A Centered But Broad Awareness

December 15, 2018

When you’re evaluating the breath to see if it’s comfortable and how you can make it more comfortable, there are different ways you can do it. One way is to start with one spot in the body where you’re most sensitive to how the breathing feels. This might be in the chest, it might be in the throat. And stay with that one spot. Just think so that one spot feels good, and then from there you spread out. Think of the sense of well-being spreading out as your awareness spreads out to finally fill the whole body. In other cases, though, you can start with the whole body. Just try to be aware of everything from the head down to the toes. And then ask yourself in this context what feels good. Try to maintain that full body awareness. And you’ll see that something that may have felt good at one spot doesn’t necessarily feel good when you’ve got the whole body. So whichever method is easier for you, you can start either way. But you’re trying to get to a state of mind where your awareness is filling the whole body. And there’s a sense of ease. The ease may or may not be great, but you protect what you’ve got. And it’s in the protective thing that things grow. The advantage of having this larger frame of awareness is that when pains come up or when pleasures come up, you’re not so overwhelmed by them. The Buddha talks about how in his practice he always made sure that pains and pleasures did not invade his mind and remain. And as you begin to discover pretty quickly, it’s not the case that they’re invading your space. You’re bringing them in. So you want to make sure they don’t overwhelm you. And by having this larger frame, you can see that they’re actually smaller. As the Buddha says, we tend to be ignorant of the sensations in the body that are not all that intense. In other words, when there’s an intense pain, it seems like everything in your mind gets blotted out, the intensity, and everything else in the body gets blotted out. And all of a sudden you feel like you’ve got pain all around you. That’s not really the case. If you can maintain full body awareness, you can see that the pain is only in one spot. There are huge areas of the body that are not in pain, even though there may be several pains here and there. Still, the majority of the body is not in pain. The mind is used to focusing in on the pains. Or focusing in on the really intense pleasures. Because the pains, to itself, are warning signals, and the pleasures are things it goes running after. But then the question is, do you want these things to rule your life? Think about all the things that people do out of fear of pain and desire for pleasure. See how easily they can be manipulated. You see the media doing this to people all the time. There’s that New Yorker cartoon. People are walking down the street, they have little sticks coming up off their backs. Hanging down from the end of the stick is a little carrot. And then you’ve got a guy driving down the street with a sports carrot. And it’s that little tiny thing that keeps people going. They’d like to have a sports carrot, too. But the people walking down the street, their backs are bent over, and they’re working really hard so they can get that little hit of pleasure. Or run away from what they think is a pain, or the pains they anticipate. So you’ve got to ask yourself, “Do I want my mind to be pushed around by these things?” As the Buddha said, you’re developed in body and developed in mind. It doesn’t mean by that that you go out and exercise the body a lot or you go out and read a lot of books. To be developed in body and developed in mind means that you don’t let pains overcome you. You don’t let pleasures overcome you. And having this larger frame is very helpful. So do your best to make sure that you’re aware of the whole body. And you find that it helps in other ways as well. It’s one of the ways of preventing sleep deprivation. As the mind gets sleepy, it focuses on a little pleasure and wants to lie down like a cat on a pillow. And everything just folds in on your awareness, and it’s gone. You have to be very careful, though, to think, “Even though there’s pleasure here, my head is up here, my hands are here, my feet are here, everything’s right here, right here, the whole body is right here.” And do your best to survey that. Make sure that you keep that in mind. Then, as the pleasure builds, you don’t get waylaid. You don’t drift off into sleepiness. And the concentration that comes with this larger frame is the kind of concentration you can carry around with you. And there is a role for one-pointedness when you’re trying to focus on little tiny things here or there. But you have to keep this larger frame in mind as well. Because otherwise, when things are totally one-pointed, there may be things hiding out in the blocked-out areas that you don’t see. And also sometimes you don’t see connections. But if you’ve got the larger frame, you can see, “Okay, something’s happening over here on the left side and it’s having an effect on the right side.” Or, “Something’s happening in the mind and it’s having an impact on the body.” Or vice versa. Then you get to see what’s going on—connections you wouldn’t see otherwise. This is one of the analogies for jhana that the Buddha keeps saying. When there’s pleasure, let the pleasure spread to fill the whole body. So the whole body is saturated with the pleasure. When there’s awareness, let the awareness fill the whole body. When the pleasure dies away, then you can have just the awareness. Because that’s what you’re after. You want a centered but broad awareness. Because that’s where you see things that you didn’t see before. The stillness is what allows you to follow things and detect subtle things. The continuity is what allows you to follow them. But the breadth of the awareness is what allows you to see connections you might not have noticed otherwise. So in the beginning you’re adjusting things. This is the activity in that analogy of the bathman or the bathman’s apprentice. Mixing the soap powder with the water so you have a nice soap dough. That’s what they used in those days. They didn’t have bars of soap. They would make a kind of a dough that you would rub over your body. So it has to be mixed just right. Use your powers of judgment as to what is just right right now for the body, what’s just right for the mind. In that sense, you’re kind of hovering around the breath, hovering around the body. And then as things get just right or good