To See What You Haven’t Seen Before

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Very frequently, a jhana-svabha would begin his Dhamma talks by saying, “Rouse a sense of conviction.” Traditionally, conviction is in reference to the Buddha’s awakening, that the Buddha really did awaken to something really special. But at the same time, he did it by developing quality qualities that we all have in a potential form. So conviction here, as you’re getting ready to meditate, means conviction that this is going to lead to something good and that you have the potential to do it. Those are the voices inside that you want to encourage, because there are a lot of other voices there as well, the ones that say, “I don’t want to work too hard. There’s nothing really special here.” You see whole legions of Dhamma teachers who will tell you, “There’s nothing to attain. Just learn how to sit back and relax and be you in the present moment.” But the Buddha wasn’t one of those Dhamma teachers, and the account of his awakening is certainly not that kind of an account. As he said, we’re here to attain what we’ve never attained before, to realize what we’ve never realized before, to see what we’ve never seen before. We’ve all seen the present moment. We’ve all seen our mind as it is in the present moment many, many times. But there’s something here that’s more special than that, but it requires a lot of digging down to have conviction that it’s worth the digging, worth the effort. Then you’ll be more likely to put out effort. One of the saddest things is people who meditate and put breaks on their practice, who rein themselves in, saying, “I don’t want to try too hard. I don’t want to put in too much effort.” They use the teaching on the middle way as an excuse. But as the Janmaha Board pointed out, middle way doesn’t mean halfway efforts. What it means is an effort that’s appropriate to the task. So when your mind is a real mess, the effort there is going to require an awful lot. When the mind is calm and clear already, it’s going to be a gentle effort. It’s not the case that it’s going to be harsh and heavy all the time. But there will come times when you have to be ready to put in a lot of effort. You have to be ready to fight off a lot of your own defilements, the parts of the mind that you tend to identify with, but will pull you away from the practice. You have to learn how to cut off that identification, cut off that friendship, because those thoughts are not your true friends. They flatter and control. They say, “You’re special. You don’t have to put in much effort. Maybe the forest of Jhana’s had to put in a lot of effort. But you’re special.” There are also the voices that say, “Their bones must have been made out of iron. Your bones are just plain old calcium bones.” So when they talk about putting in a lot of effort, that’s for people who are already who are specially built like them, as opposed to the tender creature that you are. Those thoughts are not your friends. They’re not the friends that pull you back. After all, if you’re going to see the previously unseen, realize what you haven’t realized before, you’re going to have to do things you haven’t done before. A lot of that will require extra effort, extra determination. But here again, it’s not just brute effort. The Buddhist description of determination requires some discernment in addition to being truthful. You make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath, and you’re true to that determination. But you use some discernment in how you do that, how you go about that. Discernment here means ingenuity as well. You realize you have to give things up, but at the same time you can calm the mind down as you give them up. Keep reminding yourself that the things you’re letting go of are not really that valuable. And if you use some discernment to keep your mind calm, that means you’re not finding your entertainment outside. You’re finding your entertainment with the breath. Learning to play with the breath, learning to experiment with the breath. We’re not here just to grit our teeth through pain. We’re here to ask ourselves, “Suppose you limit your awareness right to your body for the next hour. How are you going to make it interesting? How are you going to make it enjoyable?” Because that is part of the path. It’s right there in right concentration. Pleasure and rapture are born of seclusion. Seclusion means you put unskillful thoughts out of the mind, and you limit your range of awareness to the sense of the body as you feel it right here, right now. This is what renunciation is. We hear about the renunciate life when we think about monks and nuns going off. They’re leading very austere lives. But the real renunciation the Buddha’s talking about is renouncing sensual thoughts, your fantasies, your fascination with fantasizing about sensual pleasures. As you sit here with your eyes closed, that’s something anybody can do, if you make up your mind to do it. You have to be on the side of your determination and not regard it as an enemy. That’s what a lot of the wisdom is, is talking yourself into wanting to do this, talking yourself into being willing to put in the effort. Because when you listen to the Dhamma, it’s not simply a matter of just letting the words come in and bathe the mind