Taking an Active Role

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When the Buddha was teaching breath meditation, he’d try to get people very quickly into a full body awareness. Step number three out of his sixteen steps is to breathe in sensitive to the entire body, to breathe out sensitive to the entire body. It’s important that we try to develop this awareness as quickly and as consistently as we can, as we practice. Not only while we’re sitting here meditating, but also as we go through life. Because if you fully inhabit your space, nobody else can inhabit your space. There’s an image in the Canon of someone with mindfulness immersed in the body. The body is like a hardwood door. You try to throw a ball of string at the hardwood door and it just bounces off. It doesn’t enter into the door. For someone who doesn’t have that kind of mindfulness, doesn’t have that kind of full body awareness, it’s like throwing a rock into a ball of clay. The rock penetrates into the clay very easily. This can be an image for your own thoughts, greed, anger, and delusion. It can take root pretty easily if you’re not filling your awareness with mindfulness, mindfulness of the whole body. And other people’s energies can enter into your space as well, if you’re not fully inhabiting it. Sometimes you notice this. You go to somebody’s house, you go to a room where people have been fighting, and you sense their energy. And if you’re not totally careful to maintain your full body awareness, you find that their energy penetrates you. You pick it up very easily. You become like a sponge. You absorb whatever’s around you. At the same time, if your mind is not fully inhabiting the body, its range gets very small. And when its range is small, it can slip out very easily. It’s almost as if the past and future were little tubes. If your mind gets very small, it can slip down the tubes. If it’s large, it can’t. It’s too big. So as you’re working with the breath, remember to think of the breathing as a whole body process. In Ajahn Lee’s instructions here, he has you start with different parts of the body, finding a center, working through the body, and then trying to connect everything. The Buddha works the other way around. You maintain a full body awareness and then look at how the breath is having an effect on the different parts of the body. Either way works. The important thing is that you get a sense of ease and well-being. Sometimes you find it easier to work with just one small part of the body first, before you start spreading your awareness around, getting that one part feeling really comfortable, really good, and then thinking of spreading it either systematically or just wherever it wants to go. The other way is to keep your awareness full body and then notice the breathing as a full body process. You’re making adjustments wherever you see they’re necessary, so that the effect of the breath is common. In the beginning, it may require that you do some heavy breathing, just to get everything ventilated so it feels good, so that the energy needs of the body get met. But then once the energies are met, then you can allow things to calm down. It’s as if you’ve been out in the desert. You come back and you have to drink glassful after glassful of water to make up for the fact that you’ve been dehydrated. Once you get rehydrated, then you don’t have to drink so much anymore. Just little sips. But the important thing is that you learn how to develop this sense of full body well-being. So even if there are pains in different parts of the body, or the body is ill in one way or another, at the very least the breath side of things is taken care of. So the way you breathe is not contributing to the illness, it’s not contributing to the pain, and actually offers you an alternative place to focus your awareness. There may be pain, say, in your knee or pain in your stomach, but there can be good breath energy in your knee, good breath energy in your stomach, so the pain doesn’t take possession of that spot. You are less on the receiving end and more on an active, proactive way, experiencing the body, taking advantage of the fact that you do have a role in shaping the present moment. You learn how to make the most of that role. This is a point that’s really worth exploring, realizing that there are lots of different potentials here in the present moment that are showing themselves. And you have the choice of which potentials you’re going to need. You choose which ones you’re going to nourish, which ones you’re going to encourage. This is probably one of the most important things to understand about the Buddhist teachings on karma. It’s not that you’re presented with a present moment and then you react. You’ve got lots of potential present moments, and you choose. So even though there may be the potential for pain in a particular part of the body, you don’t have to get weighed down by it. You can be more proactive. Breathe around the pain. Try to understand the pain. When you take that more proactive stance, you suffer less. This is one of the ways that the Buddha says you develop both body and mind. When you’re undeveloped in body and undeveloped in mind, pain is less. Pain and pleasure overcome you. You get weighed down by them. If you take a more proactive stance, realizing that the pain is not a given, it may be one of the potentials there, but you don’t have to suffer from it. You don’t have to be on the receiving end. Then it doesn’t overcome you. The same with pleasure. You learn to use the pleasure for something more than just trying to wallow in it and try to extend the pleasure as much as possible. You do try to extend skillful types of pleasure based on concentration, based on mindfulness. But you realize that you don’t just stretch the pleasure itself. You work on the causes. Then try to keep the pleasure going as long as you can. If you find your mind slipping off, ask yourself, “What happened just now? Where did you lose your focus? Where did you allow the pain or the pleasure to overcome you so that you lost your more proactive approach to things?” This way, you’re less on the receiving end and taking on more of the role of the skillful shaper. Figure out how to make the most out of whatever you’ve got here in the present moment. And in that role, you suffer a lot less. You’re less the victim. You’re less a victim of what’s coming up in the mind. You’re less a victim of what’s coming up in the body. You’re less a victim of what’s happening around you. Always keep this in mind. You have the choice. You can be aware of a tiny part of the body, or you can be aware of the whole body. You can let the breath be miserable, or you can work to make it a more pleasurable experience. You can be the victim of pain, overcome by it, or you can put yourself in a good position through the breath where you can be more inquisitive about, “Why is there this pain? What’s going on here? How can I shape this experience so that even though there may be pain in the body, it doesn’t have to be pain in the mind?” Or there may be pleasure in the body, and you figure out, “How can I work with this best?” You’re not just trying to wallow in the pleasure. But realize, if it’s a pleasure based on concentration and mindfulness, how do you extend the concentration? How do you extend the mindfulness? Keep them going. When you take on this more proactive role, you begin to discover that there are a lot more potentials here in the present moment than you might have ever thought.

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