Papañca

March 12, 2018

We sit here just with the body and the mind focused together on the breath. And sometimes it can get frustrating. The body doesn’t do what you want. It’s not always doing what you want. You get sick without asking permission. Your voice gives out without asking permission. And your mind starts wandering around without asking permission. But the frustration there is not so much the body and the mind or the breath. It’s the “we” and “these things are not doing what we want.” That “we” is part of what the Buddha calls “papanca.” It’s a kind of thinking. Usually when you hear the word “papanca,” especially in modern Dharma circles, it means “a thinking attack.” I knew of one woman who spent an entire retreat at IMS. She was trying to figure out how the building had been put together, which parts of the building came first, which ones had been added on later. She would do her walking meditation in different areas to figure out where the seams between the buildings were. She said that was a “papanca attack.” Actually, that’s not what “papanca” is. “Papanca” is a particular kind of thinking that’s based on particular perceptions. It starts with the perception, “I am the thinker.” There’s an “I” in there. I’m the one who’s doing the thinking. I’m the one who’s inhabiting the body. I’m the one who’s using the body. I’m the one who’s trying to find what this body needs in the world, what this mind needs in the world. It spreads out from there. And as long as you’re thinking in those terms, as I said, they’re going to come back and assail you, in the Buddhist words. They’re going to come back and attack you with that sense of frustration. Because once there’s the “I” and the “I am,” then there’s the world in which “I am.” And you decide, “Well, maybe this spot right here, being focused on the breath right here, right now, is not where I want to be. I want to be someplace else.” It’s already the mind is someplace else, pushing away, pulling away. You’ve sided with a “papanca.” You’ve got to learn how to say “no” to it. And the Buddha gives you some good “papanca” for saying “no.” “Think about death,” he says. “Think about how much you’ve suffered.” “Papanca” includes the question, “Who am I? Where am I going? Where have I been?” And sometimes it’s good to think about where you’re going, where you’ve been, in a way that brings you back to the present moment. There was a time when thirty monks came to see the Buddha. And the Buddha said to himself, “What can I say to these monks so that they will gain the right here, right now?” And so he told them, “What do you think is greater? The water in the oceans or the blood that you shed from having your heads cut off in many, many lifetimes?” And then he went down the long list of different ways you can get your heads cut off, or your head cut off, one head per life. Having been a thief, having been a highway robber, having been an adulterer, having been a sheep, having been a cow, having been a goat. All the times you’ve had your heads cut off and all the blood is more than the water in the oceans. All thirty monks became arahants. Now, that thinking is a kind of papanca, but it’s useful papanca. It gives you a sense of sanghvega. Or you can think about where you’re going. The other day we were talking about different ways to motivate yourself to practice. One woman said, “My motivation is that I ask myself, ‘Are you ready for your last breath?’” The breath comes in, and when it goes out, it’s not going to come in again. Are you ready for that moment? Are you prepared to drop everything? If not, you’ve got work to do. So that kind of papanca is useful, thinking about where you’ve been, where you’re going, this you that you’ve created. But what it does, it brings you back to the present moment in a way that makes you want to take apart that sense of what you are, who you have been, who you will be. This is why the Buddha recommends just focusing on the body in and of itself and putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Because as soon as you start thinking of a world, you’re going to start thinking about who you are or who you might be in that world. But you just want to be with the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself. Just these things as you experience them right here, right now, with a minimal amount of “me.” Just enough to want to get these things to come together and to remind yourself that these things are arising within you and you’re the one responsible for looking after them, putting them in good shape. Just that much “me” or “I” is enough. And for the rest, just let that sense of “me” go. Just let it go, as much as you can, and be here simply with the experience. What is it like to breathe in and breathe out? What is it like for the mind to stay with the breath coming in and going out? As the forester johns say, in this state of mind, there is no woman or man, young or old. There’s just awareness and the sensation of the breathing, the sensation of inhabiting a body, feeling the body from within. And beyond that, just let things go. Then you start looking at what’s arising in the body, what’s arising in the mind, what kind of feelings are coming. As the Buddha said, try to develop feelings of what are called unworldly feelings or feelings not of the flesh. In other words, we’re not just here watching feelings coming and going. Those are feelings of the flesh, or unworldly feelings. The ones not of the flesh, a pain, say, not of the flesh, is when you think about there’s so much work to be done. Think about that in a way that doesn’t get you discouraged. Think about it in a way that says, “If I don’t do it now, when is it going to get done?” Otherwise, your mind goes wandering off and thinking about where you might be right now, where it’d be more pleasant. Then you have to remind yourself, “Okay, those pleasant places, where it’s more pleasant, do they last forever? Are they safe? Can you trust the happiness that comes there?” Well, no. Bring yourself back then. Focus on the fact that if you don’t get the work done now, when are you going to do it? You’ve got the ideal opportunity. Even if it doesn’t seem perfect, it’s good enough to practice. So take advantage of it. Ask for pleasures not of the flesh. Those are the ones of learning how to breathe in a way that feels really good inside. When we talk about the breath energy in the body, what is that? If you were to take your arm and just hold it out in front of you without touching anything, you’d still know where the arm is even though it’s not touching anything. Those sensations that tell you where the arm is, those are breath sensations. So try to get in touch with that level of sensation. And if it doesn’t seem like anything’s flowing, then just ask yourself, “Where is it tight? Where is it tense? Can you loosen it up?” When you breathe in, where do you sense motion? Is that the only place in the body where it can be? Or is it simply the place where it’s most obvious? Try to cast your inner eye around the whole body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And just notice where you have sensations that are there when you breathe in and are not there when you breathe out. Or sensations that are there when you breathe out, not when you breathe in. In which areas are the sensations the same? Those same sensations, do they feel the same? Do they feel comfortable or do they feel blocked? How wide is the range of your awareness? Can you keep it with the whole body? In other words, you’re approaching this not as a person here doing these things, just the body and the mind asking questions. Try to keep things on those terms. There’s an awareness that fills the body. There’s also the focused awareness. How does that focused awareness relate to the background awareness that fills the body? Do they seem like two separate things, or can you see them as part and parcel of each other? These are questions that deal with body in and of itself, mind in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, in a way that eventually brings them together. Your awareness fills the body, the breath fills the body. You’ve got these three things that are right there together. And they feel good with one another because you’re not pushing and pulling away. And then in that space, whatever your background is—gender, age, whatever—it doesn’t matter. If you can hold that attitude in mind, then it’s a lot easier to settle down and your thoughts don’t assail you. And the fact that you’re with a body, that sometimes does what you want and sometimes doesn’t do what you want. And you’re with a mind that sometimes does and doesn’t do what you want. It’s a lot easier to be with these things. They’re a lot less trouble. It’s the papanca. That’s the trouble. That’s the troublemaker. So try to see these things simply in and of themselves. Whether there’s a little me or a little mind involved, and there’s a little of the world involved. Usually when there’s a me or a mind, there’s going to be a world that comes tagging along. For the time being, you don’t want either. It’s just this world right here, the world of the body as you feel it from within, and the awareness as you feel it from within, trying to bring them together. And that way you can know what it’s like to be not attacked by your thinking. Your thinking is actually helpful, because it’s not in the terms of the papanca. It’s in terms of the establishing of mindfulness, those frames of reference that the Buddha gives us. They’re the means by which we pull out of our various senses of ourselves and our senses of the world, all the different become-ings we could create out of sensations in the body and the mind. And we’re in a place where we’re a lot more safe.

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