Anupassana (outdoors)

August 5, 2018

We have the time. We have the opportunity. Very few things to disturb us. It’s a good time to focus on the breath as a way of developing the mind’s ability to maintain a focus, to develop its mindfulness, develop its alertness, develop its ardency. We choose one topic to stay with, and then we stick with it. We keep watching this one topic regardless of whatever else comes up. In Pali, this is called anupasana. Literally, it means “watching after” or “watching in following something.” It’s like following the thread in a piece of cloth. You don’t want to get distracted by the other threads. You want to follow just that one thread all the way through the cloth. Here and now, we’ve got other threads. There’s the heat outside. Occasionally there’s a little whine off in the distance, some sort of motor is running. We’ve had the sound of the airplanes, sometimes the sounds of the crows. Those are just the outside obstacles. The inside obstacles are all the thoughts that would pull you away. So even though these obstacles are here, you can’t let them get in the way. You say, “I’m going to keep with one thing all the way through.” Just stay with that one thing. Hang on to it. In Thailand, they give the image of a red ant. They have these big red ants that like to stay in the mango trees. The funny thing is, the ants don’t eat the mangoes, but they’ll bite anybody who comes up to the tree to eat the mangoes. When they bite, they hold on really tight. In fact, if you try to pull them off, sometimes their head will break off from the body. You’ve got the body and your fingers, and the head is still biting you. And then John says, “Try to hold on to your meditation object with that kind of tenacity, that kind of determination.” Because it’s only then, when you stick with something like this, that you see it, see what’s going on. It’s like watching a movie. If you’re there watching the movie from start to finish, you don’t get up and leave in the meantime. You’ll have a good idea of what’s going on. If you come in, go out, come in, go out, come in, go out, it’s easy to forget and easy to miss a lot of things because you’re not here continually. So you want to have this quality of continuity, regardless of what the obstacles are. In Pali, they talk about the road to perdition, abhayamukha. And usually we think about things like drinking a lot, gambling, having illicit sex, and those are part of the list. But then there’s one member of the list that’s unlike the other ones. It’s the attitude that says, “It’s too hot. I can’t practice. It’s too cold. I can’t practice. It’s too early. It’s too late. Whatever.” There’s all the excuses you can have because things are a little bit excessive, one way or the other, and you make that an excuse. And as a result, the goodness you could develop never gets developed. Because we’re looking for a goodness there in the weather outside, or goodness in terms of the time. But real goodness lies in the qualities of the mind we develop. The heat or the cold, or time being early, time being late, to get in the way of developing the goodness you can. Because you don’t know how much time you’re going to have. But you do know you have right now. So you try to get the most out of right now. Squeeze what you can out of it. Tune in to what gives you strength right now. It’s like having a radio. When you turn on a radio, you realize that there are radio waves in the air. Then you can adjust the frequency on the radio to get whichever signal you want. But it’s so easy to forget. When you turn off the radio, it’s easy to forget that there are radio waves going right through you all the time. Because you’re not focused on picking up those frequencies. It’s the same here. There can be heat, outside, heat coming into your body. But there’s also breath in the same place, just as all those radio waves are in the same place. Just think of it as a different frequency. And once you’re focused on that frequency, it’s like the other ones don’t exist. They don’t impinge on your awareness at all. They’re there in the background, but you want to keep your focus on what’s in the foreground, i.e., the breath. And try to make it comfortable. Try to make it interesting. After all, the breath has a huge impact on the state of your body. The state of your body has an impact on the state of your mind, what moods are going through the mind. And so you don’t want to leave it to be just random. If the breath can have a good impact, do what you can to make it have that good impact. Try to understand what kind of breathing you need right now. Do you need heavy breathing? Do you need light breathing? Deep, shallow, fast, slow? When I think about the breath, do I think about it coming in from outside, or do I think of the breath actually originating inside the body? And holding that perception in mind, what does that do to your experience of the breath? Think of the different resting places of the breath that the John Lee talked about—down around the navel, the tip of the breastbone, the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, right at the palate, the middle of the head, the top of the head. When you breathe in, where does it feel among these different spots? Which one seems to be radiating breath energy? Focus there, and then ask, “Is it radiating without any obstruction, or is there any tightness or tension that’s surrounding it that’s making it hard for the breath to radiate out from there?” Can you relax that tension? Can you keep it relaxed as you breathe in, as you breathe out? And then can you spread it everywhere? Are there parts of the body that are not getting breath energy? What happens when you consciously try to direct it there, like down into your little toes, the spaces between the fingers? Behind your eyeballs? Lots of places in the body that we tend to forget about. So make a survey to see who’s not getting energy. Think of the energy going there. And as you work with the breath in this way, you realize that you weren’t paying any attention at all to the heat outside or the noise outside or anything. They were there, but they didn’t mean anything. They didn’t overwhelm the mind. It’s like when you’re reading a really interesting book. You can go read for hours and time passes very quickly because you’re interested. It holds your attention. Try to remind yourself that the breath is important. It lies at the basis of the health of the body, the health of your mind. If you want to use your mind well, use your body well, look after the breath. Have a sense of its importance so that this becomes a place where you feel at home. Sticking with the breath, anupasana, watching after the breath, keeping track of the breath. Because you have the right to choose the objects in your mind. So choose objects that are going to be helpful. You’ve got the opportunity right now. You’re totally free. So choose the breath, and then choose the way you’re going to think about the breath to keep you there. Take advantage of the power of your choice. There are so many things in the world we cannot change, but these things we can. And as it turns out, the things we can change, i.e., our own mind in the present moment, those are the most important things to change. So here you are. Keep track of this opportunity, because it’ll lead you to someplace good.

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