Enlarged Awareness

September 19, 2006

An important part of the meditation is learning to develop a full body awareness. All the images in the texts refer to this. Third step in breath meditation, being aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, is the first thing you’ve got to learn to do. After you get sensitive to short-breathing and long-breathing, it’s the first of the fourteen trainings. The sixteen steps in breath meditation, the first two, are simply to notice when the breath is coming in long, out long, in short, out short. Train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, and be aware of the whole body as you breathe out. This is important. For one thing, there’s a common problem that as the breath gets more comfortable, more refined, if your range of awareness is small, you slip out someplace else. Either you slip into sleep, or you slip off into a vision, or you slip off into something from the breath, because the breath gets too subtle to notice, and the mind will latch on to whatever else comes its way. So as soon as the breath gets comfortable, think whole body, from the top of your head down to the bottom of your feet. This may mean sweeping up and down, up and down, up and down for a while, or going through each part of the body, one by one by one. Until you get familiar with them, and then you can connect them. But after a while, it turns into another image from the canon, the trumpet blast. You blow your conch trumpet and it spreads in all directions. In other words, even though your focus is on one point, your range of awareness fills the whole body. From there, the Buddha has you go on to calm in the breath formations. In other words, as you’re aware of the whole body, you begin to be sensitive to the way that you pull the breath in and pull the breath out, all the bodily fabrication. You begin to see where it’s exaggerated, where it falls in line with your cartoon ideas of what the breath is supposed to do, or what you have to do in order to get it to get the breath in, push the breath out, and try your best to notice where it’s unnecessary. After all, there’s breath already there. It’s always there. There’s a breath energy that fills the body and stays with the body all the time. The in-and-out breath, as John Lee once said, is the visiting breath. So think of it as breath breathing, not the solid parts of the body breathing, not you breathing, just breath breathing. You don’t have to create any pressure here or any pressure there in order to pull it in or push it out. That way you start getting more sensitive to feelings of ease and rapture. Those you should allow to fill the body as well. The images of Jhana, the person needing the moisture through the ball of bath powder, the cool waters of the lake, being filled with the cool water from the spring that constantly wells up within the lake, or the lotuses that are growing within the water of the lake, saturated with water from their tips to their roots. All the images of water deal with a sense of rapture and pleasure. And there’s finally the image of the person whose body is covered with white cloth from head to foot. That’s an image of equanimity, a feeling of total ease. All of these things you should try to allow to fill the body as much as you can. This way you establish a really good solid foundation for your meditation, a good foundation for your concentration. If your concentration is one-pointed, then as soon as anything disturbs that one point, even the least little bit, your concentration is gone. But if it has the whole body as its foundation, you have a sense of your awareness filling the whole body. It’s like this big open field or an open screen. Things come in, go out through the field, through the screen, but they don’t destroy the field or the screen. Try to keep this one perception, the awareness filling the body, the pleasure filling the body, or equanimity filling the body. Try to maintain that wherever you go. That way, the meditation becomes your foundation, and your sense of the world or your sense of yourself within the world begins to change. It’s not that there’s a little you inside the world. It’s more that there’s an experience of the world inside this larger sense of awareness. That becomes more fundamental. That becomes your foundation. Then there’ll be a sense of identification with it, but fine, it’s a skillful identification. After all, the mind still has this habit of identifying. Give it something good to identify with, a large, open sense of awareness. When you can maintain that, you feel less threatened by things. Pains come and go. People come and go. Good people, bad people, they all come and go. But that enlarged frame of awareness stays. Now you have to maintain it, which shows that it’s not unconditioned. You maintain your sense of being in touch with it, and it helps loosen your identification with other things, things that are less skillful. This is why this state of enlarged awareness is so important. It changes the balance of power in the mind. Things that used to seem large and overwhelming, when they’re placed within the frame of this awareness, seem a lot smaller, less threatening. And you can carry this enlarged frame wherever you go. It’s a matter of mindfulness, keeping it in mind all the time. As you do this, you begin to see more and more of yourself. See the other things that make you lose that frame of reference. That’s where you learn where your defilements are. That’s where the meditation becomes akaliko, something that’s timeless. It’s not just when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. It’s not just when we’re having our group meditations. It’s something you carry around with you as you go through all your activities. Some of your thoughts may still feel sort of open and naked when you have this enlarged awareness. In other words, you’re dealing with other people in your ordinary ways of trying to figure them out and case the conversation. Those will have a tendency to take over. So you’ve got to remind yourself, “No, you’re in a much better position. You’re in a much stronger position with the enlarged awareness.” You’re more likely to see things as they actually are. It’s no guarantee. I mean, there’s still an element of delusion even in this enlarged awareness, but it’s a lot less than in your normal reactions to things. So this is an important part of the training. It’s the first training in breath meditation. It’s something you have to will. This is how you get to know intention in the practice. In other words, you stick with a skillful intention and try to stick with it in every situation. It’s like riding a boat across the ocean. There are going to be different kinds of waves—little waves, big waves—and you want to stay on your boat. No matter what the wave situation, hang on to this for dear life. And that’s how you get across.

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