Imagine

October 17, 2024

Time goes in one direction, but it also circles around. Tonight is the last night of the rains retreat. Today was the anniversary of the founding of the monastery, but it keeps circling around. Things don’t end, they keep going around and around, just the way when Ajahn Chah was studying with Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Mun told him, “You have to make your practice in the shape of a circle.” And it was all year round. Just because the rains retreat ends doesn’t mean your practice ends, so you should get more slack. Hopefully what’s happened in the course of the rains is your practice has built up momentum, and you want to maintain that momentum, keep going forward. Then we go forward by coming back to the same old practice over and over again. Focus on your breath. Be with your breath, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, and see what you can do with it. There’s a phrase, “yatha puttayana vasana,” which is often translated as meaning “seeing things as they are.” But it actually means “seeing things as they’ve come to be.” In other words, seeing things as they function, how they arise, how they pass away, how they’re dependent on other conditions. And that you don’t see simply by watching. You see by participating. Think of scientists learning about how things function. They don’t just put things on the table and watch them. They change the causes, or what may be the causes, and see if it really has an effect. You manipulate things. And you manipulate them based on your imagination. How about this? How about that? So imagination plays a role in gaining knowledge. This is how engineers come up with new ideas. Imagine, how about trying this? How about that? How about trying that? You see what happens as a result. Sometimes nothing much happens. Nothing much is learned. Other times, quite a lot. So as we meditate, we’re experimenting, and we’re using our imagination. Again, we’re often told, “Just be with things as they are. Don’t use your imagination.” But how are you going to come up with new ideas, new insights? How are you going to come up with new ways of doing things unless you can imagine them? The Buddha talks about the four bases for success, and they’re directly related to how you imagine. The first one is desire. You want something. Then you figure out what needs to be done. The second one is persistence. You put forth an effort based on your desire. And then you use your intent to pay careful attention to what you’re doing. And then your powers of evaluation, your powers of analysis, to figure out if what you did got good results, and if it didn’t, what could you do to get better results? The Buddha relates these four qualities to how you get the mind into concentration. Sometimes you emphasize the desire. You really want to do this. Which means that if the mind wanders off, you come right back. If it wanders off again, you come right back again. You make yourself want to come back. This is where Ajaan Lee’s instructions are useful, because we’re not focusing just on in-out, in-out. It’s not just the air coming in out of the nose. It’s the whole energy flow in the body. That’s something you can inhabit. And it’s something you can find, you find you can make really, really comfortable. Really riveting. When the breath gets really full, and it fills up the different energy channels that are often kind of empty, but you get a sense of flow. And Ajaan Lee compares it to cutting roads through wilderness, or putting electric electricity into a wilderness. You open things up. And as you open things up, you don’t have to push things. You know, when they build roads, they don’t push people to get into cars and run along the roads. People on their own will get into their cars and run along the roads. The same way with the breath. You open things up in the body, and the breath energy will flow. You don’t have to push it. There’s lots to discover here. Lots to explore. Focus your desires on wanting to learn about the breath energy in the body. And when you come up with a good idea, or come up with any idea that seems worth trying, then you stick with it. Because sometimes the results will come quickly, sometimes they take time. So you’re willing to maintain what you’ve got. For instance, you hold different perceptions in mind about where the breath can flow, in which direction it should flow, and where it starts. Sometimes it’s useful to think of the breath energy coming in from outside. Other times it’s more useful to think of it coming from inside. Where in the body would it start? Where is the first impulse for the breath? And you find that’s a question. Because as you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you realize every cell in the body is breathing in, breathing out. If you hold that perception in mind, it’s harder and harder to have distracting thoughts. Because you’re trying to be sensitive to every cell in the body all at the same time. You’re giving them all space to expand and contract, expand and contract. When they contract, don’t squeeze things out. They just gradually come out. Think of the breath not having any clear line between in and out. The in-breath melds