

All-around Alertness

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The Buddha says we're here to attain the as-yet-unattained, to reach the as-yet-unreached, to realize the as-yet-unrealized. Which means we have to notice things we haven't noticed yet. And to do that, we have to do things we haven't done before. We have to bring the mind into a state of concentration where it can see unexpected things. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha placed such a huge emphasis—in his analogies for states of right concentration—on developing a whole-body awareness. As he says, you develop a sense of ease and well-being, and then you let it spread through the body.

First we're talking about *physical* well-being: How do you breathe in a way that feels really good, really refreshing?

In Ajaan Lee's analogy, you have a cook who keeps changing the way she fixes her meals for her employer so as to keep her employer happy with the food. As Ajaan Lee says, if she fixes rice porridge today, rice porridge tomorrow, rice porridge the next day, the employer is going to get a new cook. So that's the first order of business here: finding ways of breathing that feel really good right now—and what feels good right now is not necessarily what's going to feel good tomorrow.

So look at this with fresh eyes. Where do you not ordinarily focus on breath sensations in the body? Have you ever spent much time with your right flank, or your left flank, or your tailbone? Give them some time, give them some space, give them some attention. They might have some potentials you haven't thought of before.

Then, from the sense of well-being in the body, it begins to spread into the mind. Partly because the mind likes being with comfortable sensations, and partly because you realize you're developing a skill. That's part of the sense of well-being, part of the pleasure that comes with the meditation. As you're learning how to figure out your own mind, you're seeing connections that you didn't see before.

When the Buddha talks about giving rise to joy in the practice, it can come

from tranquility and it can come from insight. The tranquility would give rise to a sense of ease in the body. Insight is a more mental kind of pleasure: You see things you didn't understand before, and you see, as a result, that something has been freed in the mind.

So you try to cultivate both kinds of well-being and then you let them spread.

This is where Ajaan Lee's instructions get really helpful. He talks about breath energies in the body. In Thai medicine, they talk about different breath channels in the body, like the meridians in Chinese medicine. So you notice, when you breathe in: Where does the flow seem to flow? Ajaan Lee gives you some ideas about where you might look, but there are lots of different places, lots of different ways it can flow.

And again, what feels right for the body right now? Get used to how your body feels from within so that you know when the body needs to be calmed and when it needs to be energized. There are certain parts of the body that normally seem to be well-connected but for some reason today are not, so you make adjustments. Think of the breath flowing all around, throughout the body, and it takes that sense of well-being all around the body as well. The reason we do this is because we want this all-around awareness.

It is possible to get the mind into states of one-pointed concentration, but when you do, huge areas of your awareness are blocked-out. We're here to see things we didn't see before, and you don't see them by blocking things out. You gain power of concentration from the one-pointedness, but when the mind is one-pointed like that, it's not going to gain insight. The insight will have to come—for people who tend to be very one-pointed—when they're coming out of concentration.

But it's also possible to gain insight while you're in concentration when you have this sense of the whole body as your framework. When things move in and out of the range of your body, move in and out of the range of your awareness, they don't shake that framework.

You can see their motions, you can see their connections, but you're grounded, you're solidly based. And it is possible for the mind to think, to look, to ask questions. Not very long elaborate questions, short questions, and then you watch.

Look all around, because it's possible that different mental events will come and they come in different parts of the mind, and they can be associated with different parts of the body where you don't normally look.

An important part of the meditation is having this ability to see things coming in when they're still tender, when they're still young, and you can detect if something's wrong or something's right with them. If there's something right, you want to nurture them. If there's something wrong, you want to watch out for them. A lot of insight comes from seeing connections out of the corner of your eye. They're not quite exactly where you were looking, but they're nearby.

This is why mindfulness and alertness have to be very carefully balanced, because there are the times when mindfulness can actually get in the way of alertness. In other words, you have a certain topic that you're holding in mind, and you're so thoroughly clamped down on that one topic that you miss everything else. After all, it's not the case that the mind has only one intention going on at any one time. You can think of it as being like a corporation or a factory: lots of activities are going on. Messages get sent up through the bureaucracy and some of them get blocked, say, at middle-level management. Others make their way all the way through to the president of the corporation. But when they get blocked half-way up, you have to wonder: "Is there a good reason for blocking them, or is there a bad reason for blocking them?"

If you're too focused on keeping one thing in mind and not paying attention to anything else inside the body, inside your mind, then you're going to miss this. That's how mindfulness actually gets in the way of alertness. It's a case when mindfulness is wrong mindfulness. You have to be able to hold in mind the fact that you want to be fully aware of the body all-around.

You may be paying a lot of attention, say, to your hands today, but don't block out everything else. You begin to notice, as you release tension in some of the muscles in the hands, that there's a release chain reaction that goes up the arms. The same can happen with the feet or different parts of the back. So allow those chain reactions to loosen things up inside, see where they go, see what's connected to what inside.

There was one time when I was given a treatment by a doctor in Thailand. He

maintained one of the types of old style medicine that had been actively stamped out in the beginning of the twentieth century. But his father had secreted away the text books for that style of medicine, and it had a very different map of the channels for the body from other traditional forms of Thai medicine.

I happened to have a bad headache the day I went for the treatment, so he worked on it, following a channel that wandered around the body in a lot of weird ways. So it's not the case that all the channels are straight. They can be like the Mississippi River—lots of little curves—so be sensitive to that. Be open to new things.

If you're not open to new ideas, new perceptions, new ways of sensing the breath, then the meditation can get old. And again, if you're focused on one spot without being willing to connect to other spots in the body, you block out the possibility of seeing connections. And that's what a lot of insight is all about: seeing connections.

After all, when the Buddha gave his simplest expression of what he learned in his awakening, it was the principle of cause and effect. "When this is, that is. From the arising of this, comes the arising of that." These are two causal principles. "When this isn't, that isn't. With the cessation of this, comes the cessation of that." So you've got two causal principles: Things arising and passing away at the same time; and things arising because of a cause that may have happened beforehand, and that can continue to act even after the original cause is gone. Which means there are a lot of possibilities for connections inside.

So you want to develop the right mindfulness, the right alertness, and the right ardency to see these things. And keep in mind the Buddha's instructions on right concentration—full-body awareness, full-body rapture, full-body pleasure—because that will put you in a position where you can see things that you haven't seen before.

After all, all the things the Buddha talks about are right here: The cause for suffering is right here. The path to the end of suffering as we chanted just now, is composed of qualities that we develop right here. So you don't have to go anywhere else.

You might think that, having lived this long in your life, you know everything

that could go on right here. Well, you don't. If you did, you'd be awakened. There would be no more suffering. The fact that there still is suffering means there's more to learn right here. Just bring the right quality of mind so that you can see things here that you haven't seen before.