The Weight on Your Back

October 10, 2016

The concentration we’re aiming at is all around, a full body awareness, in which you’re aware of the top as much as the bottom, the front as much as the back. You’ll probably notice that even when you close your eyes, you have the sense that the mind is looking forward. Which means there are things that are going on in your body and your mind that you can’t see because you’re looking only in one direction. So we start out by focusing on one spot in the body and get used to different spots in the body. Then we try to connect them all. So you can be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, and it’s all present. In the beginning, it’s more like you’re kind of running around to different places inside the body. But as long as you’re inside the body, you’re fine. There comes a point, though, where things get more connected. You become sensitive to one point and you’re sensitive in all directions. This is a useful state of mind to have not only while you’re sitting here but as you go through the day. Because if your awareness is all around, you can see all around and be conscious of danger coming from any direction. We go through life with a lot of weight on our backs, carrying things around, and yet we don’t see it. We turn around and look and don’t see it because it’s still there. It’s still on our back, it’s still behind us. The Dhamma is like a mirror for seeing what’s behind you. And one of the things it provides you with is not only a mirror but also a new way to look so you can actually see back, see behind you, see what you’re carrying around. One thing you may notice as you go through the day is you tend to carry around a lot of tension. This may not seem like that much of a problem. But this load that we carry on our backs makes us unstable and we tend to fall over on other people. In other words, the unnecessary stress that we carry around in the course of the day makes us do and say things that are often quite unskillful, just out of that sense of frustration of having something heavy but we don’t know where it is or what it is. And so in our ignorance we kind of spread it out to other people, thinking that it relieves some of the stress and the strain. But actually it just creates more problems. So as you go through the day, even though it may be hard to be aware of the in-and-out breath all the time, still try to at least have a sense of the energy flow in the body and keep it as all around as you can. Because the things that sneak up in the mind and cause trouble and the things that you carry around in the course of the day, they don’t happen only while you’re here meditating. In fact, a lot of them happen because of events during the day. Someone says something or you say something. Someone does something, you do something. And it’s a weight. It’s a weight on the mind. And it becomes also a weight on the body. When the Buddha talks about fabrications or sankharas, there are three levels. There’s bodily, verbal, and mental. And a lot of the unnecessary weight we carry around is simply caused by the way we breathe. If you can learn how to breathe in a way that’s soothing for the whole body, you can breathe through and dissolve a lot of the patterns of tension. Then you’re not carrying so much around. You’re not weighted down. But more importantly, when things are more relaxed in the body and then something unskillful comes up in the mind, either in terms of verbal fabrication, the way you think about something, or mental fabrication, the perceptions and feelings you have around something, when these triggers come in, if you’re not aware all around or sensitive to the breath or energy in the body, they can take hold. By the time you recognize them, they’re welling up and they’re in a state where you can’t control them. That’s when it gets really bad. But it turns out that you’ve been laying the seeds for these things in the course of the day or maybe the course of the week. And if you’re more aware of what you’re doing, aware of the present moment, aware of the energy flow in the body, you’ll notice these seeds are little tangles inside the energy. You’ll find them right at the spot where the area where the mind and the body meet, right here at the breath. So if you can see a tangle forming, you can breathe right through it and prevent yourself a lot of trouble down the line. So in this way, as you go through the day, with a sense of the energy in the body. And even if you lose it, you can pick it up again pretty quickly. But the more continuous your awareness, the more you’ll see subtle things happening in the mind. And you can catch them while they’re still subtle, before they’ve taken hold, before the mind has committed itself to taking them on. And then there are times during the day when you have some more free time to be more subtly aware of the breath itself. And you can take on that in-and-out breath as well. Use it to soothe whatever tension is building up in your shoulders, whatever tension is building up in your back, whatever tension is building up around the forehead, wherever you find it, in the jaws, whatever. And do some active housecleaning. Cleaning out that pack on your back that’s carrying all these thoughts, resentments, desires, fears, anxieties, some of which are still present. And you can go way, way back. And you have some time to sit down and sort them out. Otherwise, when you have other activities in the course of the day that take more of your attention, you don’t have that luxury of doing a really detailed cleaning out inside. But at least you can get things on a basic level of ease that both feels nourishing and allows you to see things more clearly as they’re happening. Because this is the reason why we suffer. We don’t see what we’re doing. These things we’re carrying on our back are not things, they’re activities, habits that the mind has. And we do them unconsciously. As I said, when things are done in ignorance like that, they’re going to cause suffering. So we’re trying to bring some more awareness to this process. At the very least, learn how to fabricate things in a good way. We’re not getting rid of all sankharas as we sit here and meditate. We’re actually creating good ones. The path itself is a sankhara, it’s a fabrication. It’s taking all these raw materials you have coming in from the past and learning how to fabricate them in a new way. You look throughout the text and the Buddha gives you new ways of thinking and about issues in life, new ways of perceiving them. He talks about ways that you can breathe. He’s giving instructions in all these forms of fabrication to help our imagination. So we’re going to imagine new ways of doing this, ways we may not have thought of before. All those images in the canon, they’re there to provide you with new perceptions, give you a new perspective on the events of daily life. Because it’s all too easy to fall into old narratives or other people’s narratives. And the Buddha gives you these tools, new ways of thinking, new ways of perceiving, to help resist those old habits or to resist the influence of other people’s ways of looking at things. So you’re not weighing yourself down. It’s important that you not see this as simply one more part of your multitasking day, as if it were one more ball that you had to keep up in the air as you’re juggling, or one more load to put on your back. Actually, think of it instead as the place where you can stand as you have to juggle the rest of the day. It gives you a more solid place, a more grounded place. After all, this is a path we’re following. We’re taking these fabrications and instead of carrying them on our back, we put them down on the floor and stand on them, walk on them. This load of bricks we carry around, we can put them down and pave our path with them. Think of it that way. It’s not one more task in the course of the day. It gives you a foundation for dealing with your other tasks more effectively. If you think in those terms, then this all-around awareness becomes something that you find more and more is your default mode. And it’s a really good place to stand and a good place to walk. The more continuous you can make this awareness, the fewer the gaps. Then the more you’re going to be able to see. And the more problems it’s going to be able to cut through. Because what are you looking for? When something comes up in the mind, it’s going to have its allure, a reason for going with it. And if it’s an old habit, the allure is just so taken for granted that you hardly even notice it. So the trigger that comes up, the causes it to arise, the Buddha talks about five things altogether. The origination and the passing away. The origination there is basically the trigger. And then there’s the allure and the drawbacks. Sometimes we’ll see the drawbacks way too late. Whereas the allure may be something very quick, right at the very beginning. But if you’re present here, then you can see those things as they come very quickly. And you realize, “Oh, this is why I went for that. This is why I followed that habit. This is why I’ve been carrying it around all this time.” That way you see what the most important step is. You see the escape. You develop dispassion for the allure. And then it loses its power. It may not lose all of its power all at once, but as you get more and more familiar with what’s going on and begin to see some of the ways the mind elaborates on that particular allure, then you’re able to cut through all of them. That’s when you’re freed. That’s when you really put down the burden on your back and you have no more inclination to want to pick it back up again.

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