Anapanasati Day

October 31, 2020

Tonight’s the full moon, one month after the end of the rains. It was on this night that the Buddha gave the Anabha-Nasadi Sutta. It’s one of the few suttas in the Canon where they tell us the time of the year. That’s why it’s good to think about what the Buddha had to say. He set out sixteen steps. There was one other time when he told the monks to do breath meditation. One of the monks said, “I do mindfulness of breathing all the time.” The Buddha asked him, “What kind of mindfulness of breathing do you do?” The monk said, “I put aside all thoughts of the past, put aside all thoughts of the future, equanimous in the present moment. I breathe in, I breathe out.” The Buddha said, “Well, there is that kind of mindfulness of breathing, but it doesn’t have the best fruit, the best benefit.” Then he set out the sixteen steps again. They come in four tetrads, four groups of four. The first one has to do with the body, the second with feelings, the third with mind, and the fourth with dhammas. They correspond to the four frames of reference. But the way the Buddha sets them out is that he focuses on the four frames of reference in the breath, and you get all four. It’s not the case that you leave the breath and go to feelings or leave the breath and go to the mind. You’re actually trying to bring them all together. That’s one of the main points. The second is that you don’t just sit there watching whatever happens. Out of the sixteen steps, fourteen say that you train yourself to breathe in certain ways. For example, in the first tetrad, you breathe, training yourself to be aware of the entire body. Then you train yourself to what the Buddha calls calming bodily fabrication, which is another term for the breath. You breathe in such a way so that the breath grows calm. It doesn’t grow calm all the way to the point where it stops in the fourth jhana. So why does the Buddha use the technical term bodily fabrication? That’s one of the other important features of those sixteen steps. The Buddha talks about bodily fabrication in the first tetrad, mental fabrication in the second, the one dealing with feelings. In that tetrad, you try to train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture, breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure. You have to figure out how to do this. Then you breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrication, which would be feelings and perceptions. Then you train yourself to breathe in and out calming mental fabrications. Here again, the Buddha uses the technical term fabrication to get you sensitive to the fact that you are shaping your experience right here, right now. What we experience is not given to us from past karma. Instead, we have the raw materials. Given the raw materials and the skill with which we shape those raw materials, we’re going to have a present experience. If there’s not much skill, there’s going to be suffering, there’s going to be pain. If we do it skillfully, then even if the raw materials are not all that good, we don’t have to suffer. So the Buddha uses these technical terms to make you sensitive to that fact. In the third tetrad, you’re going to be looking at the mind. The first step is to be sensitive to the state of the mind. If you notice there’s something not quite right about it, it’s not settling down, then you ask yourself, “What direction is it going in? Does it have too little energy?” If so, you train yourself to breathe in and out, gladdening the mind. “Does it have too much frenetic energy?” Well, you breathe in and out, concentrating or steadying the mind. “Is the mind burdened with something?” Okay, relieve it of its burdens. Release the burdens as you breathe in, as you breathe out. So those first three tetrads, you’re trying to bring the breath and the feelings and the mind together and shape them in such a way that they settle down. They’re in good terms with one another. Because, as the Buddha describes, the concentration that you’re trying to develop as you practice mindfulness of breathing, you would have a sense of well-being that you then spread throughout the body. The image he gives is of a bathman back in those days. They didn’t have soap. They had a kind of soap powder that you mixed with water, like a dough, like we’d make dough for bread. You had to knead the water through the powder so it was moistened in the same way that you would try to moisten the dough for bread. The bathman has to knead the water through it in the same way you would knead whatever sense of ease, rapture you feel from the breathing, and you make it work through the whole body. So you’ve got breath filling the body, a feeling of ease filling the body, and your awareness filling the body, body, feeling, mind. And then you try to maintain that. As for anything else that might come in to interfere, then that’s when you use the fourth tetrad. Whatever the distraction is, you’re going to focus on the fact that it’s inconstant. If it’s inconstant, it’s going to be stressful in and of itself. Why get involved? Think about that until you develop some dispassion for it and it’s going to cease. Then you drop the whole issue. So all four of these tetrads work together. They’re centered on the breath. And you learn a lot about how the mind shapes its present experience as you work with the breath. Because the breath is the present bodily fabrication. It’s the factor that shapes your experience of the body. You have perceptions. These are mental fabrications. These things shape your mind. If you perceive the breath, the image you have of the breath, not so much as air coming in and out through the nose, but also the energy flow that goes through the nerves, goes through the blood vessels. When you think of the breath in those terms, you hold that perception in mind. Then the sense of ease can spread throughout the body following the breath. You see, the power of perception changes the way you experience your body. All of these are important lessons. The Buddha then has you apply those lessons to the mind and your experience of your emotions as you go through the day, seeing that it’s the same fabrications. The one fabrication the Buddha doesn’t mention by name in the breath meditation instructions is verbal fabrication, directed thought and evaluation. But he does list it in the