Balanced & Whole

July 23, 2010

When you meditate, it’s a chance to develop a sense of wholeness in body and in mind, bringing things together, bringing things into balance, getting a sense that everything is in its right place, your mind is centered in the body. The breath is flowing throughout the body. This is the state you want to encourage, because when there’s a sense of wholeness in body and mind, there’s also some healing. We have a greater and greater sense that we can be clearer and more aware of our own behavior about what we’re doing and what we want, and we’re less pulled around by all the strange values in society. People talk about wanting to create an American Buddhism that meets with American values, claiming that what we got from Asia meets with Asian values, and now it’s time for something for American values. That’s not the case. The Dharma has been countercultural all along, from the very beginning. The Buddha himself, when he went off into the wilderness, was not doing what everybody else in his family wanted him to do or expected him to do. When he came to awakening and came back, the teaching he taught was not what people expected. There’s always this element of the Dharma that stands outside of normal concerns of family and making money and making a livelihood, saying, “Is this what you really want out of life? Isn’t there something more?” We have the realization that there’s something more that has to be found within, but that has been warped and distorted by the values of ordinary society. This is where we have to step out, be by ourselves, find a sense of solitude. So the parts of you that are out of balance can be brought back into balance. The parts that feel disconnected can be brought back together. So there’s a sense of wholeness. So as you focus on the breath, ask yourself what kind of breath would feel good for the whole body. You might want to go through the body section by section first to get a sense of which parts of the body need some special attention, which parts have been overworked, which parts have been underworked. The overworked ones have to be soothed, the underworked ones have to be energized. So you can simply breathe in and out in the body and bring a sense of balance into your physical sense of sitting here right now. And you want to bring the mind into balance as well. To what extent do you need to think about the breath? To what extent do you simply need to watch and observe? To what extent do you want to direct the breath, and to what extent do you simply want to allow it to do its own thing? This is something you learn through trial and error. In the same way as those old-fashioned balances wouldn’t always stay perfectly balanced. Sometimes they’d swing to the left, sometimes they’d swing to the right. Sometimes it would take a while of swinging back and forth, back and forth, to finally come to a balance. So remember, this is an ordinary part of the meditation. As John Munn used to like to say, before you find the middle way, you’re going to be leaning to the left, leaning to the right. There’s bound to be mistakes before you finally get things right. The important thing is that you’re willing to learn from mistakes. And the way to learn from mistakes is to just keep watching. You’ve been breathing a particular way for a while. Try a different way. See what that does. You get a sense of where the breath has an effect on the body. And after a while you become a connoisseur. Your taste for the breath gets more and more refined. It’s in developing your sensitivity that the meditation progresses. Because what we’re looking for, what we’re trying to understand, is a whole range of right here. You’ve got the body, you’ve got the mind. So to look at it another way, you’ve got the body and feelings and perceptions. Those are the labels you put on things, like you’re labeling the breath right now. This breath is an in-breath, that breath is an out-breath. That’s a perception, that little metal note in the mind. And they’re fabrications, your evaluation of how things are going. Does this feel good? Doesn’t feel good? If you’re not really sure, well, change things a bit. Then you have something to compare. Do you prefer focusing in the head or in the chest? How about the neck? How about the palms of your hands? You can focus on the soles of your feet, the base of the spine. You can focus anywhere on the body. And that perception of the breath coming in and going out, what kind of mental image do you have? Where is the breath coming in? Where is it going out? Which parts are being nourished? Where does the breath go into? Where does it come out of? What happens if you change that image? For example, if you have a sense that the breath is coming in and out of the abdomen, what happens if you change it to the chest? How about the middle of the head, the third eye? There are lots of different ways you can play around with these perceptions. And there’s a consciousness of all this that’s going on. So these are the things you’re trying to understand. And you understand them by playing with them. You’re trying to understand cause and effect, and the only way you can connect a cause with an effect is to try changing things. And then you begin to detect differences. This is an important Pali word for discernment, panna. It seems to mean precisely this. How is this breath different from that breath? That’s just a very beginning kind of question. But it sensitizes you to what’s going on in the present moment. You’re learning how to watch yourself. So you can detect distinctions that are even more subtle. And your sense of balance can actually come into balance. Most of us as we go through life are like those load carriers in Bangkok, scrawny, scrawny people who carry these huge, huge burdens off of ships, huge sacks of rice, other huge weights. And some of their muscles are way overdeveloped, and others are underdeveloped. And when they walk around, they walk around as if they had huge loads on their back, even when they don’t have the huge loads. Their sense of balance has gotten all out of kilter. And if you could take a picture of your mind, most of our minds would be like that. Some parts of the mind are extremely thin, wasted away. Other parts are way overdeveloped. In a mind like that, it’s hard to have a sense of what’s up and down and right and wrong, because your balance is all out of balance. So it’s just sit here and meditate. See, this is a chance to bring yourself back into balance. Just look at your spine right now. Is it leading to the left, leading to the right? Which part’s left, which part’s right? Which side of the body has more tension? And you’ll find that the left side might have more tension in the shoulder, but less tension in other parts of the back. Just hold in mind the present moment. Just have a perception of having everything kind of straightened out and balanced. Make that a model then for your mind, bringing everything into balance, so that all the different parts of the mind can develop a healthy relationship to one another. Learn how to balance your insight with your tranquility, your thinking with your stillness, because meditation does require some thinking. The thinking that can cut through distractions, the thinking that can bring you back to the breath, the thinking that can pose questions about the breath that you should then want to observe. How do you know when a breath is too long? How do you know when it’s too short, too heavy, too light? Pose the question and then watch. With the thought in mind that we’re trying to bring things into balance, a healthy kind of balance, where everything comes together, all the good qualities in the mind support one another, and a sense of health and well-being, a sense of wholeness, can develop around that. As for other concerns, you don’t need to think about them right now. They’re not relevant. I was reading today about a sportsman who was talking about bringing more balance into his life. All the sports commentators were concerned that he wasn’t going to be as good a sportsman. In order to play really well, you have to be driven, you have to be a real bastard. And the question, of course, is, what is their interest in all this? They’re not really concerned about people being healthy, being balanced, finding a sense of wholeness in their lives. They just want to have exciting sports contests to talk about so they can make money. This is a lot of what society is all about. People want something out of you, and they’re happy to see you go out of balance for their benefit. The Buddha doesn’t ask that. He asks the other way around, to try to find some balance in the mind. He taught about suffering and the end of suffering. It’s the most compassionate teaching you can think of. So don’t worry about the sports commentators in your life, the ones who want to get you out of balance. Think about the Buddha. He wants you to get into balance, into the middle path, for your long-term welfare and happiness. you

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