Ready for Anything

January 8, 2022

There was one time when the Buddha was going for alms with Rahula, his son, and he gave him a Dhamma lesson. Rahula thought to himself, “How can anyone continue going for alms after a Dhamma lesson like that?” So he went back to the monastery and decided to go without food that day. He sat in meditation posture under a tree. Then Venerable Sariputta saw him and told him he should learn how to do breath meditation. So later that day, Rahula went to see the Buddha and asked him how to do breath meditation. Before giving instructions on how to do breath meditation, the Buddha gave him several things to contemplate. One was the principle of making your mind like the breath. The different elements make your mind like earth. People can throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn’t react. Make your mind like water. People use water to wash away dirty things, but the water isn’t disgusted by the dirty things. It’s washing away. Make your mind like fire or wind. Fire burns garbage, wind blows it around, but neither of them gets disgusted. Of course, that’s teaching the principle of patience and endurance. But it’s not the principle of just sitting there with whatever comes up and saying, “Well, that’s what it’s got to be.” Your endurance is for the sake of seeing things and understanding them. If you can’t endure things, you won’t be able to see anything. You run away. You see a shadow and you run away from that. A little bit of pain and you want to run away. How are you going to comprehend suffering if you run away from pain? How are you going to know what the shadow is a shadow of unless you stay and watch? That’s the first principle. Even before you start with the breath, you should think about trying to develop these qualities of the mind. The Buddha went on to have him develop the four brahma-viharas. He contemplated the foulness of the body. He contemplated the theme of inconstancy. Things that come are going to go. He contemplated the theme of not-self. Just because something appears in your mind doesn’t mean it’s you or yours. You have to lay claim to it. You can think in these terms. Then you’re ready for the breath. Because when you try to stay with the breath, other things are going to come up in the mind. You’re opening up something inside, and you never know what’s going to come out. You sit here trying to be with the breath, and all of a sudden you’re someplace else—a memory of childhood, a memory of when you were younger. Sometimes they’re very random. Sometimes they’re very specific events that were major events in your life. Other times they’re things that you wonder, “Why did that come up?” It’s because these things are being kept inside when you live your normal life out in the world outside. There are so many things you have to take care of, so many things you’re responsible for, so many things you have to worry about. You don’t have time to deal with what’s boiling around inside. So it doesn’t have much of a chance to get out. But when you quiet the mind down, it’s like smoothing out the water that’s been turbulent, taking the lid off of something that’s been boiling. And things will come up. On the first stages, you don’t have to deal too much with them. Just note the fact that they’re there, whether they’re pleasant or unpleasant. They’re just there. But you don’t have to focus on them. You’re here to focus on the breath. But take note of these things, just to the extent that if something seems to have a lot of velcro on it, tell yourself, “At some point I’m going to have to deal with this.” Recognizing that much often helps, because otherwise we deny things. And when things go into denial, then they get tough. And when they come back, they come back stronger. So you note that they’re there. This is one of the reasons why we do goodwill practice at the beginning of the meditation. Goodwill for anybody involved in any story that comes up in the mind. Goodwill for yourself. Goodwill for others. And goodwill, of course, includes compassion and empathetic joy. And there’s equanimity. Realizing, “Okay, there’s karma there.” And karma can have a long history. There’s a famous story about a young girl named Sumdittho. A young monk came in to see her one day, complaining about another monk who had just come up out of nowhere and hit him over the head. Sumdittho looked at her and said, “Well, you hit him first.” The monk said, “No, I haven’t done anything at all. I haven’t said anything or done anything to make him upset, but he got upset at me for no reason.” Sumdittho said, “No, you hit him first.” The young monk got frustrated and went to see another senior monk, complaining about Sumdittho. The other senior monk came to see Sumdittho and said, “What’s up?” Sumdittho said, “Well, it’s obvious that he’s got karma with that other person. He must have hit him some other time. If not in this lifetime, maybe in a previous lifetime. And then who knows who hit who first, as you go way back in time.” So when something like that comes up in the mind, just say, “Karma.” You’ve probably been on all the different sides of whatever particular karma that was. Accept that fact and move on. You may wonder, “Why do I have to deal with these things?” Well, they’re there. You want to be able to deal with them skillfully, and you want to be alert to them. As the Buddha said, we act on impulses. That’s our karma. We act on our intentions. Sometimes we’re alert to what those intentions are, and sometimes we’re not. But even the fact that