Circling Around, Zeroing In

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When Ajaan Lee taught meditation, he didn’t always start with the breath. There were times when he’d have his students start with other contemplations, the ones you have to think about. That’s probably for two reasons. One is when you first meditate, you’re settling down. The mind is overwhelmed. You’re already used to thinking, and to tell it to stop is like telling a truck to stop instantly after it’s been hurtling down the highway sixty miles an hour. As long as the mind has some strength to think, we’ll have it think about some things that are useful, things that will help it sort of send zero in on stillness and work off some of its excess energy. A lot of the topics that Ajaan Lee chose were ones that give rise to a sense of sanghvega as well. That’s the second reason. You think about all the various places your mind can go wandering, and you realize there’s really nothing there. So when the mind really does turn to the breath and the temptation to go off and think about other things comes up, you realize that where you’re going, or where those thoughts are going, are all territory of thought about and thought through. You realize that that’s not what you want right now. Some of the themes have to do with the body. Think of the body in terms of the thirty-two parts. Thirty-two is just a small number. Just think about all the bones you’ve got. There are many, many bones. That’s one exercise you might try. Where are your bones right now? Start with the tips of the fingers. Go all the way up through the hand, up through the arms, up to the shoulders, then start with the toes and work up the legs, the pelvis, all the little vertebrae on the spine. Ask yourself, “Where are each of those bones right now?” Or any other body part you can think about. Or a combination that you can think about to make you realize that it’s really strange that we have these human bodies. Think about fingers with nails at the end. How did that happen? Think about eyes. There are all kinds of things you could think about in terms of the body. You could think about the body in terms of elements, realizing that this body that you’ve got is made up of the same physical elements as the rest of the world, and most of them are just passing through. The most solid parts of your body have been with you only for seven years. Everything gets changed every seven years. Some parts get changed a lot faster. It seems strange, after all. Think of these things simply passing through. You claim all of them as yours while they’re here. Then as soon as they leave the body, they’re something else. But they’re replaced just by other elements. One of the contemplations that Ajahn Lee doesn’t include is the one that sparked the Buddha’s desire to go forth. He was looking at the world and seeing it as a small stream of water with lots of fish struggling with one another. He had a little bit of that water, and they were all going to die. They were struggling and harming one another. He looked around and didn’t see anything that wasn’t already laid clear. He realized that if he was going to try to look for happiness in the world, he was going to have to fight somebody else off, what had already been claimed to. He decided he wanted to find a happiness that didn’t require fighting, didn’t require struggle. Not that it didn’t require striving, but it didn’t require conflict. You think about how much of our happiness in the world is involved in taking something that already belongs to somebody else in one way or another. You’re realizing that you’d much rather turn inside and find a happiness with what you’ve already got here. So whatever strength you have to think, if you have excess energy, work it off by thinking about these things. Then ultimately the mind will be ready to settle in and be with the breath. So it’s not the case that you simply try to force the mind to be still when it’s not willing to be still. As long as it’s going to think, learn how to think in a way that will eventually circle around and zero in on wanting to be here with the breath, finding a sense of well-being here, finding your meaning, finding your happiness here with the breath. That way, the mind will be a lot more willing to settle down. So what have you got here? You’ve got the breath coming in and going out. It may not seem like much. There was once another one of the forested jhans who would never really practice breath meditation. He asked the jhanli, “Why are you teaching breath meditation? All it is is in, out, in, and out. How are you going to get any discernment that way?” And the jhanli responded, “Well, if that’s all you see, then that’s all there is.” But if you look at the breath, there’s a lot to think about even here. When you breathe in, where do you feel the breath? How does breathing come in? Where does the breathing energy start? Here’s another way you get the mind to be willing to be with the breath. Ask a lot of questions about it. That’s what the direct thought and evaluation are all about. Give your thoughts directly to the breath and then ask questions about how the breath energy is flowing in different parts of the body, parts that you may not have thought about before as having breath. But you watch them and see how that part of the body feels different when the breath comes in and when it goes out. Is there tension there? Are there parts of the body that seem to get neglected? Often the toes get neglected. So think about your toes for a while. Think about your fingers, the spaces between the fingers, the area behind your ears. There are all kinds of places you can think about. Think about breath energy and examine it. And if you have any tight spots in the body that you’ve been carrying around for a long time, you can ask about how does the breath flow around that. Sometimes it’s hard to get it to go through those spots to begin with, because some of those spots tend to be resistant. In that case, think of it going around, gently rubbing off a little bit of the tension each time it comes in, each time it goes out. If you have an old injury, ask yourself how the breath relates to that, how the breath can help soothe that and help get rid of some of the tension that we tend to carry around old injuries. There’s a lot to look at here. The Buddha talked about developing concentration, and he said that you have to develop both tranquility and insight. You have to use both tranquility and insight to get the mind to settle down. His instructions on breath meditation are an ideal example of how you use both. After all, insight is insight into fabrications, how fabrications shape your experience right now. Tranquility is getting things calm. When he talked about breath meditation, the first thing was to look at bodily fabrication, get sensitive to bodily fabrication throughout the body. In other words, the breath throughout the body. When you’ve explored that and seen how the different ways you breathe have an effect on how you experience the body, then you can think of calming the breath. How do you do that? Well, you calm it with perception. Those are mental fabrications. Change your perception of the breath, what the body needs right now. So you’re learning about fabrications and calming at the same time. Sometimes the emphasis will be more on the fabrication, sometimes it’ll be more on the calming. But the net result is that these two qualities can work together. The mind’s active side can work together with the side that wants to be calm. You simply have to learn how to figure out what you’re doing that’s getting in the way of the calmness. That relates directly to the issues about suffering and the end of suffering. This is all what you’re doing. Our problem is that we tend to be pretty insensitive to a lot of the actions that we’re taking, especially mental actions. Working with the breath, trying to get the mind to be willing to settle down, requires that you get very sensitive to what’s going on in the mind. If the mind has too much energy, you want to know and figure out what to do with it. If the mind has too little energy, when you’re sitting here just nodding, nodding, nodding, what can I do to get the energy level up? It’s somewhat paradoxical that often the same approach can help give rise to more energy. In other words, give the mind something to think about, something to get interested in, so it’s not so bored and just zoning out. But the upshot of all of this is that we’re here to learn to be more sensitive to the mind. We’re not trying to put the mind through a program that says, “Well, these are the insights you’re going to get, and you’re going to get them in this order.” Because people’s minds, even though they have some basic characteristics in common, have a lot of things where they diverge. And the way your defilements are assembled may be different from the way other people’s defilements are. So a large part of discernment is just getting sensitive to what you’re doing. To the results you’re getting. And to the fact that there are alternative ways of doing these things. Alternative ways of relating to the breath, relating to the mind, relating to your thoughts and feelings. This is why we listen to the Dhamma, why we read the Dhamma, is to get some idea of what some of those alternatives are. And then we have to learn how to use some of our own ingenuity to figure out how to how these lessons from other people can be applied to your mind right now, the situation you’ve got right here. But always in the back of the mind are those contemplations about sanghvega. Realizing that if you allow your mind to wander around in areas outside, you’re wandering in other people’s territory. And if you want to lay claim to it, you’re going to have to fight somebody off. And then you’ll die. You’ll have to give it up. That gives rise to the thought, “Well, isn’t there something better?” And the Buddha says, “Right here. This is where it is. This is how you do it.” So try to make the most of his advice, because it’s stood the test of time. It’s stood the test of time for more than 2,600 years.

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