Sensitive & Strong

March 31, 2017

The purpose of meditation is twofold. The main purpose is to get more sensitive to what’s going on inside the mind, inside the body, here in the present moment. But as we get more sensitive, we’ll see there are things here that we don’t particularly like. After all, as the Buddha said, we’re going to be seeing our own ignorance, or as Ajahn said, stupidity. The harmful things we’ve done, the stupid things we’ve done, the habits we have that are not in our best interest or in anybody’s good interest. So in order to be able to withstand that, not get knocked over by it, the other purpose of the meditation is to give you a sense of solidity, that this is your place. Concentration ideally gets you to a point where a bright awareness fills the body and a sense of well-being and ease fills the body. And when that happens, you can take that as your stronghold as you get more sensitive to things inside and out. But to get there, sometimes you find that you’ve got to do a lot of housecleaning or to use the image of the princess who’s lying down on the mattress. And she couldn’t sleep because there was a pea under the mattress. Well, we don’t have a pea. We have a whole garbage dump sometimes under our mattress. There’s a lot of stuff we’ve got to clear out. Because things will come up. Not that we’re looking for them as we’re trying to stay with the breath lower. Things will come up, sometimes in terms of the energies in the body doing weird things. This is where Ajahn Lee’s instructions on dealing with energy flows in the body are really helpful. Thinking of the places where energy can go at. Think about the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet. And each person will have different energy problems settling down. Some people have very few problems, some people have a lot. The more you’ve got repressed stuff, the more the energy is going to be squeezed off in different directions. And you have to treat it gently but firmly. Otherwise there will be parts of the body that just don’t respond. You treat them like you treat a wild animal. If you focus directly on them, they get scared and they seize up even more. So you have to treat them indirectly. And so when you read Ajahn Lee’s instructions on the breath, realize that you have to tailor those to your own needs, your own specific problems. Sometimes he talks about an energy going down. Well, you can try. If that doesn’t work for you, think of the energy going up. I remember when I was studying with Ajahn Fuang, I kept asking him to do his own guide to breath meditation. He had lots of variations on Ajahn Lee’s themes for working with the breath. He himself had suffered from pretty severe headaches when he was a young monk. So he had his ways of getting the energy down the spine and out the tailbone. And lots of other little ways of dealing with the breath. But a lot of these things you can just learn just by trying to be imaginative and using your ingenuity. Thinking of the breath energy as going in all kinds of different directions and doing all kinds of different things. They’re not limited to just what’s listed in the book. Then there are other issues that come up, things that come up from the past. As your daily life here at the monastery impinges less on the mind, then things from the past have a chance to kind of come bubbling up. And when your concentration is good, you can be solid with them and just see them come up, note them, and they go away. But when your concentration is not yet solid, you need other tools. This is why the Buddha didn’t teach just a technique for meditation. He taught ways to think about action, taught ways to think about your life in general. The teaching on karma is very helpful here. You think of things people did to you or that you’ve done to other people. As he has you reflect, it’s not just you, it’s everybody. And it’s gone on for a long, long time. This doesn’t mean that you simply accept what happens and don’t try to fix the situation, nor that karma somehow justifies the bad things that people experience. There’s no talk of justifying in the teaching on karma at all. It’s simply a matter of cause and effect. But when you think of how long that stretch of time is, the Buddha talks about, we’ve all done all kinds of things. And this helps take a lot of the sting out of things that were done to you, in the sense that it’s not just you. Everybody has gone through this. That reflection that we often have, “I’m subject to aging, illness, and death. I’m subject to separation. I’m the owner of my actions.” In the original sutta, it doesn’t stop there. The Buddha goes on to say, “Reflect on the fact that everybody, everywhere, man, woman, child, ordained or not, is subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death.” Not just human beings, all kinds of beings. We all have our karma. We all have separation. As the Buddha said, that kind of reflection should get you on the path. The first reflection, just on your own aging, illness, and death, is to make you heatful. The second reflection gives rise to a sense of sanghvega, a sense of urgency or dismay, or the word can even be translated as terror, seeing this is the way the world is. This reflection is useful. As I said, it takes the sting out of things. It’s one of the reasons why the Buddha said, when you practice mindfulness, you don’t just focus internally, you focus externally as well, as you need to, to get that sense of perspective on things. It’s when something comes up, instead of thinking about how horrible the act was, or how horribly you suffered, or how much you were a victim, or how much you were the perpetrator. Remember, this is what happens everywhere. The inspiration should be to get out. There’s no tying up the loose ends in the world. There’s no closure. The only closure is when you finally say, “I’ve had enough.” Say that to yourself, goodwill to the other person or the other beings, whatever. When you can think the issue through from the perspective of karma, it’s a lot easier to let it go. I said, this doesn’t mean that you just sit around and are willingly the victim of all kinds of things. There are some things that you can set straight, you can, but for the time being, while you’re sitting here, this is not the time to mull over those things. If you’re going to think about it, think about it from the point of view of how you can extricate yourself from that particular back and forth. The best way to start is to have goodwill. This is why when you see some face appear in the meditation, whether you recognize the face or not, just spread goodwill, dedicate the merit of your meditation, and then get back to business. Learn how to think in a way that removes all the velcro. Those velcro strips are the thoughts that get in the way, because you’re trying to establish your foundation here. When the foundation is established, you can do real work in digging into some of the deeper patterns of how you make yourself suffer and how that suffering spills out. But as for the particular instances that you run into as you’re trying to settle down, think about them only to the extent that you need to in order to get past them so you can get back to work. So don’t be surprised when you meditate that things are going to come up that are not written in the books from your own way of relating to the energies in your body. Think about it. It’s only when we meditate that we’re really that sensitive to the energies in the body. The first time we were this sensitive was probably back when we were little children. We learned how to deal with these energies in ways that were pretty uninformed, because nobody else was around there to tell us how to deal with them. So we just dealt with them in their own way. When we tried to suppress the thought, we created a lot of pressure in the body as well. It’s all too common that there are going to be strange energies in the body. You have to learn how to sit with them and take them apart. As I said, John Lee gives you some good examples, but you have to learn how to play with things yourself. And this is also a good time, if something comes up from images of people or events in the past, to rethink them from the point of view of karma. The teaching on karma is there to be a healing teaching. On the one hand, it is kind of dismaying to think about it. This is how the world has gone on for who knows how long. Everybody’s implicated. But that thought in and of itself can take away this sting. It says you don’t have to keep shooting yourself with arrows. You can clear out all the garbage under the mattress and have a good, comfortable cushion to sit on. This is your place. So do what you can to lay claim to it, because this will be your stronghold. As you keep seeing deeper and deeper into the mind and getting more and more sensitive, the sensitivity requires that you also have strength. John Swat would talk about this, and the word for sensitive in Thai can also mean weak. So I say this is one of the paradoxes of meditation. On the one hand, you want to get the mind so that it’s really strong, but at the same time it’s really tender. Or the mind is really tough and it’s really tender. The two have to go together so that your sensitivity doesn’t bowl you over and the strength just doesn’t get too stolid and stifling. But when you get things in the right proportions, they can change the balance of power in the mind, as you deal with events around you, too.

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