I-making & My-making

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Focus on your breath. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. Try to stay with it all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. When the Buddha talks about breath, he classes it as one of the properties or elements in the body, not so much the air that you feel at the nose. But the movement of energy as you breathe in, as you breathe out, which is related to a lot of other movements of energy through the body. Ask yourself where it’s clearest right now. Focus your attention there. Then ask yourself what kind of breathing feels comfortable. You can experiment. Longer, shorter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. Give each kind of breathing a little bit of time to see how it feels and what effect it has on the body and what effect it has on the mind. Then ask yourself which is the best. Of course, you can combine those different ways of breathing—heavy and slow, heavy and fast, light and slow, light and fast. There’s a lot to experiment with. Part of the discernment you develop from focusing on the breath comes right here, as you learn to read cause and effect. You’re making the causes and you’re looking for the effects. Then you can change the causes again. This means that you play a large role in the meditation. You’re simply a passive observer of what’s coming and what’s going. You decide how to breathe. You talk to yourself about how you’re breathing. You hold different perceptions. Where does the breath come in? Where does it go out? What direction should it flow? Try different perceptions. As you breathe in, think of the breath flowing down. Then for a while, think of it flowing up, which feels better. In the John Lee Seven Steps, he talks about the breath energy starting at the back of the neck, going down the spine, out the legs. But in some of his Dhamma talks, he talks about the breath energy starting at the soles of the feet, going up through the legs, up the spine. So which do you need right now? The flowing down is something he discovered when he actually had a heart attack. He was out in the forest, had no medicine, three days walking into the forest. To get out would require another three days of walking, and he certainly wasn’t up for that. So what did he have? He had his breath. So he experimented. He discovered that by thinking of the tightness in the back of his neck flowing down and being dispersed so it’s no longer tight. It was really helpful for his condition. That’s what he taught. But then there are times when your spine feels weak and you need to think of the breath energy coming up. So what do you need right now? We take an active role in the meditation to underline the fact that the mind is always taking an active role as it goes through the day, talking to itself, arguing with itself, choosing this, choosing that. So many of our decisions have been going on for so long that they’ve become so much subconscious that we’re scarcely aware of them—the way we breathe, the way we talk to ourselves, the images we hold in mind, the feelings we focus on. These are the raw materials from which we shape our experience of the present moment. Those raw materials come from our past karma. But the past karma doesn’t determine everything. The Buddha was very critical of people who said that everything you experience right now comes from the past. That means you must have some choices right now. This is where a sense of self comes in. We’re the ones making the choices. You want to divide those roles up. What does it mean when you’re making a choice? On the one hand, you have the sense that you are an agent. You’re the one who’s doing something. And you are the recipient of the results. That’s two senses of self right there. Then you find there’s a commentator talking to you about this. We’re going to have to train all of these selves through the meditation. And you realize, as you get to know these different selves, you make up your mind to do one thing and there’ll be other voices in the mind saying, “Well, do something else.” And sometimes they don’t come up front. They’re subterranean. They’ll make a decision to leave, and then they’ll wait until you’re a little bit mindless, until you’re not really alert, and then they’ll go. And in the meantime, they pretend like they haven’t done anything. The best way to bring these voices into the open, where you see them clearly, is to make up your mind. You’re going to do one thing and stick with it. And then they’ll come up and push against it. And you’ve got to resist the push. And you’ve got to be really alert and mindful. But realize you also have the choice. There are so many different voices you could adopt right now, so many different voices inside the mind that you could listen to. So which of these inner critics, which of these commentators, which of these are you going to choose to identify with? Which ones are you going to choose to listen to? Sometimes it’s good to identify them, where they come from. I know when I started out meditating on the hill there in Riong, there were lots of voices in my mind telling me why I shouldn’t be meditating. Some said I was being irresponsible. Some said I was wasting my time. I found it useful to identify who said that to me, who taught that attitude to me. In some cases, it was individual people I knew. In other cases, it was things you picked up from the media, things you picked up from school, random friends, random comments you’ve heard here and there. For some reason, they stick. So when there’s an unhealthy voice in the mind, you might ask yourself, “One, who said that? Where did I pick that up? And two, what did that person know? What was that person’s attitude toward me? Did they mean me well?” We expose ourselves so much to