From the Buddha’s Perspective

July 25, 2023

When you close your eyes and have a sense of the body sitting here, as you feel it from within, learn how to perceive that sensation as breath. Think of it as solid. And that makes it difficult to play with. But if you realize that your first sensation of the body is energy, breath energy, then you can do things with it. You can ask yourself, “Does it feel tight and restricted?” It doesn’t have to be. If you think that it’s solid, then you accept the tightness as simply part of the solidity. But if you tell yourself it’s breath, you don’t have to accept that. Think of it relaxing, think of it dissolving the tension, dissolving the tightness. Try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Wherever there’s the slightest sense of flow, notice that. Because sometimes the breath will be still. It doesn’t have to be moving. There will be still parts of the breath, moving parts. Make a survey to see how things feel in the body from this perspective. One of the main challenges for us here in the world West, as we come to the Buddhist teachings, is to learn how to see things from his point of view. We try to force our point of view on him and we’ll find that there are things that just don’t match, or things that seem paradoxical, things that seem wrong. But if we learn how to give him the benefit of the doubt and say, “Suppose he’s right, suppose that it is breath energy, what’s the advantage of that?” If you can learn how to switch your perceptions, you’ll find that you benefit. Take that as a lesson, that coming to the meditation, you have to question your perceptions. Not simply try to impose them on the Buddha, impose them on the Dhamma. Because of the way the Buddha explains things, everything is aimed at getting you on the path to the end of suffering. It’s not that he squeezed his teachings into Indian presuppositions. Wherever he found that Indian presuppositions were actually conducive, he would adopt them. But wherever they were not, he would reject them. Sometimes it’s pretty amazing thinking here he was, just a single person, with his experience of awakening, taking on the totality of Indian culture, challenging it on many areas, where everyone simply assumes that that’s just the way it is. So as you listen to the Dhamma and you try to apply it, remember that it came from someone who did not simply passively accept what he was told. He challenged everything, tested everything, and his standards for testing things were high. After all, he rejected the teachings of the two masters that he studied with. They taught him some fairly high, very high levels of concentration, but he realized that that wasn’t enough. He was looking for something deathless. That was pretty audacious, pretty daring. So he left, tried out various other paths, and finally found a path that really worked. So take advantage of the fact that he’s done a lot of the work for us, simply for us now to learn how to look at things from his perspective and see what we can gain that way. For example, the energies in the body. There’s a moving energy of the breath, coming in, going out. Then there’s this subtle level of energy, that goes in tandem with the in and out breath, but it flows along the blood vessels, flows along the nerves, out to the pores of the skin. And then there’s a very still breath inside. If the mind gets really quiet, you can tune into it. And John Lee points out that some of the centers of the body, that he calls the resting spots of the breath, are places where, if you pay very careful attention there, you see that they’re still. And then when you get the mind still, it allows that stillness to spread throughout the body. You get to the point where you don’t feel any need to breathe in or breathe out, because after all, the breath energy starts in the body. We talk about pulling the breath in, and sometimes that’s a helpful way of imagining it to ourselves. But what pulls? Well, it’s the breath energy in the body itself that originates in the body. Without that energy, you couldn’t breathe at all. So try to have a sense of that energy coming from within, and being full, being still. And learn how to maintain that sense of stillness. And part of the mind will say, “Hey, what’s going to happen if I don’t breathe?” If the mind is still enough, the felt need to breathe in and breathe out gets weaker and weaker. When you don’t feel the need to breathe, you don’t have to breathe. Nobody’s forcing you not to, but if you don’t feel the need, you don’t. Breathe in or breathe out. It’s like there being food available, but you’re just not hungry. And then you learn how to maintain that stillness. This is one of the other problems that we tend to have. We hear that there are certain steps in the meditation. You get the mind still, and then you get insights. And so once it gets still, you say, “Okay, where are the insights?” Well, a good part of stillness is learning how to maintain it. And the voices that come up and say, “What’s next? What’s next?” You just say, “Well, this is what’s next.” Mastering the skill. Because the skill of maintaining that sense of well-being is going to show you a lot about the mind. And one of the first things it’s going to show you is that impatient voice. You have to learn to see it as not necessarily your voice, it’s just a voice in the mind. And you can let it go. You don’t have to identify with every voice that appears in the mind. There’s this area of the awareness where you’re filling the body with your awareness. The still breath fills the awareness. This is where the Buddha was on the night of his awakening. It was from this point of view that he was able to look at the mind and see how it was causing suffering. So get to the same place where he was, and you’re more likely to be able to see things as he saw them. And the advantage of that, of course, is the way he saw them was the way that he was able to open things up inside. It’s like going to Stonehenge on the summer solstice. They say that if you stand at a certain point, the sun rises right over the central altar. But if you’re not standing at that point, you’re not going to see it rise over the central altar. You say, “I don’t see it being in alignment.” It’s because you’re not at the right spot. You’re not at the right spot, and you say, “Oh yes, it is aligned.” In some way the Buddha was here where the mind is really still, breath is really still. That he saw that suffering is clinging, clinging to the five aggregates. He saw that the craving is what caused that suffering, and he saw that if you followed the path, starting with the right view, landing at the right concentration, you could attack the problem at the cause, and realize the cessation of suffering. So try to get where the Buddha was. Learn how to see things from his point of view. And you see that what he taught was really true. It really does work. That’s the test. And that was the test that those other masters had failed. Their method didn’t lead to the end of suffering. But as the path falls into place, you find that yes, it really does lead to the end of suffering. It’s the same for us as it was for the Buddha. It’s the same as it was for everybody in the past. Who followed these teachings. It’s simply a matter of practicing the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, getting yourself in the right place, asking the right questions, framing your questions well, and everything will open up.

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