Whole-body Jhana

December 30, 2015

As the Ajahns frequently say, when you listen to a meditation talk while you’re meditating, give only a small portion of your attention to the talk. Give most of your attention to the meditation. The talk is here as a fence. So if you leave your meditation topic, you run into the talk, and that sends you right back. And if anything in the talk is relevant to what you’re doing, it’ll come right in. You don’t have to send your attention outside. And you don’t want the talk to interfere with what you’re doing right now. You’re trying to focus on your breath. After all, when the Buddha gained awakening, he was focused on his breath. And there’s not much difference between his breath and your breath. The big difference lies in the quality of the focus, the qualities that the mind brings to this activity of focusing on the breath. So what are you bringing? You want to bring as much alertness, mindfulness, and ardency as you can. You want to bring conviction, persistence, discernment, concentration. Gather all these qualities together. Concentration is said to be a gathering of the mind. Ega katha cittans. Ega means one. Aga sometimes is translated as point. So you get the idea that the mind has to be solely aware of only one point. But the images in the Canon don’t bear that out. They always talk about a full body awareness. A better translation of aga here would be a gathering place, because that’s another meaning of the word. You want all these good qualities to gather right here. And notice what’s going on. What is this breath coming in and going out? What kind of layers of breath energy are there in the body? Because in the Buddha’s breath meditation instructions, they pretty quickly get to a whole body awareness. The Buddha talks about being with long breathing and short breathing. And then being aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. This whole-bodiness is an important part of the meditation. Because in some cases the breath gets very, very refined on its own. And when it gets so refined that it seems to stop, then if you don’t have a whole body awareness, you get lost. You don’t have a proper framework for maintaining your concentration. But if you do have that whole-body awareness, you’re right there. The breath can stop and there’s no problem, because you’re with the sense of the body. In other cases, the in-and-out breathing doesn’t stop, and you want the mind to calm down to a deeper level. You become aware of the full body and try to notice how is the breath energy connecting up inside? And the more there’s a sense that each part of the body has its fill of breath energy, there’s a kind of a quiet buzz. If you focus on that, then the in-and-out breathing will grow more and more calm. You have less of a need for it. Sometimes you have to counteract a compulsive sense that you’ve got to breathe in, you’ve got to breathe out, and if the breathing stops, something’s really wrong. But that’s not the case. When there’s a fullness of breath energy in the body, the body will stop breathing on its own. As long as you’re aware and you’re right here, there’s no need to worry. If the body needs to breathe, it will. So try to have a sense of this whole body. You can go at it section by section, starting at the navel, starting at the back of the neck, wherever it seems easiest to get started, and go through. Always try to figure out if there are some sections you’ve missed. The guided meditation gives you a certain series, but there are a lot of parts of the body that it doesn’t mention. So you can explore there. Sometimes some connections in the breath energy are in places that you tend to ignore. And if those connections are missing, the body won’t be properly nourished. Things won’t settle down quickly enough. Or solidly enough. So take an interest in what’s going on in the body, an interest in what’s going on in the breath. That quality of interest is also one of the qualities that’s part of the four bases for success. There’s desire. You really want to do this. And there’s persistence. You stick with it. And then there’s interest, or intent. You really pay attention to what’s going on. After all, the breath is the force of life. Without it, you die. You’d have no way of being aware of the body. And it’s good for the health of the body. In Oriental medicine, they talk about the chi, or the ki. In Indian medicine, it’s prana. It has to nourish all the parts of the body. Without this energy nourishing the different organs, they can’t function properly. So if you find that there’s some blockages in the breath, you’re going to remind yourself that by working through the blockages, you’re helping your health. And you’re making it easier for the mind to settle down. The mind likes to settle down in comfortable places. Remember John Fuing’s image. When you catch eels, you have to put a dead dog in a jar, he says. Open the mouth of the jar, put it down in the mud, and the eels will come on their own. It’s not a pretty image, but it’s a striking one. You give the mind what it likes. It likes pretty raw pleasure, without being dressed up, and the fact that the breath can be comfortable. In the beginning, it’s not all that impressive. But if you allow it to have some space and allow it to smooth out, and as the mind settles in and is ready to settle down, it finds that being with a really smooth, comfortable breath feels really good. You allow yourself to get sensitive to an area that you’ve been desensitized to for a long time. In most societies, we encourage people to look outside, not pay too much attention to what’s going on inside, because everything outside is a lot more interesting, and a lot more necessary, and a lot more whatever. And so we desensitize ourselves to the need for a sense of well-being inside. We’re trained to look outside for our pleasure, for our satisfaction, for our sense of fulfillment. And this part of the awareness inside you gets starved. So take some time to nourish it again. It’ll take a