factors of concentration. Basically, it’s how you talk to yourself. You choose a topic to focus on and then you make comments. And his instructions for the different steps are basically a form of verbal fabrication. So they’re all there. As you get sensitive to this fact, then you can start applying this to other issues in life. Emotions come up in the course of the day. And they’re composed of verbal, bodily, and mental fabrication. Say anger comes up. You’re going to be breathing in a certain way that aggravates the anger. And then you’re going to be talking to yourself, justifying the anger to yourself. And there’ll be perceptions and feelings. The person you’re angry at you can perceive as a monster. And there’ll be a certain feeling that goes along with that. And you can feel that you can’t hold the anger in. Largely because it’s gotten into the breath and it’s affecting the body as well. So you have your choice. The choice that’s usually presented to you is either you bottle it up and just carry the tension around. And it’s going to come out in some other way. Or you act on it. But that often leads to really unskillful actions. So the Buddha provides you with a third alternative. Take it apart. See it as composed of these different kinds of fabrication. First ask yourself, “How are you breathing?” Can you calm the breath down? Be aware of the whole body. Calm the breath down. So you don’t have that feeling that it’s gotten into the body. And then you look at how you’re talking to yourself about it. This is probably the most important part of the fabrications. Because when you’re angry at something, you find all kinds of reasons to justify why it’s right to be angry at that. It’s natural to be angry at that. It’s the proper response to whatever it is. We can get very self-righteous about our anger, but that doesn’t make it skillful. It doesn’t make it right. You have to keep reminding yourself, “Arahants can look at the same situation and they don’t get angry. They have right view.” So you have to ask yourself, “Where are your views wrong? What are you telling yourself wrong about this situation?” And often it’s that anger that’s driving you. Now, this doesn’t mean the situation might not need to be changed or deserve to be changed. But change doesn’t best come about through anger. Because when there’s anger, you lose control. Your sense of shame, your sense of compunction, just go out the window. The Buddha says if you see somebody whose behavior has some good to them—not totally good, but some good—you focus on that. If they have no good to them at all, you have to feel pity for them. It’s like seeing someone who’s sick lying by the side of the road out in the desert. No matter who it is, you don’t ask who it is. You just say, “Poor person.” At the very least, you feel compassion. Because if someone is doing something really unskillful, they’re going to suffer the karma consequences. And if you have any goodwill for them at all, you have to feel compassion. So watch out for what the Buddha calls your verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. Especially the talking to yourself that justifies the anger and tells you that if you don’t act on it, it’s going to get bottled up, it’s going to get repressed. Repression is one thing. Subpression is something else. Repression is when you deny it’s there. Because you know it’s there, but you learn how to take it apart and stop it so you don’t have to act on it. And that’s healthy. So how do you learn these tools? Well, through doing the breath meditation the way the Buddha taught it. Because, as he points out, you develop both tranquility and insight as you follow the sixteen steps. Tranquility lies in the calming. Insight lies in seeing things in terms of fabrication, in other words, what you’re doing right here, right now, to shape your experience. Because, as he points out, if we do this in ignorance, it’s going to lead to suffering. If we do it with knowledge, it becomes part of the path. So as you’re sitting here focusing on the breath, ask yourself, “What is this? What is the bodily fabrication, the intentional element of the breath? How do I get sensitive to that?” Once it’s more and more obvious what’s happening, then how do I calm it down? You want to calm it down in such a way that you’re not putting yourself to sleep, which is one of the reasons why it’s good first to breathe in a way that’s really energizing. Then gradually let it calm. Look to see what feelings you’re creating as you do this. When there’s a feeling of ease, you let it spread around. Then notice the effect that it has on the mind. You can then use that same effect out in the world. So you’re not aggravating your unskillful emotions. You can actually tranquilize them, calm them down. So you do this with knowledge. This is how it becomes part of the path, both while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed and as you apply this knowledge to the emotions you feel as you go through the day. This way you can respond to what’s going on in your life. Whatever comes up, in a skillful way, respond with knowledge. So the whole day becomes part of the path, because it’s ideally how you want to practice. John Fuhr once made the comment that we tend to divide our life up into different times. There’s time to meditate and then times not to meditate. We have other things we have to do. Time to eat, time to work, time to prepare the food, time to clean up, time to go to work, time to come back. We have to chill out. Lots of different times. It all gets chopped up. So the time to practice doesn’t have any chance to build up momentum. It’s like turning on your car and then turning it off, turning it on, turning it off. But if you see everything you do in the course of the day as part of the practice, it’s all lessons in fabrication. Here, fabrication doesn’t mean lying. It means just intentional action, intentional putting things together. Then you can bring knowledge to the different ways you fabricate your experience. No matter what you’re doing, it all becomes part of the practice. That way your practice can develop momentum and take off. Then your knowledge that you develop from the meditation gets applied to everything you do. So the whole day is a path leading to where you really want to go.

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