Getting into the Body

June 13, 2006

One of the Buddhist terms for concentration is atticitta. It can be translated as “heightened awareness” for the heightened mind. It can also be translated as “heightened intentness.” In other words, you really do pay careful attention to what you’ve got here, the object you’re focused on, in this case, the body, the breath. Give all your attention to how the breath feels. Whichever aspect of the breath seems most prominent right now—the in-and-out breath or just the sense of breath energy in the body—whatever seems the most congenial place to focus the mind. Let the mind settle there and then just be very intent on sticking with it and noticing what you’ve got there. The image of heightening is useful. You think about how, when you go up in an airplane, you look down on the land below and you see a lot of things you didn’t see before. Your perspective is different. Things that loomed large when you were on the ground suddenly seem very small. You can see patterns that you didn’t notice before. You can see where the roads go. You can see the layout of a city or the layout of a countryside. You can see whole mountain ranges. It changes your perspective on the land. It’s the same with getting your mind in the state of heightened awareness or heightened intentness. When you really give all your attention to the body right here, the more time you spend here, it changes your perspective. When you leave this state and go back to your daily concerns, or if you can carry this state into your daily concerns, that’s even better. But either way, you come back with a different perspective. Things that seemed so large and overwhelming suddenly seem a lot smaller. This is one of the ways in which concentration is really, really useful. It gives you another place to go, a place that can give you a different perspective. Problems you have in day-to-day life look different from this perspective. And that change in perspective can also often help you. You see the problem in a different light. You see the larger pattern of which it’s a part, and you can do something about it. Or, if it’s a problem that you can’t change, at least you have a different perspective on it. It’s important that you pay careful attention to what’s going on in the body. One of our problems in the West is that we have a very limited vocabulary for how things feel in the body. That’s why the Buddhist teachings on the elements are useful, thinking of the energy flow in the body as a kind of breath or a kind of wind in the body, for the solid sensations, the liquid sensations, the warm sensations. Sort out your sense of the body in these terms and try to gain a sensitivity for exactly what sensations in your body they correspond to. Once the terms start making sense to you in terms of what you’re actually experiencing, then you can use them to change what you’re experiencing. You can bring more of a balance into the body. So you notice that when you breathe in, you tend to pull things up in the body. Someplace in your mind is the idea that the breath has to be pulled up into the body. That, of course, can lead to headaches. So you can think of the energy going down as you breathe in. Or you may pull things into your shoulders, pull things into the back of your neck, which, of course, leads to a lot of tension in your shoulders and the back of the neck. Think of the breath coming in from the other side, coming back from the back into the neck, from the back of the shoulders into the shoulders. Or you can think of the breath energy being centered. That line that goes down the front of the middle of the body, radiating out from there, doesn’t have to be pulled at all. As you breathe in, it radiates. When you can do this, you find that it changes the way you relate to the body. It’s a lot easier to inhabit the body. This is where your heightened awareness can stay. Imagine the body in and of itself as your frame of reference. Instead of looking at the body in the frame of reference of the world, you’ve got the body just in and of itself. That puts you on a more solid footing. So at the event that you’re in, the body in and of itself is the reference of the world. It doesn’t bowl you over so much. You feel at home here. You feel grounded here. You can really inhabit the body. It may sound like you’re identifying with the body, and that’s exactly what’s happening. Because the whole other purpose of concentration is not only to give you an alternative to your attachments in the world. It’s to have a very steady attachment right here so you can look long and hard at this process of attachment. The Buddha says if you really want to see your attachment to form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness, this is the place to see it in a concentrated mind. As you fully inhabit the body, you can see what it’s like to identify with the body. Because ordinarily, our sense of identification is very erratic. It’s like the reflections of sunlight off of water. It dances around. Sometimes you identify with a body, and then you’re identifying with a feeling, or then a thought, and it moves around so much that you can’t see it. Or what you see is a reflection. What you see is the movement, but you can’t really pin it down. But if you can develop this sense of really inhabiting the body all the time, continually, no matter what, you can look at the process of identification, you can look at the process of attachment a lot more easily, because it’s right there, solid, continuous. It’s not absolutely continuous. There will be little fluctuations, and it’s the fluctuations that allow you to see the process. But the fact that it’s repeatedly coming back to the same thing over and over and over again, that’s what enables you to see it clearly for what it is. You can see right through it. This is why concentration is so important for insight. It gives you perspective on things outside. You gain insight into those things, the ways of the world, and then you can start getting insight into the ways of the mind as well. So take the time to develop this heightened awareness, inhabiting the body. If you find there are parts of the body that are a stranger to you, get to know them well, because those are the ones that make it hard to stay here. There are parts where the energy is cut off, blocked. There are parts where the energy is bottled up. Take the time to explore them. Learn how to open up the energy channels in the body, what John Lee calls the breath channels. Although it may seem that you’re not getting anywhere with the more abstract notions of insight, you’re giving yourself a really important grounding. Without this grounding, insight is just as mercurial as that sunlight dancing off the water. You have a little bit of an insight and then it goes. It doesn’t have much chance to do any work. That’s when the mind is settled, permeating the body, suffusing the body with a sense of ease and rapture. That’s when your insights can begin to suffuse the body as well. There’s a passage in the Canon where they talk about people in jhana, in strong states of concentration, who can touch the deathless with their bodies. This is how they do it. They have to get really into their bodies before the body can touch anything like that. So whatever time is required to explore your inner sense of the body, is time well spent, because it’s in this sense of inhabiting the body that you gain all the insights you’re going to need. That ultimately will take you beyond the body. You just can’t skip over this, saying, “Well, I just want to go straight to insight.” You’ve got to go through the process. This is the territory where the deathless is touched. So learn how to inhabit this territory. If the body’s a stranger to you, then the deathless is going to be a stranger as well. So get on familiar terms. As the Buddha said, those who develop and pursue the practice of immersing mindfulness in the body, those are the ones who touch the deathless, because it’s touched right here.

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