little while, in some cases, to get healthy again. But as you get more and more used to being here, you’ll have a greater sense of what feels good. Now nourishing it can be. Now stabilizing it can be as well. Because we’re working on the breath not just to settle down, but then to move on from just settling down to gain some insight into what the mind’s doing. And the smoother the breath, the more calm the breath, the easier it will be to see what movements there are in the mind. Because the movements of the mind are very subtle, especially in the beginning stages. Things come through the mind in waves. And they’re very gentle and subtle at first, and then they grow and grow and grow. And when they’ve grown, they’re difficult to deal with. They’re a lot easier to deal with when things are subtle. So make your breath subtle so you can see the subtleties of the mind. A little bit of anger, a little bit of greed, a little bit of boredom, a little bit of whatever. You want to be able to detect these things. Because if you can detect them, you have a lot more control over what’s going on inside. And again, this full body awareness is useful. Because thoughts and emotions, as they come into the mind, tend to have a little marker in the breath energy someplace in the body. Most often it’s in the head, but not always. Sometimes it’ll be in your arm, or sometimes it’ll be down in your intestines, or in your leg, or in your foot. You’ll be amazed to notice where the mind tends to place those little post-it notes in the breath energy in order to keep a particular thought anchored so it can come back again and again and again to that thought. So when a little thought appears in the mind, if you have a full body awareness, you’ll also notice that there’s a little stirring someplace in the body. Sometimes the stirring comes before it’s even a thought. The stirring comes and then you slap a label on it. “This is this, or that’s that.” “This is a thought about tomorrow. This is a thought about yesterday.” Sometimes the labeling can be pretty arbitrary. It’s just basically what you want to think about. Other times it’s totally random. You begin to see that there are lots of members of the bureaucracy here in your mind. And sometimes, deep down in the bureaucracy, some little clerk has placed a label on something. And if your awareness is full throughout the body, you’ll detect these things a lot more easily. So gather your mind here and then spread your awareness out, not only to the skin but also sometimes to the area around it. And John Lee mentions this very briefly in his meditation guide. He says when you’re aware of the breath energies in the body, you begin to be aware of the breath energies surrounding the body, too. It’s like you have an aura of breath energy around you, a cocoon. And as you get sensitive to that, you can work with the energies there. These are especially useful when there’s a pain in some part of the body. You can work with the energies right outside that part of the body, working back into the body. You’re cleaning up any tangles in the outside energy and getting a greater sense of everything melding together, everything flowing together. The greater sense of harmony there is inside, the easier it is to stay here. You can bring some harmony to the breath and it also helps bring harmony to other parts of your awareness. So there are a lot of advantages to developing whole-body awareness, dealing with the breath in the whole body, as it brings wholeness to the mind. And the sense of wholeness is not the end. It’s not the end of the path. It’s part of the path. But it’s useful for all kinds of things. That’s why it is part of the path. You’ll notice when we chant the sutta on the Maha Vipassana, the analysis of the path, the longest section is devoted to right concentration, the most varied section, the three biggest sections are right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The ones for right effort and right mindfulness are pretty formulaic. But the one for right concentration gets long and complicated. That’s because it is the center of the path. And the images the Buddha uses for right concentration all emphasize this quality of whole body. This sense of ease and rapture in the first jhana, you spread it through the whole body. The same in the second jhana. In the third jhana, the ease gets spread. In the fourth jhana, your awareness is bright throughout the body. When you’re with the whole body, you’ve got to be in the present moment. If you’re in the middle spot, it can very easily slip out of the present moment into the past or future. So that’s why right concentration and right mindfulness come right together. Of course, the right effort is to stay here. All the factors of the path come together right here. So do your best to learn how to get here and learn how to stay here and to reach the next step. You’re in charge. So do your best to stay in charge. That’s for all the good qualities that come in. You can absorb them into you so that as you watch the breath, your awareness of the breath gets closer and closer to the way the Buddha was aware. You’re that much closer to opening up to something that is the most valuable thing in life. So get to know this spot right here. There are lots of advantages to being here, settling in here, so you can peer deeper into what’s found right next to right here. So that someday, at least, the story of the Buddha’s awakening won’t be just a story anymore. You realize that what the Buddha awakened to and what he taught really is true. There really is a deathless element that can be touched by the mind. And then, as the texts say, it can be seen with the body. It’s an interesting concept. What it means is, right where you’re experiencing your body right now, is where the deathless will appear. And it will fill your awareness in the same way. So do your best to get here and stay here. Because being here allows a lot of really great things to open up.

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