A Deep Well Inside

October 9, 2023

Ajahn Lee used to say that the problem with human beings is that we have so many good potentials within us that we don’t take advantage of. We don’t see much of what we have inside, so we go looking outside for satisfaction. And the world outside doesn’t have much to offer. Remember, it’s just the results of your own past actions, which could be good or could be bad. We all come into the human world with a mixed record. And if your happiness is going to depend totally on what you did in the past, it’s pretty unreliable. Fortunately, though, you can put things into the present moment that don’t have to depend on past actions. You learn new skills. You learn ways of developing the properties of the body, the properties of the mind, in a way that’s independent from things outside. It’s like those wells that are scattered around the world. They give water no matter whether there’s rain or no rain. One theory is that they’re related to earthquake faults and the chemical reactions that happen in the faults. They’re much more reliable than the comings and goings of the clouds. You don’t have water all the time, even during a drought. So what you want to do is find within yourself where these deep wells are, the wells that have determined that no matter what, we’re going to do what’s skillful. And then we look for sources of strength inside as well, so we can carry through with that determination. That’s one of the reasons why concentration is such an important part of the path. Getting insight is going to take a lot of energy. It’s not simply a matter of memorizing what the Buddha taught and then applying it to what you see. We start out with borrowing the Buddha’s wisdom, but to make it our own, we have to keep applying it. As the Buddha said, the Dhamma is nourished by commitment and reflection. You work on what you’re told to do in the path. Then you observe what’s happening. From your observations, you learn new lessons. There are things you can pick up from the instructions, but there’s a lot of stuff you’re going to have to learn just by observing on your own about the breath, about how to relate the mind to the breath. A simple exercise like staying with one thing will teach you an awful lot. You just stay with the breath. You’re learning both about the body and about the mind in terms of the body. The way you breathe is going to have a huge impact on your mood, on your ability to see things clearly. So you want to explore that. At the same time, the exercise of staying with one thing is going to teach you a lot about the mind. There’s that story in the Canon of the Eightfold Path. The elephant trainer tells the Buddha that he gets a new elephant, takes the elephant out down the road and back. He doesn’t have to go very far before he learns all the elephant’s tricks. In other words, as you try to train the elephant, the elephant’s going to resist. Elephants, though, have a limited number of ways of resisting. But they do have their variety. One elephant will not be the same as another. So his job as an elephant trainer was to learn the particularities of that particular elephant so he could work with him. You’ve got to learn the particularities of your own mind. The Buddha says you train yourself to breathe in and out, aware of the whole body, calming the breath. Breathing in and out is supposed to give rise to feelings of refreshment, fullness in the body. Breathing in and out is supposed to give rise to feelings of pleasure. Breathing in and out in a way that gladdens the mind or concentrates the mind. Those are the goals he sets for you. He doesn’t give much explanation as to how to do it. For that, you have to observe. But as you do that, you begin to befriend all the properties in the body. You know their strengths, you know their weaknesses, you know their tricks. Not from observing them passively, but by giving the mind this task. Stay with the breath. If you wander off, come right back. This is where the quality of the meditation comes in. Sometimes we think that we’re going to develop meditation simply by putting in a lot of hours. But as the Chan Cha noticed, if wisdom came from sitting long periods of time, the chickens would have us beat. It comes from observing and being really quick to notice that the mind is slipping off, and then learning how properly to come back. In other words, you come back firmly, but gently. Gently in the sense that you don’t get upset, discouraged. Firmly in the sense that you show the mind that you mean business, that you really do want to stay here. Each time you come back, you reward yourself. This is a part of the training that many of us often miss. When you do something well, pat yourself on the back because that will encourage you to do it well again. The voice in the mind that’s dismissive, that says, “Well, you did okay this time, but the next time it’s not going to work,” that’s not a helpful part of the path at all. Recognize that as a defilement. We think it’s realistic, but just because something may have been true in the past doesn’t mean it has to be true in the future or in the present moment. We are here to train ourselves. We are here to change our habits, and our habits can change. So