enough, then you allow yourself to meld into that sense of the body so you’re surrounded by it. At this point, you’re ready to move on. It’s like trying to gain your balance on a bicycle. There’s less talking going on, less conversation. You’re just gaining a sense of how you can stay balanced with the breath without leaning to the future, without leaning to the past. Just being right here, without giving into any desire that you want to think about this or think about that. Just be totally present right here. If there’s pleasure, you allow the pleasure to be there. If there’s rapture, you allow the rapture to be there. When the rapture gets unpleasant, think of tuning into another frequency. There are more subtle levels of energy going on. You can tune into those. When they talk about people having rapture problems in meditation, it’s because they try to corral the energy or push it in a certain direction. You just let it dissipate out and go out the hands and go out the feet, go out the eyes. But otherwise you don’t have to adjust much. You don’t have to think about much. Just being here, right here, aware right here in the body. You can ultimately get the mind to where the Buddha was on the night of his awakening. He was sitting here right here with his breath in his body, filling his awareness. The body filling his awareness. Awareness filling the body. And then you try to maintain that. The question often comes up, “Well, once the mind gets concentrated, what do you do with it next?” Well, in the beginning, the next is learning how to keep it concentrated, because it’s when you start seeing things about the mind that you didn’t notice before. The way it starts to broach a topic and hoping that other members of the mind will join in. It’s kind of like a beehive. They say that a bee may come into the hive and say, “There’s a really nice batch of flowers over there.” It does this with its dance. And then other bees next to it will start picking up the rhythm of its dance, and they start dancing in unison. And ultimately you can get the whole hive. And here it’s the same with the mind. A little thought comes in and gets a little reverberation going. And ultimately you find what you thought was the body has suddenly been taken over by something else. There was a nice meditation cartoon I saw one time. There was a woman sitting very quietly, and then the word “think” appeared right in her forehead. Then there was another “think” down in her arm. Then there was another “think” here and there. Ultimately it’s just a big blotch of “thinks.” That’s what you want to avoid. You don’t want these things to come in and take over. So you’re trying to nip them in the bud. And that puts you in a position of control. As the Buddha said, one of the things you want to learn as a meditator is to think the thoughts you want to think and not think the thoughts you don’t want to think. You want to be able to pull out or prevent the thinking. If it starts taking over, you know how to pull out. If it’s just barely beginning, you want to prevent it. Keep maintaining this centered but broad awareness. And then you find that some thoughts come in and they have more force than others. Why do they have more force? What is it about them that is more appealing? Watch for that. When you’re asking these questions, you’re not totally implanted in your concentration, but you haven’t left it. The image I like to think of is having your hand in a glove. And you can pull it out a little bit. Most of it is still in the glove, but there’s a part of it that’s not. But in this case, this is where the analogy falls apart. You’re actually watching what’s going on in other parts of the mind. You pose the question and then you watch. Because a lot of the insights are going to come with those little beginning stirrings of a thought, and the mind is tempted to think about it. And you want to see why. What’s the appeal? What’s the magnet? And you start seeing things about your mind that you never saw before, some of which are fascinating, some of which are kind of dismaying. But remember, we’re here not to be fascinated or dismayed. We’re here to find things out. Why does this process have such power over us? Why are we overcome by our pleasures? Why are we overcome by our pains? That’s what the allure of these thoughts is, the hint of pleasure. Today we’re talking about magical thinking, people thinking that if they think about sensual pleasures enough, the pleasures will actually come somehow. Is that what’s going on in your mind? Or is it something else? I mean, the fascinating part is good. But the fact that you’re getting interested in the processes of the mind, how it puts things together, how it fools itself, you’re taking this apart, not with abstract thinking. Think of a John Lee’s image. You’re not taking a little pick and going out and just getting the little traces of gold in the rock. You’ve got to bring the rock in and you’ve got to smelt it. In other words, the smelting here is getting the mind into concentration and keeping it in concentration and noticing the little things that will pull you out. And resisting them. That way, as he said, the tin will come out, the lead, the zinc, the copper, silver, gold. Things will separate out in the mind. And it’s in seeing them as separate that you can begin to see exactly where the problem is. It’s one of the big ironies of the mind. What you hear about the Buddha’s teachings is so many times they say, “Well, the Buddha is teaching us about the oneness of everything.” But as he himself said, it’s when you see things as separate that’s when you understand them. Your awareness is one thing, the thoughts are something else. You bring them together to make them one. That’s putting the rock in the smelter. But then as the rock gets heated, things come out and they separate of their own. It’s this big hunk of physical and mental phenomena that we’ve got here. You bring them together, and it’s when they’re together solidly and you make the effort to keep them that way, then they begin to open up, separate out. Then you find why it is that the mind was creating suffering for itself. Even though it didn’t want to, it was acting in ignorance. But you want to know exactly what it was ignorant of. We’re not answering these questions with abstractions. We’re answering them by seeing things in action. And this centered, broad awareness is the best place to see it.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2018/181215_A_Centered_But_Broad_Awareness.mp3>