Full-body Awareness

November 25, 2018

Try to give your full attention to what you’re doing as you focus on the breath. That means being alert both to the mind and to the breath. John Lee’s image is of a pulley. You pull on the one rope, it goes in one direction. You pull on the other rope, it goes the other direction. You just go back and forth. The closer you can bring the mind to the breath, the less of a back-and-forth there’s going to be. But you want to be fully here. So it’s good to make a survey of the whole body as you sit down. The Buddha gives his breath meditation instructions pretty early on that he recommends that you try to be aware of the whole body. Get a sense of your in-breath and out-breath, what’s comfortable, what’s not comfortable, and then go straight to the whole body. Realize that your awareness is already there in the body. It’s just that some parts of your awareness are more highlighted than others. So here you’re trying to highlight everything. There’s an awareness of the foot in the foot. There’s an awareness of the hand in the hand, the stomach in the stomach. There’s an awareness of the head in the head. So try to bring that level of awareness to the fore. When your awareness is large like this, filling the present moment, it’s harder to think of thoughts of past and future. There’s no place to put them, and your awareness is too big to go to the past. Or too big to go to the future. Because normally when we think a thought, we focus on a little area of the body, and that becomes the anchor for the thought. And then we forget that it’s part of the body, and it’s almost like it’s a conduit into that little thought world. So the more narrow your awareness is, the easier it is for it to slip off. When your awareness is broad like this, it fills everything. And you’re making it full also in the sense that you’re fully present. You’re not holding anything back. Then it’s a lot easier to stay here. So try to get a sense of this full body awareness and how you can maintain it. Then the question will come up, “What’s next?” Well, what’s next is your shooting gallery. You’ll begin to notice that as a thought forms, it’ll form again in some little spot in the body. But now instead of going into the thought, you’re watching it from outside. And you can breathe right through it. It’s like a spider on a web. Something hits the web, the spider immediately goes, checks it out, then goes back to its home base and waits for the next thing to come. So you’re shooting down thoughts. And the part of the mind that wants to look into the thought and say, “What’s this? What can this be made into?” is something that you want to learn how to discourage. You want to starve it. It’ll complain. But if you have a sense of ease and well-being with that full body awareness, the complaints won’t be all that strong. Because the purpose here is to get a greater and greater sense that this is where you belong, with a full body awareness. And those little thoughts are not places where you belong. They’re places where you may travel for a bit when you need to think about something. And John Lee talks about the difference about having a home base and that’s where you begin having places where you travel. You travel in your thoughts. You travel even in the kinds of thoughts that have to do with, say, recollecting the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha when they’re necessary. You travel in the course of the day when you have to make plans, when you have to try to remember something that’s important. But that’s not where you belong, or that’s not where you should be staying. For most of us, we’re staying in our thoughts. And then we jump from one train of thought to another train of thought, like a hobo going from one train to the next. And who knows where you’ll end up. But if you stay here, you’re here. You know you’re here. This is where you belong. And you want to remember that. That’s the other function of being fully aware. It makes it a lot easier to remember when the mind really does settle down, what you’re doing. Because when you leave meditation, that’s one of the things you want to take with you. The ability to remember when the mind was really still, what I had been doing leading up to that. How was the breath while I was there? What were the steps by which I settled down? Where was my mind focused? Because you remember here not only to be here in the present moment, but you want to have a skill to take with you, something you’ve remembered. When things are not going well, you want to remember that too, as to what doesn’t work. That way, every meditation session becomes something useful. Even days when it doesn’t go well are not wasted if you’re observant, if you watch. And so the more fully you can be aware right here, the more you benefit in the present moment and on into the future. One of the things you want to notice, too, is where are the really sensitive parts of the body. There are some parts of the body that no matter how you breathe are going to feel pretty much the same. Other parts are pretty responsive to different ways of breathing. Those are the ones you want to focus on. Those are the ones that will tell you when it’s really good, when it’s not really good. For some people, the really sensitive spots are down in the heart. John Lee has his list of resting spots for the breath—above the navel, at the tip of the sternum, at the base of the throat, the middle of the head, right at the palate, the top of the head. But these are just a list of suggestions. Your sensitive spot or sensitive spots may be different places. So where are the spots that are most sensitive to changes in the breath? Give special attention to those, because when you leave meditation, those are going to be the areas that you want to stay with. Ideally, you want to have as much of a full body awareness as you can, but you’ll have jobs where you have to think and situations where you have to talk. And if you can’t maintain a whole body awareness while you’re doing that, at the very least stay in touch with your sensitive spots and keep filling them with good breath energy. Because they’ll be your touchstones for when something’s going wrong in the mind. Something will happen to the breath that will immediately alert you to the fact that greed has come in, or aversion has come in, fear, jealousy, whatever disturbing thought you might have. And the more quickly you can do something about it, the better. So stay with your sensitive spots, but make sure that they are well-nourished. And then as soon as they’re not well-nourished, that’s something you can work on. Developing an awareness that’s not only good here while you’re sitting with your eyes closed, but a way of relating to your body, relating to your mind, as you leave formal meditation. Because these skills are meant to be used in daily life. They’re not here only for when your eyes are closed. It’s not the case that you’re suffering only when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. It’s not the case that defilements come up only when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. They can come up any time. And you don’t want to be prepared for them at any time. So when you leave meditation, it’s not a jolt. You don’t throw it away. You carry it with you into the day. First, as you reflect from moment to moment on what went well in the meditation, what didn’t go well, and when it went well, what were you doing? If you’re paying attention, you’ll know that your powers of observation, your awareness, may be pretty weak in the beginning. You have only a vague sense of what you’re doing. But as you keep asking that question again and again, “What am I doing? When something’s good, how can I maintain it?” Be very clear about the fact that you’re here not only with the breath, but also looking at the mind, keeping them together. That way you have knowledge, you have skill, that you can carry with you into the end of the day. And then make up your mind that if you can’t stay with the full body awareness, try at the very least to stay with your sensitive spots. Carry those into the day as well. So remember, this is practice in preparation for performance. It’s like a person who practices the piano. You don’t practice the piano simply for the sake of practicing the piano. You hope to be able to perform someday. Well, here you get a chance to perform every day. So remember that you practice well for the sake of your well-being all the way through the day. John Fung had a student whose concentration was really strong. But when she left concentration, she pretty much threw it away. Then she’d come and complain to him, “Why is it that my anger doesn’t go away? Why is it that my getting upset so easily doesn’t go away?” In fact, sometimes it seems even worse. She wanted the concentration to be a magic bullet. But it can help you only when you carry it around, if you leave it home. It’s like having a tool that you need, but then you leave it back on your bench. And when you go to your work site, you don’t have any tools. So remember, you’re developing tools here that you use through the day. And you want to remember what you’ve got. So you can remember your skill from one session to the other and all the way through. You’re going to need it all the way through, in between. That’s how our skill as a meditator develops.

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