into the out-breath, the out-breath melds into the in-breath. There’s a greater and greater sense of fullness. And your need to analyze things, your need to adjust things, gets less and less. So give your full attention to this. And after you’ve been with it for a while, ask yourself about the results. Does the mind settle down? Does it have a sense of fullness? Does it have a sense of contentment being here? If not, what could you change? So you start with some imagination, and then you test it. This is why it’s not purely make-believe. You imagine something, and then you see if it’s actually helpful. It’s like imagining that the world is round, or imagining that the earth goes around the sun. It certainly doesn’t look like it goes around the sun. The sun seems to travel across the sky, around us. But they found that if you assume that the sun is at the center, or near the center of the solar system, sometimes the center is actually just a little bit outside the sun. But if you assume it’s there, and we’re going around it, it’s a lot easier to send things around the different planets. It’s like imagining the world is round. You haven’t seen that it’s round. You may have seen pictures, like the ones that astronauts took as they went to the moon. But who knows? But you find that if you assume that the earth is round, and you’re going to fly from Los Angeles to Paris, or to Amsterdam, you go north. Which wouldn’t make sense if the earth were flat. But you find that you save time. So you imagine something, and then you test it. This is not pure make-believe. A lot of times, if you can’t imagine something, you miss a lot of reality. Think of the ozone hole. For a long time, satellites were sending back information that there was a big hole in the ozone, around Antarctica. And the programs that had been designed to evaluate the data were designed in such a way that they rejected that data as being false. Couldn’t happen. But then they found out what actually was happening, so they had to redesign the programs. So a lot of your ideas are what’s possible in the breath, what’s possible in the mind. I like those programs that are designed in such a way to throw out what’s actually happening. So a large part of the meditation is expanding your imagination and then testing it. You stick with it, you evaluate it, and then you find if you don’t get good results, what can you do to change it? People have studied the process of imagination, and it goes through the similar steps. One, you create an image in the mind. And then two, you maintain it. And then three, you inspect it. And then four, you make changes in the image. And then you go back to three again, inspect it again. And that’s how you can bring something into the imagination that really is worthwhile. And you have something really worthwhile testing. So the same principle applies. We’re learning how things happen, which means we’re looking for cause and effect. We learn cause and effect by manipulating the causes. That’s how we find out which causes really do have an influence, and which ones are not influenced at all. So we don’t just sit here looking, or sit here accepting, or sit here just being aware. We ask questions. We’re trying to figure things out. That’s what Four Noble Truths are all about. That’s why the Buddha came up with the Four Noble Truths. He was trying to figure out the problem of suffering, track down the cause, to see if there’s some way of attacking the cause so he could bring suffering to an end. And just the way the questions were framed got him into the Four Noble Truths. And think of how his quest was driven by his imagination. He imagined the possibility of an end of suffering that can be attained through human strength, human ingenuity. And he tried imagining different paths, or learning different paths from other people’s imagination. A lot of paths didn’t really work. He kept on trying, trying, trying again, changing the causes in new ways. So he started with a very large desire, end of suffering. Then he followed through, testing various ways of finding that, until he found what worked. And that’s how he did it. So we have to do it too. There are some people who say, “Well, the Buddha set out the path. We simply have to follow the path.” And partly that’s true. But there’s a lot in the path that he doesn’t explain. When he teaches breath meditation, he gives 16 steps, and you find out there are a lot of gaps in the 16 steps. And they raise a lot of questions. The thing is, they ask the right questions. And they get you to ask the right questions. So to fill in the blanks, you have to use your own imagination and test things. So just as the Buddha had to explore, you have to explore as well. That’s how you not only find out how things function, but how you can make them function to the highest possible end, the end of suffering, something deathless, free from aging, illness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, despair, free from limitations of every kind. So when you meditate, you don’t put your imagination aside. You use it. You learn how to use it properly, because it’s an important part of the path. Thank you.

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