Ven. Ananda’s Awakening

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There’s a story of how Venerable Ananda gained full awakening very early on in his career as a monk. He gained stream entry, which is the first glimpse of the Deathless. But then he took on the job of being the Buddha’s attendant, which meant that he didn’t have much time for his own practice. But he did ask of the Buddha a favor. When the Buddha gave a Dhamma talk anywhere, he would come back and repeat it to Ananda, which meant that Ananda knew more about the Buddha’s teachings than almost anybody else. So after the Buddha passed away, the monks got together and they decided to do a standardized version of the Buddha’s teachings that could be remembered. They realized that even though Ananda was not an arahant, and they wanted to have mainly arahants making this collection, still he couldn’t be left out. So he felt compelled to practice extra hard in preparation for the Council. The night before the Council, he meditated very late into the night, practicing mindfulness immersed in the body. And then it got very late, and he hadn’t gotten anywhere. And so he decided to lie down. And as he was lying down, he wasn’t sitting, he wasn’t lying down, he was halfway between. He gained full awakening. So the next day he levitated into the meeting to show that he had gained awakening, that he was qualified to join the rest. But that story of how he gained awakening sometimes is interpreted as meaning that he’d been trying too hard, he had too much desire. And when he gave up his desire, gave up his effort, that’s when he gained awakening. The irony though is that in the descriptions of the role of desire in the practice, the two most explicit descriptions of how important it is to want to practice and to want to gain awakening, are by Ananda himself. In one case he’s talking to a nun, telling her that the end of conceit is when one of the goals of the practice. But the conceit that goes with the thought, there are others who have gained awakening, they’re human beings, I’m a human being, if they can gain awakening, why can’t I? That’s to be encouraged. It’s part of the path. Same with the craving of wanting to gain total awakening. The practice of putting an end to craving, but that particular craving is an important part of the path. It’s to be developed and not to be abandoned. You abandon it only after you’ve gained what you want. That’s the message of the other passage, where Ananda’s talking to a Brahmin. He’s staying in a park. The Brahmin has come to see him in the park and he asks him, “This path you’re practicing, what’s the goal?” And Ananda says, “One of the goals is putting an end to desire.” Is there a path to putting an end to desire? The Brahmin asks. And Ananda replies, “Yes.” And he describes the four bases for success. One of which is concentration based on desire, accompanied by right effort. And the Brahmin says, “Well in that case, this is an endless path, because you can’t put an end to desire by using desire.” And so Ananda asks him a question in return. “Before you came to this park, did you have a desire to come to the park?” “Yes.” “And did you make an effort to act on that desire?” “Yes.” “Now that you’re here, what happened to that desire? What happened to that effort?” “Well it’s gone, because it’s already been fulfilled.” And so Ananda said, “Well in the same way, whatever desire there is to put an end to suffering, to attain the goal, when that is satisfied, then that desire ends.” So this is not a path of not wanting. In a lot of things you learn how not to want, but you do have your overriding goal, your overriding determination that you do want to attain awakening. You do want to put an end to suffering. You do want to make that change in your heart. It’s only a matter of learning how to use that desire and use that effort, so that desire and effort don’t get in the way. In other words, you focus your desires on the causes, what will take you there. So here we are, not sitting thinking about awakening, we’re thinking about our breath. Thinking about the breath gets the mind to settle down with a sense of ease in the present moment, which is where the work is to be done. And wanting to be balanced, at ease, happy to be in the present moment, that’s an important part of the path. And the breath can help you, because of the different elements in the body, it’s the most responsive to what the mind tells it to do. It’s hard to tell your heart to beat at a certain rate, or to tell your blood pressure to go down, but you can tell yourself, “Breathe more slowly and the body will respond. Breathe faster, breathe more deeply, breathe more shallow, heavier, lighter, in long, out short, in short, out long. The body responds.” And you can create a sense of ease, asking yourself what kind of breathing would feel good right now, and where can you think of the breath energy coming into the body, or you can think of it originating in the body itself. One spot, two spots, many spots. By holding an image in mind, you’ll see that the breath responds, and the mind will begin to settle down with a sense of ease, with that perception, whatever the perception is that allows you to stay with the breath. So we’re here with the desire for awakening, but we learn how to channel that desire into our efforts to stay with the breath. To stay here in the present moment, to be fully aware of the breath, bathing the whole body. This is a full body experience. We’re not just aware of the breath at the nose, or at the pores. This is not a tactile sensation we’re focusing on. We’re focusing on what the Buddha calls form. When he classifies the in and out breath, he doesn’t classify it as a tactile sensation, he classifies it as an aspect of the wind element in the body. And that can be felt anywhere in the body. In fact, the more conscious you are of the breath in the whole body, the easier it is to get the breath to feel really good inside. As you come to the practice, ideally with a sense of joy, which may be a mental joy, but it also can translate into a sense of physical ease. And that’s what you can spread through the body. The Buddha talks about spreading a sense of rapture, a sense of ease through the body. Not just a mental ease, it’s physical. And that way you have a good grounding so you can watch your thoughts. Because that’s the real lesson of that story of Ananda’s awakening. You want to be able to watch your mind, and you want to be able to watch it all the time, not only when you’re formally meditating, but as you go through the day. The story about Ananda’s awakening doesn’t say that he stopped focusing on the body as he was lying down. Somebody says that he was changing his position. And too often when we change positions, we drop the breath. We start thinking about other things, like at the end of a meditation, session, if our object of meditation was made out of glass, you’d hear the sound of glass shattering at the end of every session. As people get up, forget about the meditation for a little bit, and they’re going to do whatever chores they have to do to think about meditating again. You want to stay with the breath as you get up, as you move around, even as you talk with other people. You want to be grounded all the time. That’s what heedfulness is all about. Because the breath will show itself, the mind will show itself, in those unexpected moments. It’s as if it behaves itself during the meditation, like a child in a classroom when the teacher is present, and that when the teacher is out of the room, the children can run around as they like. So ideally, the teacher wants to know what’s going on. She’ll have a sense of what the kids are doing while she’s in the room and also when she’s outside of the room. But you can do that as you monitor the breath all the time. So that’s the lesson of Ananda’s Awakening. It can happen in unexpected moments. There’s a similar story about Patajara, one of the nuns. She comes back to her hut, and she notices off in the fields, farmers working. They can do their job. She says, “Why can’t I do my job?” And so she concentrates her mind as she’s washing her feet, goes into the hut. There’s a lamp lit in the hut, so she pulls out the wick. And at the moment that she pulled out the wick, that’s when she gained Awakening. So incidents can happen at any time. So you want to be there so it can happen, so you can be aware of what’s going on. That’s the lesson of the story.

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