

Eyes in the Back of Your Head

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One of the most important skills in meditation practice is learning how to develop both a clear center, a strong focal point, and full-body awareness. You've got to have both.

A focal point without the full-body awareness is hard to maintain continually. You can maintain it when everything is quiet and there are no disturbances. But as soon as there's the least bit of disturbance, you lose it. And even when you *can* maintain it, it's a very blind kind of concentration. You focus just on one spot and you tend to blot out everything else. You can feel very centered, very secure while you're in it, but it makes discernment difficult.

Full-body awareness without a center, though, doesn't have the depth, doesn't have the heft of a centered concentration. It can get very vague and sloppy.

So you've got to learn the skill of balancing the two. In the course of your meditation, you'll find that sometimes the emphasis goes more toward the center and at other times more towards the fullness. But you want to work at both.

Ajaan Lee gives the analogy of cutting roads through a wilderness. If you want to improve the communication, improve the transportation to the wilderness, you've got to cut lots of roads. Then it's very easy for everybody to get to everybody else. Nowadays, we don't like the idea of cutting roads through wilderness. We think the wilderness should be left alone. But in his day, there was a definite need in Thailand for more roads. So think of your body as needing roads. You want everything to be connected. This way makes it easier to develop that balance between the center and the full-body awareness.

First you have to go through the body. Notice where the blockages are. But before you look at the blockages, first you've got to get at least one spot that feels good. Maintain that steady sense of fullness all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, and you notice that it depends how long the breath is. Sometimes if your out-breath is too long, you start squeezing your spot, so that's not good. As soon as you sense that you're squeezing it, stop and breathe back in, until the body feels ready to breathe back out again.

Try to maintain that sense of your full, comfortable center, and then start exploring the rest of your body to see if you can find that sense of fullness and ease in other parts as well. Notice where you don't have it, or parts of the body that seem to be missing or are tense or tight, blocked. Then you do your best to work

through the blockages. Just think of them as penetrable. You can make connections.

Say there's a blockage in your arm. Focus on the part above the blockage and the part below the blockage. How can you connect them? Where do they actually connect already? There must be some connection, otherwise your arm would be paralyzed. Why do the muscles feel tightened there? Can you consciously loosen them so that you can connect things up? Do this throughout the whole body, so that there's a sense of connection.

Once you've got that sense of connection, you can try settling down in one spot and see if you can maintain that one spot and feel connected throughout the whole body, from that spot, at the same time. In the beginning, you might want to try the points that Ajaan Lee mentions in his Method Two: the middle of the forehead, the palate, the base of the throat, the tip of the sternum, a point just above the navel. These are the basic spots that you might want to try first. But if you they don't work for you, explore on your own to see what *does* work. Try to maintain that balance of being focused and still in your one spot and yet feeling a sense of connection throughout the whole body. It's like having eyes on all sides of your body. Instead of just looking at one thing, you're looking all around.

The advantage of this kind of meditation is that once you have that sense of the all-around awareness, you can withstand distractions. They come into your range and you can hold them in that range if you need to hold them, or you can simply let them go through, much more easily than if you're just on one spot. Because if you're on one spot and that's it, then if you move from that one spot, the concentration is destroyed. But this way, you've got a sense of full range that you can hold on to, that you can stay settled in, where you feel at ease, at home. Each distraction is like a sound wave coming through your home. The sound may come through, and you know there's a sound, but it doesn't destroy your home.

So the first advantage is that the concentration is a lot more solid. It's the kind of concentration you can carry throughout the day.

Second, it primes you for discernment. The whole issue of discernment is: What is the mind doing? If you just look at one spot, you miss all the other things that are happening around that spot. Often it's the things that are happening around: Those are the issue. You can apply this principle either in the concentration itself or when you've come out of concentration and are looking at things in terms of the five aggregates.

In the concentration, the Buddha recommends developing the ability to step back from your concentration a bit. The image he gives is of a person sitting who's watching a person lying down, or a person standing watching a person sitting.

You look at the other person and you're above them. You can see what they're doing. After all, this state of concentration is a form of what they call *bhava*, or becoming. It's a state of being. Every state of being is usually focused on something. There's a craving, there's delight, there's an attraction to one thing that becomes the focus for a whole sense of who you are and of the world around you. You want to be able to watch the process of how that happens. Being able to step back from that one spot and look at it from another perspective enables you to see how it's all put together.

