Centered All-around

January 18, 2020

The Buddha describes right concentration as a full body awareness. The question is, how do you develop that, and why? The how is something the Buddha doesn’t explain much. In his instructions on breath meditation, he says simply that your discerning of long breathing and discerning of short breathing, and then you move right on to a whole body awareness, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And he also mentions in his similes for right concentration that when there’s a sense of ease or rapture, say on the first jhana, you let it spread through the body to the point where there’s nothing in the body that’s not saturated with ease and rapture. But again, he doesn’t say how. He gives some helpful advice. He says you think of the breath not just as the breath coming in and out of the lungs, but also the breath energy in the body. And you try to coordinate the two. First, he recommends being aware of the breath at one particular point. He says there are resting spots for the breath. And you can choose whichever one seems most congenial. There’s the middle of the forehead, tip of the nose, base of the throat, tip of the sternum, or just above the navel. Those are just a few of the major ones. There are other ones as well. Try to find a spot where you’re sensitive to how the breathing feels. Not just sensitive to the fact that it’s coming in and going out, but a spot that’s sensitive to long breathing and short breathing. Notice that one feels better than the other, and then try to breathe in a way that keeps that sense of well-being going. Once the breath is at ease, then you can think of it spreading to different parts of the body. He has you take the body section by section. He starts from the back of the neck, going down to the spine. Then the middle of the chest, going down through the intestines, down the shoulders, out the arms. But you can go through the body in any way that you find most congenial. In Ajahn Lee’s case, when he discovered this method for breath meditation, he was recovering from a heart attack. And as anyone who has heart disease knows, the thing you notice most is there’s a lot of tension building up in the neck. So that’s the first area to treat. But he does say in other places that you should not focus first on the parts that are difficult or painful. Focus first on the parts that you can make comfortable, because you’re going to need allies. So you can get sensitive to what kind of breathing really does feel comfortable, so that when you start spreading the breath, you are spreading a comfortable breath, not a tense one. And your attitude is also at ease. So when you’re focusing, say, at the middle of the chest, you don’t tighten up the middle of the chest. When you’re focusing in the middle of the forehead, you don’t tighten that up. You think of it as being wide open, because that’s the kind of focus you want. There was a book that came out years ago on tracking through the forest. The author was talking about something he called “scattershot vision.” When you’re going through a forest, you have no idea where the tracks are going to go. You have to be ready to see them in any direction. So you’re sending your awareness inside, not outside. If you can think of a camera lens, imagine the focal length of the camera lens being right in the middle of the lens. Think of your vision radiating out from that in all directions, so you don’t give more emphasis to one spot than another. This is very different from our ordinary way of looking at things. We tend to spotlight things. Some things are thrown into the light and other things are thrown into the shadow. But here you’re trying to have an even awareness all around. But you do have a center. In this case, the center is in the middle of the lens. But everything else radiates out from that, because you want to see the tracks wherever they might be. This applies to whether you’re tracking animals or trying to find mushrooms. Whatever you’re looking for in the forest. It’s the same with tracking down defilements in the mind. Because when they arise, they arise together with attention in the body. And if you’re not aware of the whole body, they can move in, slip a sack over your head, and then drag you off without you noticing where they came from. But if your awareness is all around, you’re ready for them. Like that story of the young man who went to study sword fighting with a master. Instead of picking up the sword, the sword master said, “Well, just learn how to chop wood, carry water, do the chores around the place.” Then every now and then he would attack the young guy as he was chopping wood or carrying water. The young guy thought, “What kind of setup is this?” He wanted to learn sword fighting. But then he began to realize that he had to get more and more wary about how the sword master might come at him from any angle. So he developed an all-around awareness. Then one day the sword master came up with a stick to beat him, and the young man was able to fend him off. And the sword master said, “Okay, now you’re ready to pick up a sword.” In the same way, the defilements can come from any direction. So you want your awareness to be centered about all around. You might think of it in terms of attention and consciousness, in terms of the Buddha’s analysis of how the mind works. Attention is focused on a particular issue, whereas consciousness is simply receptive. And it’s going to be receptive all around. Similarly, we tend to block off certain parts of that receptivity so we can focus on other things, to focus our attention on where we want it. Now you want the attention to meld back into the consciousness, your consciousness of the body, so that it becomes one and the same thing, centered but broad. Now you notice, as you try to settle in with the body, that some parts seem to be missing. I remember when I started out, my right shoulder seemed to be missing. I knew where my right forearm was, and I knew where my neck was, but there was something missing between the two. And so I very deliberately tried to track where the connection was. And I found that my mental picture of where the shoulder was was way out of whack. But there was a connection, so I tried to trace it. As you go down the shoulder, say, if that was your problem, go down from the neck to the shoulder. Where do you have the sensations of shoulder? Or you can come from the other end, starting with your hands, going up your forearm, past the elbow and up through the upper arm to get to the shoulder. And at first you don’t have to adjust things. Just notice, where do you actually feel it? What is your mental picture of your body? You may have seen those pictures that they printed years back of how the body looks to your brain. Based on where most of the nerve endings are, the face is huge, the body is small, the hands are big, the feet are big. But just notice how you picture the body to yourself, and where you have the sensation of the different parts of the body. Trace things around so you get familiar with it, because you want to have a place where the mind can settle in and have this all-around awareness, this scattershot awareness, centered by the mind all around. And learn how to stay here with a sense of well-being, with a sense of ease. The breath helps with that. And having the perception of the breath as energy going through the body helps with that as well. You also begin to notice that there are different levels of breath energy. We talked about this earlier this morning. There’s the in-and-out breath. Then there’s the breath that flows through the blood vessels, the breath that flows through the nerves. There’s also a very sudden, subtle breath that, as soon as you start thinking about breathing, it’s already gone through the body. It’s like all the different currents in the ocean. Some go fast, some are down in deeper levels, and they go very slowly. And you want to notice which level of energy you can focus on that gives you that sense of well-being, that gives you a sense of all-around awareness that you can maintain. So there’s a lot to explore here. But it requires that you treat the breath as a friend, not as an enemy. And also be willing to listen to what the breath needs, what the body needs. If you come in with a lot of preconceived notions of how you’re going to straighten things out, you’re barging into an area that has probably been abused and neglected. And you know what abused and neglected people are like. You move in on them and they resist. So you’ve got to show that you’re gentle, that you’re sensitive. You’re willing to give them some space as you explore. Listen to them. And after all, things will begin to connect, things will begin to open up. And then you can follow the Buddha’s instructions. Develop a whole body awareness that the breath is filling the body, your awareness is filling the body, your sense of ease is filling the body. They’re all together right here, centered but all around. And then try to maintain that. There may be some impatience, saying, “Well, what’s the next stage? What’s the next step?” That’s like the difference between an unripe fruit and a ripe fruit. You don’t move from the unripe fruit on one spot of the tree to a ripe fruit on the other spot of the tree. You just stay with the unripe fruit. Nurture it, and it’s going to ripen on its own, right here where you are. As you get more sensitive, as you get more solid, as your combined attention and consciousness turn more and more into one.

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