the media, we have no idea what their intentions are. And even when people who mean well, like our parents, family members, friends, what do they know? And do you want to adopt their attitudes? Do you want to listen to their voices? The voices can be in their mind, but you don’t have to listen to them. That’s an important lesson right there. You don’t have to snuff out all other thoughts in order to get the mind to settle down. You just make up your mind. You’re going to focus on the sensation of the breathing. And if you’re talking to yourself about the breath, that’s fine. But other topics right now, you don’t have to get involved. Think of them as being people in a large room. You’re in one corner of the room, they’re off in another corner. They can say what they like, but you don’t have to listen to them. You’ve got work you’ve got to do. So in some cases, you simply ignore the voices. In others, you have to take them apart. Where is the hook? Why does that voice seem to be so authoritative? In this case, you’ve got to develop a strong sense of self, a strong sense of you as the meditator. We are so much about not-self, not-self. But you have to know how to apply that perception. And you don’t apply it to everything all at once. The Buddha’s not saying you have no self. He’s not saying that you have a self, but he is saying that you make a self. The hangara, mamangara, I-making and my-making, these are activities that we all do. When we see them as activities, then the question is, well, this is a kind of karma. What kind of karma is it? When is it skillful? When is it not? And what kind of self-making would be skillful right now? You’ve got the choice. So what kind of self do you want to develop? You want to develop a critic who is helpful. You don’t want to abolish your inner critic, because then you have no standards at all. And if an inner critic is holding you to high standards, don’t see that as imposition or as heartlessness. One of the reasons why the Thay and Jhans are so appreciated is because they do have high standards and they hold their students to high standards. And it’s out of compassion. But that means you have to learn how to read when someone’s holding you to high standards inside. Is that the voice of the Dhamma or is that the voice that’s trying to discourage you? They’re saying, “Well, you’ll never live up to these standards. Okay, throw that one out.” One of the principles that they use in Thailand is that if the teacher is critical of a student, it’s because the teacher sees that the student has potential. So what kind of voices inside are encouraging you to develop your potentials in a good way? Listen to those voices. In other words, you want someone who’s true, saying what’s beneficial. And as for the inner critic, you have to have a sense of time and place. When to be harsh, when to be gentle. You’re basically learning how to apply the principles of right speech inside as you develop this new sense of self. As for not-self, you apply that to all the voices that would discourage you, that would pull you away. They really don’t have your best interest in mind. They may have a narrow idea of your best interests, but why let yourself be pulled down by their narrow attitudes? You’ve got all these different selves that you’ve been accumulating over the years. You’ve got to sort through them. As we decide on the practice, we’re basically saying that we want to identify with the selves that want to practice, that want to put an end to suffering, and are willing to do whatever is necessary. So the self as the agent has to be ready to put forth some effort. The self as the receiver of the results has to be picky as to what it’s going to be satisfied with. And the accommodator has to be wise. You can’t let go of yourself totally, which does happen at the end of the path, but you can’t let go totally until you’ve trained your different senses of self. Otherwise, we tend to let go of our self, our sense of self, out of disgust, out of fear, out of aversion, which is not helpful. It’s better to train them well and then realize, “Okay, they’ve done their job. I’m going to let them go.” Both sides benefit from letting go. So you’re applying not-self selectively to whatever pulls you off the path, whatever voice. It’s not helpful. In the meantime, you try to develop a solid sense of self, wise. The inner judge is not making final judgments. Part of its wisdom is that it sees that it’s watching a work-in-progress and is trying to give good advice. The kind of inner critic that, say, a carpenter would have as he’s working on a chair. He’s using his plane and whoops, there’s a gash that he didn’t mean to make. He doesn’t throw the chair away. He doesn’t quit carpentry. He’s learned how to cover up so that nobody will see the gash. So learn how to cultivate a healthy sense of self on the path. Remember the Buddha’s comment on the question that lies at the beginning of wisdom, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” There’s the “I” there. “I” will be doing this, my welfare and happiness. You want it to be long-term. So you train your agent selves to do whatever’s necessary for long-term. You train your recipient selves to be satisfied only with long-term. And of course, it’s the commentator who’s asking the question. That’s the question you want the commentator to ask. Always keep that question in mind. And that provides you with the guidance that you need for skillful “I” making and “my” making, to the point where you don’t need to do that anymore. After all, your senses of self are strategies for the sake of happiness. And when you’ve found true happiness, the job is done. You can put the strategies down. But until that point, you want to learn how to use them well.

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