The Two Sides of Singleness

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Concentration is defined as singleness of mind. And the singleness here can have two meanings. One, you have a single focal point, and two, you have a single object filling your awareness. And you notice, if you look at Ajahn Lee’s instructions, that he encourages both. That you focus your attention on what he calls the resting spots of the breath. And that you’re aware of the whole body, aware of the breath throughout the body, allowing it to be connected so that when you breathe in, the breath energy in the different parts of the body isn’t in conflict, it’s all in harmony. One of the skills you want to develop as a meditator is the ability to hold both sides of singleness in the mind at the same time. This takes practice. As you work toward it, you’ll find there are times when the full body singleness comes to the fore, and other times when the one-pointedness comes to the fore. Especially as you’re going through the body, section by section, you’re going to be focused on one particular point or one particular area. But you can’t help but notice that even though you’re focused on that one area, you’re not totally blocking out everything else. It’s like looking at a painting. You may focus on one detail in the painting, but as you’re focusing on that, you can’t help but see the rest of the painting. You might think of it as foreground and background. The foreground is the single spot or the single area, and the background is the whole body. This is important for several reasons. As you’re sitting here, it helps to make sure that you’re not blocking out areas of your awareness, not providing areas where all your definements can hide. You want to have a 360 degree awareness. So if anything comes up in this field of body and mind, you want to know. At the same time, for the mind to be really solid, it does need one spot where it’s going to be focused. That’s what you want to choose. And if you’re going to move your spot, you want to be clear about why. This is why we start out with the body as your frame of reference, because it’s especially useful as you’re going through the day. And you want to maintain mindfulness. You want to maintain as much concentration as you can as you’re dealing with other issues. You have to think about jobs you have to do. The one spot of your focus is going to have to move around. But if you keep the background in mind all the time, the background is your body, the sense of breath filling the body, the sense of energy filling the body, and at the very least, being in touch with it to make sure that it’s tuned in a way that feels comfortable. It’s not too tight. It’s not getting blocked. If anything comes up, you know. That way you can maintain a continuity as you deal with different issues, as you talk, as you watch dishes, as you work in the orchard. Whatever the activity, you can always have this background in mind. Be sensitive to it as much as you can. There’s a tendency that when we’re dealing with the world, our awareness goes out into the world and the body gets pushed off to the side. But that’s a choice we’ve learned to make, and we can learn to unlearn that choice so we can still maintain full awareness of the body at the same time we’re dealing with other people. We find that we can do it more skillfully. In the beginning, it may be a little bit awkward. It may seem like too many things to keep in mind at once. But as you get more and more used to having this as your ground, you find that you have more and more of your mind at your fingertips. Things you might not have thought of otherwise will come to you because you’ve opened up all the channels. Then your concentration can maintain itself in spite of the fact that the focal point has to move around, because your background is still single, it’s still solid. And whatever else comes in, you can notice, and it just goes right through. Remind yourself that this sense of the energy in the body is porous, if you want it to be porous. In other words, whatever people say can just go right through. You don’t have to react, you don’t have to get worked up about it. The same with thoughts coming through the mind. You can be aware of the thought at the same time you’re still grounded in the body. If you want your energy to be non-porous, you can make that that way as well. In other words, if you sense you’re with people who have a negative energy and you don’t want to pick up on their negative energy, you can fill the body with a strong awareness and have kind of a force field that keeps everything else out. The image in the Canon is of a hardwood door and someone tries to throw a ball of string into the door. It doesn’t make a dent at all. The way we normally are, as the Buddha says, is more like a lump of clay. Someone tries to throw a stone into the clay and it makes a huge dent and goes right into the clay. So you can learn how to adjust the energy to be porous or non-porous. But the important thing is that you maintain this grounding as much as you can. I’ve used the image of a spider on a web before. Remember, the spider in this image stays on the web. It just moves around in the web, but it has the web as its basic range. It has its hiding spot on the web, and also if a fly comes in or whatever else comes in, and gets caught in the web, the spider zips out, captures the fly, spins its thread around it, and then goes back. In doing this, it doesn’t have to leave the web. So as you notice what’s happening, the different things you have to focus on, you can move around, but you don’t want to leave the grounding of the body. So remind yourself that you’ve got these two sides of singleness that you want to work on. Sometimes you may notice if you focus too much just on the wide open space that it gets, well, it gets spacey. In which case, you have to give yourself a single point and just bear down as much as you can without putting too much stress on your nerves. It’s a real thing to feel solid and settled, gathered together in one spot. And then if it gets too heavy, then it’s a sign that you’ve lost the spaciousness of your background. And you have to take it for granted that as you meditate, as you’re trying to develop the skill of being centered but fully aware of the body, it’s going to take time. You’re going to go back and forth, emphasizing one side for a while, another side for another while, until you get the balance just right. That way you have a grounding as you go through the day, as you go through the events that are coming up this weekend. A lot of people are going to be here. You know what happens when there are a lot of people, there are a lot of opinions, there are a lot of words, there are a lot of things that need to be done and said. And if you let yourself get blown away by what gets said, what gets done, you lose your grounding. It’s like you’ve been knocked off kilter. Of course, you can’t do anything properly when you’re knocked off kilter. So you might want to make this your assignment for the weekend. You’re going to stay grounded in the body. This is going to be your background all the time, no matter what. No matter what anybody says or what anybody does, they can’t make any inroads on this background unless you let them. And if you don’t let them, you’re secure. That way, whatever you do and say comes from a position of strength, comes from a position of confidence. This is your territory. Then as for the negative energies that come in, you can think of the breath energy in the body, as I said, as this force field that repels negative energies, instead of being the sort of person that just sucks in whatever everybody else is sending your way. You can have this wall, and it’s an invisible force field. In other words, you can see clearly what they’re doing, what they’re saying, but you don’t have to suck it in. Sometimes we think that the compassionate thing is, for some reason, to pull in other people’s energy, to be open to them. But that’s not wise. And if their energy is negative, it certainly doesn’t help for you to start sucking up that energy, too. Just let it go around you. This way you’re actually a lot more helpful to them. You’re more solid. You’re more reliable. And keep your wits about you. This is probably one of the best ways in English of explaining the term mindfulness. You have all your wits about you. You’re alert. The things that you should remember, you’ve got right at your fingertips. And you’re really intent on maintaining this centered, but broad awareness. That requires that you pay full attention to being right here. You may wonder, if you’re focusing on this so much, how are you going to think of what to say or do? Well, you’ll find that you can actually think of what to say or do more easily. Because nothing is blocked out. So see if you can make that your assignment for this weekend, and from the weekend, of course, continuing on for the days after the weekend. Keeping the background solid, keeping your foreground very clearly defined, where you’re most interested right now. If you’re going to change your focus, know why you’re doing it. And when you’ve done whatever needs to be done with that particular issue, come right back to your center here in the body. For having the center in the body strengthens both the foreground and the background. So when you think of setting your focus on the singleness of actually having two sides—single-pointedness or one-pointedness and singleness of preoccupation—your whole body is breath, as far as you’re concerned. And it’s all connected breath. When you breathe in, all the different energy channels are working together. When you breathe out, they’re all working together. There’s a sense of unity that fills the whole body. And when you can do this, you find that your concentration gains in strength day by day. It becomes more and more continuous and builds momentum, because it’s not chopped up into little bits. There is a unity where all the parts gain strength from one another.

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