and soothe you. The Buddha says you have to apply appropriate attention, asking yourself, “How does this apply to the problems I’m suffering from right now? How does this give me some insight into my problems?” The next factor is practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. After having given your full attention to the Dhamma and realizing what it is, what it demands, you’re willing to give it a try. There’s a famous saying from the Third Zen Patriarch that the Great Way is not difficult for those with no preferences. That doesn’t mean you just sit here saying, “I’ll just be okay with whatever comes up.” What it means is that if your preferences go in one direction and the path goes in another direction, you’re willing to put the preferences aside. No matter how much you’ve been clinging to them, you realize that they’re not your true friends. Give the path a try. And the only way you’re going to know the path is by trying it. You may have a picture in the mind about what it’s going to require, how much it’s going to demand. But there’s a lot of figuring out the path as you’re going along. The big question is, how can I make this something that’s something that I can do? That doesn’t mean you pull the task down to an easy level. It means you divide the task up into smaller tasks and then work on each one as you see it coming up. In this case, each task is this breath. The next task is this breath. How are you going to stay with them? How are you going to keep continuity? It helps to have the perception that each breath flows into the next breath. There’s no clear line between them. And the spots where the breath seems to stop, those are especially useful because those are the ones where you can expand your sense of awareness throughout the body without the breath getting in the way. Then how do you use that full body awareness? Your attention is limited to the body. Make full use of the body. Make full use of what the potentials are that lie here that you haven’t really explored yet. Because you’ve been finding your entertainment in other places, you don’t feel that you need to explore the potentials of the present moment. But now, when you place some limitations on yourself, really fully develop what you’ve got right here. Which parts of the body are most sensitive to how the breathing feels? Which are the ones that feel especially nourished when the breath comes in? Focus there. Appreciate that sense of nourishment and think of it spreading around. There’s no law against breathing any way you want. How are you going to know what way of breathing you want? Well, you’ve tried out different ways of breathing. You get a sense of what feels really good and where it feels really good. And you focus your attention there. And you adjust the breath so that it maintains that sense of feeling really good. In that sense, at a spot. Then think of it seeping through the rest of the body. So this is not all brute effort. That’s the discernment element in your determination. That’s why discernment comes first. But when the Buddha talks about strength, strengthening the mind, strengthening your discernment, discernment has to build on conviction. It’s the conviction that the Buddha really did find something very special through his efforts. He showed what human effort can do. Think of all the many thousands of years of human civilization before there was someone who did what needed to be done. So this is not going to require just a half-hearted effort. It has to be full-hearted. The middleness of the path is a sense that it’s just right for the task at hand. But you’ve got your friends on the path. You’ve got the sense of well-being that comes from getting the mind to settle down. You’ve got the breath in the body. In other words, you’ve got these potentials. It’s one of Ajahn Lee’s frequent statements that the human body and the human mind have potentials that we hardly ever really take advantage of. We’ve let our attention get distracted other places. By the time we get to the meditation, we’re tired or disillusioned. We don’t really trust that something really special could come out of this. That’s something we’ve got to change. That’s what Ajahn Suat kept saying. Develop a sense of conviction, something you can work on. It’s not going to happen simply on its own. You have to be convinced that there is a way out. Only then will you have the discernment to find it. So be convinced that the Buddha’s awakening really was special, that there’s something that he wasn’t special. In other words, he didn’t awaken because he was a deva or some sort of god that came down. He awakened because he had qualities within us that we can all recognize, at least to some extent, within us. He simply developed them, brought them to maturity. Which means that you, if you develop these qualities within you, can attain something special as well. But it’s going to require a special effort. Special in the sense that you need all your faculties, your discernment, your truthfulness, your willingness to give things up to get something better, your willingness to test yourself to see if you have the potential to do that, where they’re new as well. There’s no reason that you shouldn’t have those potentials. Give them a chance.

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