The Work Is Inside (fragment)

May 28, 2021

Every evening, when Ajahn Sowa would lead us in meditation, he would start out by saying, “Give rise to a sense of conviction. Give rise to a sense of confidence that we’re doing something good here, training the mind. From the outside it may not seem like much. Keep your eyes closed. We’re focusing directly on the source of the problems in the mind, which lies within the mind itself. We want to find happiness. We act, we speak, we think, all for the sake of happiness. Our actions lead to the opposite. They lead to pain and suffering. Why is that? You’re not going to find the answer by looking outside. And it doesn’t do any good to lay the blame on people outside. The Buddha taught the noble truth of suffering, which is that we suffer not because of the actions of other people, but because of our own clinging and craving. In other words, we’re taking responsibility. That’s why this is a noble truth. We’re responsible not only for the problem, but we can also be responsible for the solution, because we also have good qualities inside. We have the potential for mindfulness, the potential for alertness, ardency, compassion for ourselves, compassion for others. Compassion lies in the ability to realize that we want to find a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. Compassion also in the sense that we want happiness that lasts. So both the problem and the solution lie inside. To keep ourselves from getting distracted by outside affairs, we close our eyes. We sit very still. We try to make the mind still as well, because if you want to see the movement of the mind, you have to make your attention very, very still, focused on one thing. So we’re focusing on the breath. As long as you’re alive, there’s always going to be breath. There’s the in-and-out breath, there’s the breath energies in the body. There’s something you can focus on all the time. They’re always there. The question is, are you always there? You’re there sometimes and sometimes not. So part of the practice of the meditation, the work of the meditation, is to make our awareness of the present moment as continuous as possible. There is a background awareness that’s always here in the present moment, but the foreground of our awareness is sometimes here and sometimes it’s off someplace else. You can create all kinds of worlds in the mind. You get into the worlds and then you travel around. They drop you off someplace and then you pick up another world and they drop you off someplace else. If you were to try to follow the course of the trains of your thought, even in the course of one day, sometimes you find yourself off on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. You have no idea how you got there. As the Buddha pointed out, it’s just ignorance of what we’re doing. That’s one of the big problems. So we try to develop alertness. You’re mindful to keep the breath in mind and then you’re alert to watch what you’re actually doing. Are you staying with the breath? What is the breath like? This is where we develop a third quality, which is ardency. We try to do this well. You find the mind wandering off, you ask,”Is the problem with the mind or is the problem with the breath?” The Buddha gives us four frames of reference for asking questions about how we can get our mind in shape. First of all, you check with the breath. Is the breath comfortable? If it’s not, you can change the way you breathe. And when you can give rise to a sense of well-being through the breath, that’s the second frame of reference. What do you do with that sense of well-being? Well, you don’t focus on it to the exclusion of the breath. You maintain your awareness with the breath. But you notice there are certain feelings that come about by long-breathing, short-breathing, fast, slow, whatever. When you’ve found a breath that feels really good, think of that sense of well-being spreading through the body. It goes down the nerves, down the blood vessels, out to all the pores of the skin. So your body feels like it’s saturated with a sense of pleasure. Now, if the mind is in good shape, this is not all that hard to do. The problem is sometimes the mind itself is a problem. That’s the third frame of reference. Again, a sense of your mind. Is your mental energy too low? What can you do to gladden the mind, to make it feel confident, happy, cheerful that it’s here meditating, having this opportunity to look inside, not be distracted by lots of other responsibilities outside? If the mind is too scattered, what can you do to get it more concentrated, more stable, more steady? Sometimes you can do this with the way you breathe. Sometimes you have to bring in other topics. You can think about the quality of the Buddha. Get a sense of inspiration that this is a really good place to be. Or you can think about death. Death could come at any time. And as the Buddha pointed out, death doesn’t just happen. There are choices that you make as you’re dying that are going to determine where you go afterwards. So you want to make sure the mind is well-trained so that even as the body gets ill, the body gets weak, it still has the strength to make the right choices. And where’s it going to get that strength? Well, it’s going to get the strength by meditating. In other words, you think about other topics, but you think in such a way that brings you back here. So in this way, if the mind is too energetic, you can calm it down. If the mind has too little energy, you can give it a boost.

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