The Body from the Inside

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When we experience the body from the inside, the Buddha calls it an experience of form. It’s not counted as one of the six senses. When we talk about the body and tactile sensations, we’re talking about the body as it touches things outside, as it touches the air where it’s hot or cold, touches things that are soft or hard. That’s the body as one of the six senses, and the pleasures that come from that count as sensual pleasures. But the pleasure we can create inside as we work with the breath, that’s a different kind of pleasure. And as the Buddha said, it helps us, enables us, to step back from our sensual pleasures so that we’re not so totally involved with them. Because if we don’t have any other alternative to pain, that’s where the mind keeps on running to sensual pleasures, sensual pleasures. But as we learn how to work with the different energies in the body, it gives us another alternative. In fact, it’s part of the path, the pleasure that comes. The sense of pleasure and refreshment that comes as you pull away from your ordinary sensual concerns. The pleasure and refreshment that come when you get the mind centered and concentrated. The word samadhi that we translate as concentration, some people object to it on good grounds. Because ordinarily when we think about concentration, we think of a very narrow, one-pointed focus. We’re blocking out everything else. Whereas with this kind of concentration, you’re trying to open up your awareness and make it all around. You’ve got a sense of being centered right here, centered between front and back, left and right, up and down. And there is one point that you’re focused on, but that’s not the totality of your focus. It’s like looking at a painting. You can focus on one spot in the painting, but you see the whole painting nevertheless. In the same way, you want to be aware of the whole body, even as you’re focused, say, at the middle of the chest, tip of the nose. And as you maintain this sense of whole body, it gives you a foundation so that when other things come in and make contact, they don’t knock you off your concentration. Because your concentration is totally one-pointed. You change the point, the concentration is gone. Whereas if the concentration is based on this larger foundation, then sounds can come through and they go right through. You think of your awareness as a big screen, and the sounds are like the wind that goes through the screen. And it’s that way in which you can get the concentration really centered. Keep it solid as you’re sitting here, and also keep it going as you go through the day. It really helps to have a sense of what else you’re feeling here inside the body. The Buddha talks about four properties. There’s earth, water, wind, fire. It sounds like the old medieval elements. But as we use these concepts in the meditation, it’s something different. How do you know you have a body sitting here right now? How do you know that? You’re sitting here with your eyes closed. There’s nothing you can see. So how do you know you have a body? Well, you feel these different sensations from within. There’s the warmth in the body. There’s coolness in the body. That’s fire and water. There’s a sense of heaviness in the body. That’s earth. And then there’s the energy that allows you to move the body. That’s wind. These are things that we’ve been using all along. Because we tend not to pay attention to what’s going on inside our bodies, because we’re too focused on the world outside, we’re not really sensitive, say, to the flowing of the breath energy. For some people, this is one of the hardest parts of doing the meditation, is getting a clear sense of what’s meant by breath energy. Well, the fact that you feel the body right here, it’s because of the breath energy. Without the breath energy, you wouldn’t have any sense of any of the other elements, any of the other properties. So start with that, the fact that you feel a body here. That’s breath. And then the other properties are things you feel through the breath. This requires rearranging some of your perceptions. Many of us have the idea that we’ve got a solid body here, and you have to breathe the breath in and breathe the breath out. But from this point of view, the breath is what you start with, and solidity is something that comes afterwards. So as you breathe in, think about the whole body that you sense here. It’s breathing. It may be breathing together, or the different parts may be breathing at cross purposes. Try to notice that. Some parts feel more nourished by the breath than others. Others feel worn out by the fact that they do all the breathing work for everybody else. Or they’re left out at the breath energy. Try to make a survey through the body and see how different parts feel as you breathe in, how they feel as you breathe out, and whether things feel coordinated or if things feel like they’re working at cross purposes. And if they’re working at cross purposes, what do you do? Well, don’t try to push the breath in, because the breath isn’t something you push. If you push, it’s going to be the liquid pushing against the solid parts of the body. And that’s something that can very easily lead to headaches and other problems. The energy is something that doesn’t exert pressure at all. It moves freely. And if there’s a sense of blockage, think of it as being permeated by holes, or you can think of it as being atoms that are mostly space, so the energy can flow freely through. And when you get that sense of blockage, you get the hang of this. It makes it even easier to stay with this larger foundation as you go through the day. It may sound like multitasking, but actually what it’s doing is giving you a good, solid place to stand. Multitasking is like juggling lots of things in the air. But this isn’t something you juggle in the air. This is where you stand. And if you have a good, solid foundation on which to stand, then it’s easier to juggle the other things that you need to take care of. Sometimes it helps to think of backing into the body as you inhabit it. If you were to take a picture of some people’s conception of how they’re observing the breath, it’s like they’ve got this bird perched on their shoulders, and it’s looking through their eyes at the body. But we’re not looking at the breath with the eyes. We’re backing into it. We’re feeling it from within. And we’re trying to develop a sense of what they call the all-around eye, where you’re sitting here and you’re looking in all directions all at once. That helps keep you centered, but with that sense of broad awareness at the same time. So get acquainted with this body. These elements can be troublesome. There’s a passage where the Buddha compares them to four vipers that you have to pick up and feed and bathe and then lay down again. Again and again and again. And if any one of them gets provoked at you, as the Buddha says, you’re going to meet with death or death-like pain. But they also have their good side. If you learn how to work with the breath, your health gets more solid. Just inhabiting your body from within, you begin to see areas of tension that you’ve been missing all along, because you’ve been so focused on something outside. Sitting here and meditating, it’s not the case that the meditation is causing those blockages, unless your posture is bad. But we carry these things around because we’re not paying attention to them. We just take them for granted. And it’s only when we begin to inhabit the body again that we begin to notice, “Oh, there’s a lot of tension here.” Think of it just dissolving away as you breathe in and breathe out. Notice what rhythm of breathing is good to help soothe the body from within. This helps to keep the vipers from getting provoked at you. And your own sense of your own awareness of what your awareness can do and how broad it can be and how steady it can be, that will change. That will develop as you inhabit the body from within. Because after all, someday we’re going to have to leave this body. But it’s easier to leave if you get to know it really well from within at first. I heard someone once say, “How can you take the breath as your meditation object when you’re going to have to leave it someday?” Well, you use the breath to get the mind centered, and then you get to know the mind. And that becomes your real object. But as Ajaan Lee said, the breath is like a mirror for the mind. You learn a lot about the mind by looking at the breath. The more sensitive you get to the breath, the more sensitive you’ll become to what’s going on in the mind, the little stirrings in the mind, the beginning of a thought. That tends to be obscured within our sense of the body. But as you get more sensitive to this, then you begin to see those little stirrings. And there’s more. As the Buddha said, “The deathless is touched with the body.” What that means is where you’re experiencing your body right now, that’s where you experience the deathless. It’s not something you simply think about or hold as a concept. It’s a total experience all around. So to get in that direction, learn how to be aware of your body all around to begin with. That gets you off on the right foot. you

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