended. His teachings are reliable. They’ve been guaranteed by many, many people in the 2000s. They’ve been around for 600 years since he passed away. These are standards that you can really take and hold to and trust. They’re standards to which you can give your life. So tonight we’re going to be moving into January. Think about Janus, the Roman god, who can look forward and look back. Get your mind lifted up to the breath now, lifted up to a state of good concentration. Then look forward and back. Decide what you want to see as you look forward, what you want to create, so that when you ask that question again at the end of the year, next year, days and nights fly by. “What am I becoming right now?” You realize you’ve become something better. You’ve become more reliable. You’ve become more trustworthy. If you’re still suffering from renunciate pain, maybe you’ll find some renunciate joy, i.e., a sense of well-being that comes as you’re on the path. Realize that you’ve attained things, or at the very least developed things, that give you a solid sense of well-being, and get closer and closer to that true happiness that the Buddha said is possible. And that when you find it, you realize, “Okay, this is what you’ve been wanting all along.”

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