On Good Terms

September 6, 2022

Years back when I was still in Thailand, after John Foyne passed away, I got a bad case of bronchitis. And someone suggested a natural remedy. It was a leaf that was called “The Sky Destroying Thieves.” It’s supposed to be really good for fevers. What I found out later, though, was that it was actually making my condition worse. And I ended up having to go to two different doctors, Western-style doctors. And the lesson I learned is not everything natural is good. Look at the air outside right now. It’s the air we breathe. It’s the air we need in our order to survive. But if you get really hot, it can have a bad effect on the body. And it’s natural. The Buddha has us reflect. Once you have a body, it’s subject to all kinds of things. It’s subject to heat, subject to cold. People can hit it. And you were the one who wanted the body. So here you are. It can do a lot of things for you, but it can also leave you exposed to all kinds of dangers. And given that nature seems to be designed to wear us down, we need to develop some friends inside, primarily qualities of the mind. But we train the mind first through the breath. You want to get on good terms with the breath, so that you have an ally inside. When your heart feels weak from the heat, how do you breathe in a way that gives it strength? Or you feel oppressed by the heat in general. Where’s the cool breath in the body? Look around. It’s there. But you want to be on good terms with it. That means you don’t go in with a lot of preconceived notions about how it should be. Ajahn Lee gives us some pointers in his Seven Steps. But those are just meant to be pointers. “Try this out,” he says. And we look at some of his other Dharma talks. Sometimes he gives the opposite instructions. In the Seven Steps he talks about the breath energy going down the spine, out the legs. In some of his Dharma talks he talks about going the other way around. It starts with the soles of the feet and comes up the legs, up the spine, as you breathe in. Which means that you’re free to play. And it’s up to you to decide which one works for you right now. And that’s just one issue, the direction of the breath. There’s the quality of the breath. It can be heavy, it can be light. What do you need right now? It can be cool, it can be warm. You don’t want warm breathing right now. Think of the breath as cooling. At the same time, don’t be worked up about the heat. Think of the times when you’re really cold. If you thought it would be nice to be warm, well, you are warm. Now that you’re warm, you say, “Well, when is it going to be cold again?” John Fuhr made a comment one time about the devas that look after the weather. Sometimes they get fed up with human beings. There’s no pleasing us. Years back, when my father was sick, I came home to visit him. He liked to watch nature specials on PBS. There’s a nature special every night. So we watched them together. I began to notice that if it had to do with the tropics, I wasn’t interested. I’d been in Thailand too long to want to see the amazing tropics. But I was fascinated by the polar regions. The penguins down south, polar bears up north. And then several years after that, I actually had a chance to be in what was equivalent to an Arctic. We were in an Arctic region during the winter, and it was insanely cold. I kept thinking, “Why on earth am I here?” So look at the mind. It’s never pleased. You’re at one extreme, and all you can think about is the other extreme. You have to realize the world is going to have its ups and downs. You’ve got this body that is exposed, and all these things. So learn how to make corrections inside. Balance things out inside. Make the breath your friend. Listen to the breath. As with any friendship, if you just force your way on the breath, it’s going to clam up. And it’s not going to want to be your friend. And if your own breath is not your friend, you’re in really bad shape. So listen to it. And be open to all kinds of different ways of breathing. Think of the breath coming in at the base of the spine. Think of the breath coming in and out through the spaces between your toes. The breath in the ears. The breath between the eyes. The breath in the bones. All kinds of ways of breathing. And sit out on the ground and think of the breath going down his spine, and then going down from the base of the spine down into the earth, as if his rear end was rooted in the earth. So use your imagination. This is a friend that appreciates your imagination. But it will also tell you when your ideas are not working. Because it is possible to force the breath too much, and when you do that, you start getting headaches. And it becomes uncomfortable to be here. So what is required is that you become sensitive to what the body needs right now. That sensitivity is the beginning of your own discernment. You can read about discernment in the text, and you can analyze it and define it. But the actual discernment that’s going to get you past the defilements of the mind starts with sensitivity. Noticing what works, what doesn’t work. So you combine your ingenuity with the quality of sensitivity to the results. And that way this inner friendship begins to grow. And then when things outside are out of balance, you can bring things inside more into balance. You’ll find that there are limitations to what the breath can do. But as Ajahn Lee used to say, you don’t just give up on the aggregates. Saying, “Well, the Buddha says they’re in constant stress on that self, so just leave them alone.” There is some extent to which you can control them. And the breath is how you control the body. And if you breathe in ignorance, the Buddha said that can be a cause for suffering. If you bring knowledge to the way you breathe, together with knowledge to the way you talk to yourself, knowledge to the way you make use of perceptions and feelings, you can turn all this into a path. Your breath can be a path. Your thoughts can be a path. A good path. Because it leads someplace good. So we’re not here just to look at the present and be with the present. We’re thinking of this as a place that’s going to lead someplace, depending on what we focus on, depending on how we focus, depending on the perceptions we bring, the sensitivity we bring, the ingenuity we bring. That’s how we turn this body into a path. That’s how we turn this mind of ours into a path that goes someplace good. And in the meantime, it’s a good path to be on.

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