Embodied Awareness

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We tend to think of meditation as something you do when you sit with your eyes closed, or when you’re walking back and forth on a meditation path. But that’s just the posture of the meditation. The actual meditation is a quality of the mind. The Pali word for meditation, bhavana, means “to develop.” You’re trying to develop mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment. When these qualities are developing in the mind, that’s the meditation. Which means that not everything you’re doing while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed is meditation. You’ve probably realized this when the mind wanders off someplace and you let it go. That’s not meditation. It’s when you pull it back. That’s the meditation. So, if you notice wandering off, don’t get frustrated or upset by the fact that it’s wandering off. Just come right back. I.e., do the meditation right then. If you allow yourself to get tangled up in the regret or the anger or the frustration, that’s not meditation either. So when you find yourself wandering off in these mind states, just drop them. Come right back. In other words, you’re strengthening your mindfulness, you’re strengthening your alertness. That’s what makes sitting here meditating. The other implication, of course, is that you can meditate at any time, in any position, in any place. When your awareness is centered with the breath, when you’re alert to what’s going on with the breath, that’s meditation right there. And you can do it anywhere. While you’re waiting for a plane, while you’re riding in a plane, driving a car down the road. Even when you’re engaged in other activities, you can have a sense of the body. This is where the concept of breath as the energy flow in the body is really useful, because sometimes it’s difficult to stay focused on the in- and out-ness of the breath. But you can stay in touch with how the energy field in your body feels right now. Does it feel open and relaxed? Does it feel energetic? Can you sense it tightening up someplace? If it’s tightening up, you allow it to open up again. That right there is meditation. The importance of doing this at all times is manifold. For one, your center of gravity is inside your body. If you’ve ever practiced any martial arts, you know that if your center of gravity is outside your body, you’re in a precarious position, an unstable position. It’s when you’re centered inside that you’re stable. And although we may not like to think of life as a battle, as in martial arts, you do have to do a battle with your heedlessness. You notice in that chant just now they paired “respect for concentration” with “respect for heedfulness.” The two really go together. Heedfulness means realizing that dangerous mental states could arise at any time—greed, anger, delusion, lust, fear, jealousy. They can spring up at any time. And if they catch you off your guard, if they catch you off balance, they can knock you over. So one of the reasons we develop these qualities of mindfulness and alertness and concentration is so you can be prepared. You notice these things when they come. If you’re really alert, you can see them as they’re just beginning to form. And it’s a lot easier to deal with them then, when they’re fully grown. If you pay very careful attention to your breath, you notice that when a thought world forms, it’s first a little stirring in the breath energy, someplace in the body. And in the initial stirring, it’s hard to say whether it’s thought or physical, mental or physical. It’s just a stirring. And then the mind comes and slaps a label on it, what they call a perception. “Oh, this is a thought about X.” And then you run with it. You make a story out of it. You start fabricating things. And often the fabrication is under the radar until it’s a fully blown thought. But if you’re really alert, you can catch this process before it really turns into anything specific, or before it takes over the mind. Then all you have to do is just breathe through that little place where there was a stirring of energy, and the thought will go away. If the thought has taken over, if you’ve been careless and, say, a thought of anger takes over, you can follow a similar approach. Notice where in the body there’s a sense of tension, a tightness, a catch in the breath, a sense of the breath energy in the body being squeezed. Open it up. And often you find that the thought can disappear. It’s one of the classic ways of dealing with distracting thoughts. There are five altogether. One is just noticing that you’ve slipped off into something unskillful and replace it with a skillful object. This is the basic tactic we use when we find that the mind has winded off and you just bring it back to the breath. If, however, you find that it’s not willing to come back to the breath, then you’ve got to look at the drawbacks of that particular kind of thinking. In other words, see the thinking as an event in the mind. Don’t get involved in it. Don’t get sucked into it. Look at it as a process, this angry thought or this lustful thought or this jealous thought. If you were to think it twenty-four hours, where would it lead you? And how does it feel right now as you’re thinking that thought? If