Respect, Inside & Out

October 28, 2016

When you meditate, you’re trying to get as sensitive as possible to what’s going on inside you, both physically and mentally. Physically in terms of the movement of the breath energy through the body. Noticing when you breathe in, where you feel the breathing, which parts of the body seem nourished by the breath, which parts seem to be doing the work. Which are often the parts that are not getting nourished. In other words, certain muscles are doing most of the work so that other parts get refreshed, and the muscles themselves don’t get refreshed. So try to notice that and see if there’s a way you can breathe that allows the muscles that have been doing the work to get their share of the breath energy too. Then you’ll notice there are other parts of the body that just seem closed off, off in these areas. Areas in the throat, down in the heart, or if you’ve ever had an injury, areas around where the injury happened. It seems like there’s a lump of deadness there, maybe, or solidity. With those, you have to work around them. Don’t try to penetrate into the center quite yet. Try to work around the edges. Work around the edges of those unresponsive areas. Because they’re so used to being attacked that they’ve created a shell around themselves. And the shell is partly their protection, but it also turns out that it’s cutting them off. So don’t believe in the shell, but at the same time respect it. Otherwise, don’t go trying to crash it through, but just work around very gently, very gently, very gently, and it’ll begin to open up. And whether this happens quickly or slowly is not the issue. When these areas do open up, you’ll find that they’re extremely tender and very sensitive. You have to be very gentle in how you treat them, but at the same time try to nourish them as much as you can, because they’ve been starved for a long time. And they’re often connected to areas of the mind that have been closed off as well. Certain memories, things that were done to you or things that you did to other people, may be closed off in those areas as well. So be gentle. And do your best to make the breath energy in the rest of the body as soothing, nourishing, refreshing as possible. So when these things do come to the surface, you’re not knocked over by them. When you can create a sense of being aware, fully aware, on the body and sensitive to what’s going on, you also have to protect it. Because you start getting sensitive to other people in ways you might not have been sensitive before. They may pick up on that and they may try to abuse it, the fact. So you have to protect what you’ve got. We talk about restraint of the senses as dealing with greed and aversion. But you also have to watch out for false ideas of compassion. You get sensitive to other people’s needs and they abuse that. You have to learn how to restrain yourself. You have to restrain yourself there as well. This is where equanimity has to come in. There are certain people who will take and take and take your help, but not really benefit from it. They just like to do the taking. You begin to realize you’re losing your energy and they’re not really gaining anything of real value. That’s when you have to pull out. And you can’t let your fear of hurting their feelings prevent you from pulling out. Remember, hurting someone’s feelings is not the same thing as harming them. Harming them is actually trying to get them to do unskillful things. If you have to be afraid of other people’s feelings, their feelings become tyrannical. So you have to realize there are times when you have to say or do something that’s going to hurt somebody else’s feelings as protection for yourself and a larger protection for them, too. Remember, even the Buddha would say things that were harsh when he saw that it was the right time. So this tenderness that you develop, this sensitivity that you develop inside, needs protection, both in terms of the attention that you pay to it and also the values you have around what you owe people outside and how much attention you have to pay to what’s going on outside. Then make sure that your values are right to protect your concentration. But notice that chant we had just now. One line talks about having respect for concentration and being ardent in your concentration, and the other talks about respect and welcoming guests. In other words, being hospitable. Our concentration is going to be put to the test this weekend. We’ve got the kathin coming up. You’ve got to learn how to strike the right balance, protecting your inner center like a little flame that’s being buffeted by the wind. You’ve got to learn how to hold your hands around the flame to protect it. But at the same time, you’ve got to deal with the wind. And you have to show respect for the people who are coming. You can’t just run away and say, “My meditation is so important, I’m just going to hide away.” One of our duties here at the monastery is to be hospitable to the people who come. When a monk is doing his chores and someone comes to visit, he’s supposed to put his chores aside to see what they need. The only exception is if you’re making medicine for someone who’s seriously ill. Otherwise, you have the duty to be hospitable, and particularly to welcome them with the Dhamma. That means being fair to them, being compassionate to them. Because remember, the people who are coming here, they’re all coming to make merit. And you want to rejoice in that fact. You think of all the other things they could be doing, but they’re not nearly as useful, not nearly as meritorious. Here they’ve decided to come and make merit. But you find that people’s ideas of making merit are very different, and some of them will have lots of demands, and others won’t have many demands. Try to maintain your equanimity. Try to maintain your concentration. But at the same time, try to be as hospitable as you can. This requires a balancing act. Protect your inner center, but at the same time, don’t make a big show of protecting your inner center. As a Jon Furon once told one of his students, “Part of your mind has to be in the world, and another part of your mind has to be separate from the world.” Learn how to make that distinction. Learn how to make that division. Protect your inner flame, your inner tenderness, but without making a big show of it. Particularly in an activity like the kathin, try to be as helpful as you can. Look around to see what needs to be done, what needs to be cleaned up. In all those years when I was helping at the Ajahn Lee commemorations, I was originally assigned to the lowest of all the teams, which was the cleanup team. And there was plenty of work to do. But I found that there were times also when they needed to set up the area for particular ceremonies or whatever was coming along. So I would pitch in in that area as well. And I found myself promoted to that team, where that was the main job. It was more interesting work. But I still would help clean up. So when there are activities like this, don’t let the burden fall on just a few people. Everybody shares the burden. It gets lighter for everybody. Remember your dual responsibility, your respect for your concentration and your respect for hospitality. It’s interesting that respect for hospitality would be the last thing the Buddha mentions before he talks about being right in the presence of Nibbana. He’s placing that comment there. It was strategic to remind people that, yes, you do have to be hospitable. You can’t just run away into a cave and say, “My meditation is more important than anything else. I don’t care about other people.” That kind of attitude gets narrow, and it’s not going to be helpful for your meditation at all. So share your respect inside, share your respect for outside, and learn the balancing act. Think of those acrobats. Whereas you help yourself, you’re helping others, and when you’re helping others, you’re helping yourself. Try to think of the benefits going both ways. And they will.

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