A Separate Awareness

October 12, 2014

It’s been a long day. It’s time to give the mind some quiet time for itself. The mind spends its whole day looking at things, listening to things, taking lots of things in, trying to make sense out of them, figuring out what’s worthy of attention, what’s not. And if you were to draw a map of where the mind has been in the course of the day, it’d be like a huge tangle of string, zipping here, zipping over there, then going back and twisting around, tying knots. It needs time for itself, time to settle right down here, right with the body. So it can gather its strength, because not just in the course of the day, but in the course of a lifetime, the mind has to deal with a lot of issues. The big ones, of course, are aging, illness, death, separation, and then all the minor variations on that. And that’s generally true across the day. The mind has a lot of work to do, a lot to deal with, but fortunately it can give itself strength. This is what the practice of concentration is all about. It gives the mind a chance to rest, to be with one thing for a while, and to really know that one thing very well, like with the breath. We know that there’s air coming in and out of the lungs. It keeps us alive. But if you were actually to take some time and notice what’s happening as you breathe in and breathe out, what you feel as you breathe in and breathe out, you’d find there’s a lot more to it than just that. After all, the air wouldn’t come in and out of the lungs unless there was energy in the body expanding the ribcage, allowing it to contract, expanding it again. The energy of the heart takes the oxygen or the oxygenated blood and pumps it through the body. Without these different levels of energy going on, you wouldn’t sense anything. You wouldn’t be alive, of course. And it’s good to get in touch with them, because getting in touch with them gives the mind a chance to settle down with a sense of stability and a sense of spaciousness. Then talk about the unification of concentration. Your mind is focused on one spot generally. But you want to allow it to not be pressured into that one spot. Give it some room. Back when the Buddha was teaching breath meditation, he’d start out by having you notice variations in the breath—short, long, short. You can also notice heavy, light, deep, shallow—to see what feels good for the body right now. When you get a sense of what kind of breathing feels good, then his next step is to have you be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and the whole body as you breathe out. That takes some doing. You might want to go through the body section by section first just to notice how the different parts of the body feel as you breathe in and breathe out. In some cases, there’s not much difference between the in-breath and the out-breath. You may not notice much going on, say, in your arms or your legs, to begin with. But just try to get a sense of where the parts of the body that you tend to tense up at the beginning of the in-breath are. Are they the ones that you hold on to the tension as you breathe in, or do you hold on to the tension as you breathe out? Can you let go of that tension and still breathe? We have a lot of subconscious directions in the mind that say, “When you breathe in, tense this up or tense that up,” just to get the breath started. Or when you’re holding the body erect, as when you’re sitting here, you tell yourself to tense this muscle, tense that muscle. It may not be a conscious direction, but there’s something going on in the mind that’s telling you these things. And you might want to learn how to question that. What are the parts that you can relax and still sit upright? What are the parts you can relax and still breathe in, still breathe out? And as you’ve surveyed the body a couple times like this, you begin to know it better, and you begin to get a better sense of the energy flow. If you don’t sense much, you might just ask yourself, “Which side of the body has more tension than the other side?” And go down, starting from the head down to the whole body down to the feet. Sometimes, say, in your head there’ll be more tension on the left side, and you get to your shoulder, well, there’s more tension on the right shoulder than the left. Whichever side has more tension, allow that to relax. Learn how to get into your body and fully inhabit it. It may not feel like you’re just with one thing, but you’re getting to know this one thing really well. You know the breath. You’re laying your groundwork for giving the mind a place where it can really settle down and feel at home. Being at home is what gives the mind strength. As things begin to gather around, all the different parts of the mind can give energy to one another so they’re not all running off in different directions. If you find your mind drifting off as you do this, bring it back and reward yourself with a really nice breath. Something that feels good all the way down through the torso. If you wander off again, bring it back again. You might want to change the way you breathe if you find that you’re wandering off quite a lot so that the mind has a clear place to focus. It needs its strength when you have a sense of being centered and at the same time having a broad, easy, open sense of the energy flowing in the body. It’s healthy for the body, it’s healthy for the mind. The mind needs a place to stay like this because things are going to come up in life. Things that you’ve claimed to are going to change on you, particularly right here in the body. Things that used to be able to do, can’t quite do anymore. When a disease comes up, it doesn’t ask your permission. It doesn’t ask if it’s going to be convenient for you. So the mind needs a sense of not being threatened by these things. And one of the ironies is that as you get to inhabit your body better like this, get acquainted with it, you also begin to step back from it. The mind and the body have been together for a long time. They tend to separate out on their own. So there’s a sense of awareness, and there’s the body as the object of awareness. And you see clearly the distinction between the two. And you come to realize that whatever happens to the body doesn’t have to happen to the awareness. In other words, you’re aware that it’s happening, but the awareness doesn’t have to change in line with that. This is an important skill you need as the body ages and grows ill. And as the body dies, the awareness is still going to be here. But if it lets itself get tied up in these things, it’s going to suffer a lot through the process. And it’s important to realize that suffering is not necessary. It’s optional. It happens because of our own craving and ignorance and not really knowing what’s going on. There’s an inherent relationship between the body and the awareness. But the longer you stay here, the more you begin to realize that there’s a connection between the two, but there’s also an inherent way in which they’re separated. They’re two separate things. The body doesn’t know anything, it’s just there. But there’s an awareness which is aware of these things. And generally it’s like water that’s had a dye put into it. You put a little bit of red dye into a glass of water and suddenly the whole glass is red. You put a little bit of green dye into a glass of water and all of a sudden the whole glass is green. That’s the way it is with the mind. A little bit of change happens in the body and the whole mind gets upset. But if you have a clear sense that your awareness is one thing and the body is something else, there can be that little dot of green, and it’s just there. It’s just that little dot. The rest of your awareness is clear. The little dot of red is just a little dot. But the rest of your awareness is clear. In other words, things can happen in the body. There can be pain in some parts of the body, but that doesn’t mean that the whole mind has to be pained. Or incidents can happen in the world outside that would get you upset. But you realize, again, that’s the incident, but the awareness is something else. This is a really necessary skill. Otherwise we go through life and we suffer a lot because we latch onto things that we want, and then they change. And the way they change is a little bit under our control, which is why we latch onto them and we think we can get something out of them. But then they show that they’re, in the large term, not under our control at all. A lot of things are due to the fact that they don’t ask your permission and there’s nothing you can do to stop them. That’s when you want to have this awareness, this strong sense of the awareness, right here in the present moment. As your refuge. So first you get to be aware of the whole body, and then you begin to see that the body is one thing, the awareness is something else, and that this knowledge is really useful in lots of ways. It helps to prevent you from creating a lot of unnecessary suffering. So this is a useful skill to work on. It takes some time every day to just settle down and be in the present moment. Thoughts of the past come up, you just let them go. Thoughts of the future come up, you can let them go. Try to develop this kind of awareness where you can see a thought as something separate from the awareness. We hold onto the breath to enable us to let go of those thoughts. And as this sense of awareness gets stronger, you’ll be able to let go of the breath, too. That puts you in a much more secure place. We have these blessings that we chant every day. May you be free from illness. May you be free from disease of the mind, disease of the body. May you be free from wishing all kinds of good fortune. But the Buddha’s blessing would have been different. He said, “Have a state of mind that’s not touched either by good or bad things in the world.” When you can develop that skill, you’re giving a blessing to yourself because you’re not demanding that the world be a certain way. You’ve learned how to meditate. You’ve learned how to make your mind a certain way. And that’s a lot more reliable and a lot more realistic.

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