Then you can start analyzing what you've got in the state of concentration. Where's the form, where's the feeling? In other words, look at it in terms of the five aggregates. It's not just a spot. There's going to be a sense of form, a feeling of pleasure or equanimity, and then the perception that keeps you there. Then there's the running commentary. This is *sankhara*, fabrication, and that can exist on many levels. In the beginning of concentration, when you're actively working through the body, it's pretty blatant. On the more subtle levels of concentration, it goes more into the background. But there are intentions going on. There has to be an intention that maintains that concentration all the time.

And there is going to be perception. So uniting that intention and the perception: That's a process of fabrication. You want to look for that. Again, sometimes this involves having eyes in the back of your head or eyes on different sides of your body. In other words, it's not going to be right where you thought it was. It's certainly not going to be right at the spot of the concentration. It's going to be hovering around. This is why you need that all-around awareness to see it.

Then there's a sense of awareness itself—consciousness, *viññana*—that's in there, too.

You want to be able to observe these things if you're ever going to get any insight out of the concentration while you're in the concentration.

The same principle applies to focusing on things when you leave the intensity of strong concentration. For example, when there's a physical pain, you want to be able to take it apart. You realize that the suffering is not the pain; the suffering is what you do around the pain. So again, you need this all-around awareness to see what's going on all around. Like that analogy of taking a camera in to see the animals of the savannah. You focus at the watering hole, but you don't just sit there taking pictures of the watering hole. You want to be able to see the animals all around the watering hole.

The pain is the watering hole. You take it apart to see what's in the pain, what's around the pain, because that's where you see a lot of the suffering being created. First there's the form of the body, and you have to realize the form of the body is

not the pain. We tend to glom the two together, though. You have a pain in your knee, and it seems to be right there in the shape of the knee. The pain gets equated with the knee. But your sense of the form of the knee and the pain: Those are actually two different things. The form is made out of the properties of earth, water, wind, and fire, but none of those are pain. The pain is a *vedana*, a feeling. If you can learn to make a distinction between the two, you see that the actual feeling comes and goes. It moves around, whereas the knee just sits there. The blood flows through, you move it a little bit, but the actual form of the body and the sensation of say, physical pain, are two separate things.

You want to be able to see that distinction. You're trying to take the suffering, and cut it up into manageable bites. Instead of being one huge lump, it turns into little pieces of gravel. Then, as you're looking at it, you begin to realize that there are also perceptions going on around the pain. Some of them just say: "pain, pain, pain, oops, now it's moving here, now it's going there." Sometimes there's a mental image of the shape of the pain that goes along with that. You want to be able to see that in action so that you can begin to realize how the way you label the pain has a huge influence on both the actual physical sensation of the pain and the extent to which it's causing suffering for the heart.

It can even happen that as you cut that perception, once you actually see the part of the mind that's commenting on the pain saying things like, "that or pain" or what it looks like, then if you can cut that perception and stop repeating it, the pain will actually disappear. It goes zip, right into the heart, and disappears. You realize that the suffering all came out of the heart and was projected on to that spot in the body. That can happen. Other times, you cut the perception, but the physical pain is still there. Still, the mind is a lot less burdened by it because you're not trying to carry it.

Sometimes that happens. We feel that if we don't surround the pain with our commentary on it, it's going to take off and spread everywhere. That fear is what makes us hold it. But, actually, the holding is a weight on the mind.

Then there are the narratives that go along with the pain: This is the *sankhara* or fabrication. You think about how long the pain has been there, or how much longer it's going to be there. You're wondering why you're putting up with this pain, or why the forces of the world are making you ill right now, if that's where the pain is coming from. But again, if you have this all-around awareness developed, you can see the narratives as they flit around in the mind. You can see the connection between the narrative and the actual level of suffering that you feel.

Then there's the consciousness, the awareness of all these things. You want to make that as all-embracing as possible so that you can see the whole picture, and not just one point. It's this all-embracing awareness that allows you to see connections, particularly connections between events. That's what the word *samudaya* in the origination of suffering means: something that arises at the same time. It arises together, disappears together. If you see the perception arising and there's a greater sense of burdensomeness, you realize that that burdensomeness has come from the perception.

But if your focus is totally narrow to one point, you're not going to see any connections at all. You're just going to see your one point. So you want a concentration that's more inclusive.

Some people say that concentration has to be exclusive whereas mindfulness is inclusive. The Buddha never said anything like that at all. Concentration is stable full-body awareness—centered but full-body—and the skill is learning to keep the two of them together. It makes the concentration more solid and opens the way for discernment to arise. Because your awareness is all-around, you see connections of what's happening all around. It's only in that way that liberating insight can arise.