we act on them, even when we’re not alert to them, it still has a karmic consequence. That’s scary. The things that lie beneath the surface can have an impact, and you’re barely aware of what you’re doing. It’s bad enough that you’re doing this on a day-to-day basis. We see common examples where someone reminds you of someone in the past, and your reaction to this new person is, to be clear, your attempt to pay back that person from the past. But then there’s the whole question, “What’s going to happen when you die?” Sometimes people are not very conscious when they die. They’re overcome by pain, or they’re drugged with pain, or just the fact that they’re going to die has them really scared. These subconscious things that they’ve been lurking around inside, that they’ve never dealt with, may suddenly come up. They may latch onto it. You know the Buddha’s image of what happens when you latch onto something when you die. It’s like a fire going from one house to the next. It latches onto the wind. And the wind can blow anywhere. So you want to be more and more alert to what’s going on in the mind. This is what concentration is really good for, because you begin to see through all the different layers of curtains and walls that the mind puts up to hide things inside. So when something comes up, you’re alert to it. You know what’s happening. Remember when I was first meditating? I was really frustrated by the fact that I’d be sitting, trying to focus on the breath, and all of a sudden I realized that I’d left the breath and gone someplace else. I had no idea why it had happened, what had happened in the meantime. I mentioned this to Ajahn Phu, and he said, “Well, watch for the steps.” I said, “How can I watch from there? It’s like I’m blocked out. There’s a big empty space.” He said, “Watch for the steps.” And after a while, I began to realize there were little movements in the mind that I hadn’t paid much attention to. It’s like a decision was made, “Okay, we’re going to leave the next chance we get,” and then it would deny it as if the decision hadn’t been made by it. It was lurking there inside. The more quickly you can see these things, the more you begin to realize how the mind likes to lie to itself. It lets itself be lied to. And we’re trying to undo that habit. It requires a lot of patience, a lot of endurance, goodwill, equanimity. And even before the mind gets concentrated, you have to have some understanding of the fact that things that come up in the mind are not going to be there forever. They come and they go. And when something comes up, you don’t have to get involved with it. You don’t have to take it on. And that makes it a lot easier to deal with these things, to see them for what they are. And you have lots of goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people around you, for all the people involved in whatever that story was that suddenly comes up to the surface. And that way you develop more alertness and also more resilience. You’re able to take things more, see things about yourself that you don’t like, or accept events in the past that you’re trying to hide. And actually become cheerful about the fact that you can see these things and then get past them. So as you sit down to meditate, be prepared. Who knows what’s going to come up? For the time being, you don’t want to get involved with whatever comes up. You want to stay with the breath to give yourself that space inside where you can face these things and not be knocked off balance by them. Work on that space. And then eventually these things will come in and you’ll be able to deal with them. You’ll understand what their allure is, why you might want to think about them, but you’ll also see the drawbacks. And you can see it in a very matter-of-fact way. And John Fu had this talent. He could read what was going on in other people’s minds. And you can imagine what you might see in other people’s minds, what they think about you. And you have to have a very matter-of-fact attitude toward that. One of his students came to him one time and apologized that she had been meditating one night and just suddenly wanted to curse him. She was so angry at him over something and she couldn’t stop herself. She felt really embarrassed. Of course, she felt that probably John Fu was reading her mind, and it made it even worse. So at her next opportunity, she went to apologize. And as John Fu told her, “Look, the mind can think. It can think good things. It can think bad things. It’s just the way the minds are.” So you can imagine how much in reading other people’s minds he saw them thinking bad things about him. You have to learn how to take that as a matter-of-fact event with a matter-of-fact attitude. And that’s the attitude we’re trying to develop as we look at our minds. Once you see the facts of the case, then you can do something about them. And when you see them and not get blown away by them, then you can be more effective. So you have to be ready for whatever comes up. And that means developing these qualities of being like earth, water, wind, fire, having the brahmapaharas available whenever you need them. Seeing your thoughts as inconstant and not-self. So whatever does come up, you’re ready for it. And the more you’re ready for whatever, the more you’re going to see. Sometimes unpleasant things, but the more you’re going to see things of value. So realize there’s a point to all this, and take heart to other people who’ve been this way before.

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