Occupy Your Body

March 29, 2012

One of the terms for what we’re doing here is called mindfulness immersed in the body. You want to keep the whole body in mind. Do not let your thoughts or awareness wander off someplace else. You want to be right here, fully right here, all the way down to the tips of the fingers, all the way down to the tips of your toes. Try to think of your awareness not as a one-spot phenomenon in the body, but think of the whole body having an awareness. After all, your nerve endings are all over the body, and they’re all sending messages. So open all the channels, all at once. And see what that does for the breath. If you block off certain parts of the body, they don’t get their full measure of breath energy, and also your awareness gets blocked off as well. And it’s hard to feel really grounded and secure if things are being blocked off like this, because part of you knows that something’s missing. So you want to learn how to be as sensitive as possible to the body throughout. And if you can keep your awareness filling the body like this, it’s hard to slip off to the past and the future. To slip off, you have to shrink your awareness down to one little spot, and then it’s like a little tube. When the mind is small enough, your awareness is small enough, you can go down the tube. If it’s too large, you get stuck here in the present. So try to fully inhabit the present moment. The image the Buddha gives is of a hardwood door and someone throwing a ball of string at it. The ball of string just bounces off. In other words, the impact of things outside. You just can’t penetrate. You’ll notice that sometimes you’re around certain people and you begin to pick up their energy. Not because you want to. It’s because you’ve left part of the body uninhabited, and their energy can move right into that part very easily. And if they’re nervous or upset or anxious, you find yourself going away from the encounter with some of that energy yourself. So try to ground yourself fully throughout the body. And think of the breath as a whole body process. All the nerves get involved in the movement of energy. And again, it’s useful to have everything connected. If things are blocked off from one another, you have a sense that one part of the body is breathing in one direction and another part is breathing in another direction. They’re working at cross-purposes. It’s unpleasant to be there, and so the mind goes slipping out. So this is one of the reasons we have to engage in directed thought and evaluation as we settle down, to work through all the blockages and to get things coordinated, and to sensitize ourselves to this area that, for many of us, is unexplored territory. And it’s important, not just for the body. You learn a lot about the mind this way, too, because as you’re dealing with the breath and the body, you find that the breath is the interface between the body and the mind, or the body and awareness. And the more you sensitize yourself to what’s going on with the breath and the mind, the more you have a sense of what’s going on in the mind, too. When you really get to know the body, you’ll notice that when a thought forms, there’s a brief moment when it could either be a physical sensation or a mental sensation. At that moment, it’s not really either. And what turns it into a thought is a perception, an image you have. Your breath is a thought about that, that’s a thought about this, it’s about the future, it’s about the past, this person, that person. Then it becomes a whole story. And even though you’ve turned it into a mental phenomenon, there’s still going to be the physical side as well. This is where the breath can come in. If you notice that there’s an oppressive emotion in the breath that you’re feeling, you’ll feel it both in the mind and in the body. And what makes it oppressive is the sense of oppression in the body itself. Your heartbeat changes, the flow of the blood changes, the energy flow in the body changes. And even though you may not be able to articulate these things to yourself, you know it doesn’t feel right, it doesn’t feel good. And no matter how much you try to reason with the thought, there’s always that sense that there’s something that hasn’t been dealt with by your reason. You can’t think your way out of some of these emotions because they’ve got their physical side as well. So you’ve got to deal with the physical side. And it’s a useful approach to have when you don’t really know what the issue is. You just know there’s an uncomfortable feeling. Try to notice how the breath is flowing in the body. If you haven’t been sensitive to the body, it’s hard to gain a sense of this when things are all stirred up. So it’s good to gain a sense of the body at normalcy, like we’re doing right now. So you know that this is how comfortable breathing feels, this is how energizing breathing feels, this is how relaxing breathing feels, or nourishing. So when something’s wrong, you recognize what’s the problem. And you can provide a different way of breathing. Just think healthy breathing, nourishing breathing, relaxing breathing, and see how the body responds. If it doesn’t respond automatically, then you have to work with it. This may involve breathing in ways that feel a little unnatural for the time being. I’ve noticed, for one, that when migraines occur, it’s really good to breathe as deeply as possible, breathe as long in as possible, to the point where it really gets uncomfortable. Then allow the breath to go out. Then breathe in really long again. That seems to reset the body’s energy. Otherwise it falls into vicious cycles. So try to notice when you’ve got to reset it and what you can do to push it in the direction you want. You don’t want to push it long periods of time, just enough to get things into a new rhythm. And then you can find a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, that were not available to you when the breath was really going in weird directions. How do you know it’s weird? Well, you know what normal breathing is like. You know what good breathing is like. You’ve really got to sensitize yourself to this part of your awareness. There’s so little in our culture that encourages that. We don’t have a very good vocabulary. And everything seems to be pulling us into computer screens, TV screens, iPad screens. Everything gets pulled outside. It’s almost like the body is left to its own devices. Of course, when that happens, strange energies can come in again from the outside and from your own mental activity. And they feel like they’re coming from some alien spot, something that you’re not really sure whether it’s inside of you or outside of you. And that gets even scarier. So try to lay claim to this area right here. It may seem strange. We’re taught that eventually you’re going to have to let go. You don’t have a feeling of possessiveness or a feeling of ownership. But before you can let go, you’ve got to fully own what’s going on inside right now. Fully inhabit the body. Try to be fully aware of the mind. And try to bring it into it under as much control as you can, through the breathing, through the way you think. After all, the Buddha didn’t teach only breath meditation. He also taught ways of looking at the world that can help pull you away from greed, or pull you away from lust, or anger, or fear, or anxiety, or jealousy. Learning how to recognize these emotions for what they are in the present moment. And deal with them first from the physical side, then from the mental side. So that this becomes more and more your space. After all, it’s right here that the Buddha says you’re going to find awakening, right where you’re sensitive to the body right now. There’s a passage when they talk about people who are in deep concentration, touch the Dhamma with their body, and people gain awakening, touch the deathless with their body. It’s not a physical contact, but it’s right here where the sense of the body is right now. That’s where you’ll see these things. So try to familiarize yourself with this territory as much as you can, or immerse your mindfulness here, so it’s fully occupied and can’t go slipping off. The body is fully occupied in the sense that your awareness goes out to all the nerve ends. And every part of the body has its equal share in being aware. Aware, aware. Keep your awareness simple. The more you pare down your awareness and cut back on the analysis of things, the more that kind of awareness can seep throughout the body, with the sense of every part of the body being equally aware, equally present. And that right there gives you a great sense of security and stability that’s hard to knock over. Even though it’s not the ultimate, it’s pretty good.

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