you see the drawbacks, you get to the point where you realize you don’t want to get involved in that thought. You can just let it go. If that doesn’t work, then you just consciously ignore it. In other words, think of it as a crazy person chattering away in one corner of your mind. And as you know what happens, if you start chattering with crazy people, they’ve got you. They suck you into their strange way of viewing things. So don’t get involved. You let it chatter away, but you stay with your breath. The mental chatter doesn’t destroy the breath, just as the sound of the crickets here doesn’t destroy your breath. It still comes in, it still goes out, and you can still feel it. So even though the crickets may be buzzing away, you don’t have to get involved with them. You can stay with the breath, there’s no problem. Think of your thoughts in the mind. Think of your thoughts as background cricket noise, and you find that you can stay with the breath. If that doesn’t work, then the Buddha recommends this technique of finding where in the body there’s the tension that goes along with the thought and allowing it to relax. This is where working with the breath is especially useful, because you’ll find that the tension can be in any part of the body. The back of the neck is a major spot, but it can be in your arms, in your hands, in your feet, in your legs. It can be in your stomach, in the middle of the chest. If you’re used to working through the tension in the breath in these different parts of the body, it’s no big deal to apply the same skill when you find that a thought has associated itself with some particular tension in the body. The fifth way of dealing with distracting thoughts is just to let it go. None of these other techniques work. You just beat down the mind. In other words, you say, “I will not think that thought.” Press the tip of your tongue against the roof of the mouth. Grit your teeth and just hold it there for a while. That simple activity of putting the tip of your tongue way up in the roof of your mouth, as far back as you can, seems to short-circuit a lot of thinking processes. But at least it gives you a breather. Then you may decide you want to get up or change your activity, if you can, and then get back to the breath. But it’s good to have practice all through the day of staying with the breath whenever you can. It provides you with this center of gravity where you feel secure. When you’re coming from a feeling of security, then the things you choose to do and the things you do and say and think tend to be more solid as well. You’re coming from a position of strength, a position of well-being. Often, our less-than-honorable intentions or our less-than-skillful thoughts and words and deeds come from a state of mind when we’re feeling weak and threatened and insecure. So try to inhabit as much of your body as you can. Keep your awareness embodied, not floating around like a hungry ghost in the Buddhist cosmology, a spirit that has no home, no place to settle down, looking for a place to be reborn but hasn’t found one yet. So many people live their lives as hungry ghosts. They have a human body, but their mind is off looking for some place to settle down. They can’t find any real place that’s really home. And even if we don’t spend a lot of our time that way, the moments when we are in that kind of state of mind, disembodied, we’re in a very weak position, a hungry position, which is not a good position to be in. So remind yourself that you always have the food of comfortable breathing. You’ve got the home of comfortable breathing. We have that chant on the four requisites—food, clothing, shelter, medicine. Well, the breath can be all four for the mind. So this is why it’s important to keep your awareness as embodied as possible. Don’t let it float off in little thought worlds, which are like little bubbles that form and then carry away who knows where. You’ve got home, you’ve got a foundation here, and you can tap into it at any time. While you’re talking with other people, try to have a sense of your body and have a sense that the energy in the body is all connected and it all feels good. It may sound like that you’re not paying full attention to the other person, but you’re coming from a grounded place. This is the place where you take your stance, and from your stance you can listen to the other person. You often find that you can hear more clearly what the other person is saying, because you’re spending less time thinking about what your response is going to be and more time saying, “Standard, centered, still.” The more still you are, the more you can hear. And from that state, the proper response comes a lot more easily. So keeping your awareness embodied like this, as a way of showing respect, both for concentration and for heedfulness, knowing that when situations come up—disturbances outside, disturbances inside—if you’ve got your center of gravity inside, you’re more likely to respond in an appropriate way, a skillful way, a helpful way, a compassionate way. And in that way, you turn to the other person. You turn your whole life into a form of meditation. You take the skills you’ve learned in, and you can take them with you wherever you go.

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