Right Here in the Heart

October 22, 2023

When you listen to a Dhamma talk while you meditate, it’s important that you know where to focus your main attention, which would be on your own mind. If anything in the talk is relevant to what you’re doing right now, it’ll come in. If it’s not relevant, well, maybe it’s relevant for somebody else. Leave it for them. Because the whole point of the Dhamma is that it’s pointing to your mind. The word for a Dhamma talk in Pali, Dhamma desana, literally means pointing to the Dhamma. Where is the Dhamma found? It’s found inside you. And the qualities of the mind, good or bad, it’s the truth that’s showing itself all the time. And part of the truth of the mind right now is that you’re shaping your experience. You’re not simply on the receiving end of things coming in from outside. You’re also playing a role, taking the raw material from your past actions and turning it into your experience right now. And the Dhamma is meant to help you understand where you may be doing this in an unskillful way, and how you can do it more skillfully. So think of it as encouragement as you focus on your mind, pointing you to things that you may have missed, things you may have not thought of, or approaches that may not have occurred to you, and saying, “How about this?” Then you give it a try. It’s in your giving it a try that things are tested. If there’s something you don’t understand, you’re free to ask. This is one of the special qualities of the Buddha’s teachings, something he calls cross-questioning. You hear the Dhamma you don’t understand, you can ask questions, “What does this mean? What does that mean?” There was a Dhamma talk where the Buddha was talking about the aggregates, and a monk asked him permission to ask a few questions, and the questions went back and forth, back and forth, question, answer, question, answer. And in the course of getting the questions answered, that monk and many of the other monks listening in all gained awakening. And it wasn’t just that they were following the Q&A. They were taking the information they were learning, the answers they were getting, and pointing them into their own minds. What are they doing right now? So right now you’re trying to get the mind to stay settled with the breath. And you’re going to ask yourself, “Is this helping me stay settled with the breath if I listen to this? If not, just let it go.” And then when the talk talks about the different qualities you should be bringing to the breath, you may ask yourself, “Am I bringing those to my breath right now?” And then you can give it a try. As the Buddha says, “If you want to get good at the meditation, it requires desire.” So do you have the desire for the mind to settle down? Or are there other desires coming in that would get in the way? If there are these interfering desires, you have to remind yourself, where are they going to take you? Not any place good. The Buddha once said that he got on the right path when he learned how to divide his thinking into two sorts. Thinking that was imbued with sensuality, ill-will, thoughts of harmfulness, on the one hand. And on the other hand, thoughts of renunciation, non-ill-will, harmlessness. So for thoughts of the first sort, he said, “Just put them aside. Don’t think them.” He actually said, “You beat them down.” As for thoughts of the second sort, he said, “You can think them. Give the mind free range to think in those ways until it starts getting tired and then you get the mind to settle down.” So you take that lesson and look at your own thoughts, which thoughts are pulling you out of the concentration. For the time being, you say, “No, no matter how important they may insist that they are, or how entertaining you think they may be, just say no, no, no, not going there. Keep bringing your mind back to the breath.” As for thoughts of renunciation, what does that mean? Where you’re renouncing sensual thinking, the part of the mind that likes to fantasize about sensual pleasures, and you’re looking for happiness in another place. You’re looking for happiness with the breath. As you experience the body from within. Okay, encourage those thoughts. Those thoughts help you settle down. You have goodwill for yourself. You’re here to not cause harm for yourself or others. So you can take energy from those thoughts to remind you, “Okay, here, here, doing something good.” And then you put those thoughts aside and just keep on focusing on the breath. Asking yourself what kind of breathing would feel good. After all, the Buddha says that as you settle in, you learn how to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of refreshment, breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure. What kind of breathing would that be? This is something you have to find for yourself, because it’s your body as you feel it from inside. Nobody else can feel your body from within. So you’re the one who gets to judge. Do you like this? Do you like this kind of breathing and that kind of breathing? And how about the way you perceive the breath? What ways of doing that will help? Get the mind to feel a sense of ease that can then spread throughout the body, because that’s the next step, once you have a sense of ease, well-being, refreshment. You let those feelings spread. You can think of the whole nervous system as being animated by breath, and these comfortable feelings can run along the nerves, all the way out to the pores of the skin. That’s a perception that can help make it easier for these things to spread out. So you’re aware of the whole body, and you’re aware of the whole body being filled with a sense of ease. And then you try to maintain that. This is called persistence. You stick with it. Anything unskillful comes up, you let it go. And for skillful things, you encourage them. Then there’s a third quality the Buddha recommends, being really intent on what you’re doing and paying full attention to what you’re doing right here, right now. Letting go of thoughts of whatever noises there may be outside, or whatever plans we have for after the meditation. Sometimes the Jhans will say, “Tell yourself you’re sitting here alone in the salon without anybody else.” Which literally is not true, but as far as your range of awareness is, you can make that true. You don’t have any other concerns. And then finally there’s vimamsa, the fourth quality. There are lots of different ways this can be translated. And John Lee likes to translate it as circumspection. In other words, looking at what you’re doing from all angles to make sure that it’s really good. And if it’s not good, what can you do to improve it? Because the word vimamsa can also mean analysis. And when you analyze things, you need to use your ingenuity to try different ways of approaching the breath to see what works best right now. Because what worked yesterday may not work today. The technique we’re using here is not one that just says, “Well, do whatever you’re doing and don’t make adjustments. Just plow right through.” We’re trying to learn sensitivity. Sensitivity to what we’re doing, sensitivity to the results of what we’re doing. That means adjusting things as you see fit. And over time you get a better and better sense of what’s going to work. Try one day when nothing that you have mastered so far as a technique is working, you can think of other things. How about this? How about that? All of this develops your discernment, and it’s your discernment that’s going to free you. Because discernment doesn’t mean simply accepting what the Buddha said and convincing yourself that it’s true. It means taking his teachings as tools. Again, remember, they point to the Dhamma. They’re not the Dhamma themselves. The real Dhamma is what’s appearing inside. So take these teachings as tools to help improve your sensitivity. Because you’re going to have to be sensitive to what you’re doing that’s causing suffering, and what you can do that would put an end to suffering. So try to be sensitive for what you’re doing right now, and try to develop these good qualities. If you’re lacking in the proper desire, lacking in persistence, or intentness, or your circumspection, well you know that’s something you have to work on. And these are all qualities we all have to some extent. It’s not like we’re working with no resources of our own at all. We have these resources inside. It’s just that they haven’t been developed. So work on developing them. And you’ll find that it gets easier and easier to settle in right here, right now. And you settle in not just falling asleep. You settle in fully alert, fully aware, sensitive to what’s going on, but still at the same time. And when the mind gets stillness like this, then you begin to get insights. Those are the answers to the questions. The questions we have about the words, the questions we have about particular teachings, those are simply meant for us to make sure that we’ve understood what was taught, and we see the purpose of these things. But to find the real meaning and to really appreciate the purpose, that comes when you start getting results. So everything points in here. The talk points in here. Your awareness should point in here. Because right here is where the problem is, and right here is where it’s going to get solved.

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