think of the breath as being one of your deep wells. It has water all the time. No matter how bad your breathing has been, you can always change. No matter how many times you’ve wandered off, you can make the breath interesting enough so that it wants to come back as soon as it realizes it’s wandered off. This means not only making it comfortable, but learning how to deal with different feelings of disease, blockage, whatever, in the different parts of the body. When to think of the breath energy coming up. When to think of it going down. What kind of ways you can conceive the breath energy. And Chan Fung would recommend thinking of a column of energy running down the middle of the body, from the head down to the tailbone. As you breathe in and breathe out, the energy comes from all directions into that column, and it comes out of that column. If you hold that perception in mind, what does that do to the way you breathe? And what does that do to the mind’s ability to settle down? Sometimes if you’re focused just on one spot, it’s like holding onto something with one hand. Your other hand is free to grab whatever comes by. But if you’ve got a whole column like this, it’s like you’ve got both hands engaged from one end of the column to the other. The only way you’re going to be able to pick up anything else is if you let go of part of the column. So explore. Experiment. This is how you befriend the breath, befriend the body here in the present moment, and can pull away from your fascination with the world outside. Remember the instructions for mindfulness. Reference to the world. The reason we feed on greed and distress with reference to the world is because we’ve been looking for our food out there, looking for our shelter, our clothing, our medicine, all the requisites of the mind, requisites for the body. But now we’re going to learn how to find those same things inside. Because as you get to know the potentials of the breath, you also begin to see the potentials for the mind. The verse should say that by noticing how the mind does things unskillfully, an emotion comes up, and the hormones are released in the body. And even though the emotion may pass away, the fact that the hormones are still there makes us read them as meaningful. This emotion must still be there, deeply buried in the body, deeply buried in our mind. Then you can dig it up again. We’ll learn how to read things in a different way. The hormones are there, of course they’re going to be there. But that doesn’t mean that you have to give in to the emotion again. You can think of the emotion having stolen your breath, kidnapped your breath. You’re going to get it back. And that may be part of the mind that’s like that emotion. And you’re going to see it clearly when you resist the emotion, when you set yourself apart from it. So you learn how to study what kind of ways does the mind argue with itself, plead its case for going back, and learn how to see through those arguments. So think of the concentration as food for the mind, shelter for the mind, medicine for the mind, clothing for the mind. And that it’s not a selfish thing to be taking care of your mind when there’s so much suffering out there in the world. Because if you don’t take care of your own mind, who’s going to take care of it for you? It’s your number one responsibility. And in taking care of the mind, it’s not that you’re going to treat the world in a bad way. After all, part of the training is generosity. Part of the training is virtue. Part of the training is extending thoughts of goodwill to all beings. The beings you like, the beings you don’t like. Compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. You’re radiating good energy. But if you allow your mind to get upset by the things that are happening in the world, you’re not going to be radiating good energy anymore. So think of the mind in the present moment as being the instigator, the source of whatever’s going to be good and happy in your life. You can’t just feed on things coming from outside. You have to produce. As John Lee would say, you gain instructions in the meditation, you’re on the receiving side of the Buddhist wisdom. But then you’re going to have to learn how to produce your own wisdom, produce your own discernment. All the good things have their source here, where the mind and the body meet, right at the breath, here, right now. And you have within you the resources to do this. There’s a deep well here. It gives water during the dry season, during the wet season. It can keep on producing if you learn how to tend to it, if you learn how to look after it. So again, remember, your primary responsibility is to look after this, because whatever goodness you have to offer to the world will have to come from right here, too. And you, yourself, will be taking care of your own responsibilities, your primary responsibilities, right here. So these potentials are here to be developed. Try to have a strong sense that you have within you more resources than you could imagine. And then, using your understanding of the Buddha’s recommendations, see what you can do to develop those resources, to find them, and bring them to maturity.

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