Immersed in the Body

July 5, 2022

Make a survey of your body. Make a survey of your mind. For the body, start with the fingers. Go gradually up through the hands, the arms, to the shoulders. Then start again with the toes. Work up your way. The feet, the ankles, up your legs, through the pelvis, up the back, to the neck, the skull. Wherever you feel any tension or tightness, allow it to relax. Try to inhabit your body fully. Remember to cause this mindfulness immersed in the body. It’s an important principle in getting established in the present moment. The sutta on mindfulness immersed in the body has those images. Breathing in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease, rapture, or refreshment, and then allowing that sense of rapture and refreshment to spread through the body, to permeate the body, saturate it. In the beginning, this requires some work. In other words, you notice where there’s tension that’s getting in the way, and you relax it. This is where it’s useful to think about the breath as a whole body process. When the Buddha classifies the in-and-out breath, it’s not as a tactile sensation. It’s part of the process. It’s a wind element in the body, which means we’re talking about the energy in the body. Try to get a sense of how it’s flowing. It may be very subtle, but there are some places where it’ll be more obvious than others. Start with those. Breathe in a way that those parts of the body feel good. Then expand your awareness. Expand the breath. Think of them going together. Think of all the different parts of the body feeling coordinated. If you can settle down with the breath like this, then there’s not much need to make a survey of the mind. It’s when you can’t settle down that you have to ask yourself, “Okay, what’s wrong? What in the mind is resisting? Maybe holding on to some issues of the day?” Learn to think in a way that you can untie the knots of those issues. This is one of the reasons why we have thoughts of goodwill at the beginning of the meditation. Think of any difficult people you’ve had dealings with in the course of the day and spread some goodwill in their direction. We’re on this earth for a very short time, so why carry resentment so much? So why carry issues around with you? Think of your mind lifting up above the issues of the day. Because you don’t want to be defined by day-to-day issues. You’ve got more important things—the state of the mind, where you’re going. Think about the Buddha’s image of the fish fighting one another. They’ve got that last little bit of water in this tiny, tiny, shriveling up stream of water. They fight and they fight, and those who win are going to die anyhow. So you don’t want to be a fish. You want to lift your mind above that. That image in the can reminds me of a time when I was up in Canada. I found a stream where the salmon had come in off of the ocean, and they’d run quite an obstacle course, going through a beach where the stream ran. On either side of the stream were these birds that were ready to pick out their eyes. They made it past that, then they got into the woods, and there were bears. And there were the bodies of other fish that had gotten there, spawned, and died. So think about that. Think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening, thinking about the many lifetimes he’d been through, what the details were. His name, his appearance, what kind of being he was, or if he was a human being, what clan he belonged to, what nationality. His experience of pleasure, his experience of pain, the kind of food he ate, and how he died. That’s it. Pleasure, pain, food, die. If there’s part of the mind that wants more than that, you want to identify with that part of the mind. Because that’s the part of the mind that’s going to be in charge of your meditation, the part that can look at what you’re getting involved in—your thoughts of greed, thoughts of aversion, thoughts of delusion. You can ask yourself, “Is that what you want? Isn’t there something better?” Or you’re going to find something better right here, watching the mind in the present moment. This ability to watch the mind is very important. As the Buddha said, you find the Dhamma by committing yourself to the Dhamma practice and then reflecting on what you’re doing. That’s how the Dhamma is nourished. And that’s how you’re nourished, too. Otherwise, you’re feeding on things that are basically unsatisfactory. We’re not here to tell ourselves to be satisfied with them. We’re here to realize that they really are unsatisfactory. They’re stressful, inconstant, not-self. The way out is through developing the path. The path is right here, in the body. As the Buddha said, “This fathom-long body, with its consciousness.” So keep your awareness together with the body, because they strengthen each other. It’s through having a sense of breathing easily throughout the whole body that you gain strength for the path. In one of the Buddha’s images, this is your food for the path. So anything in the mind that resists settling in, think your way around it. Think your way through it. Try to parry it. Otherwise, you fend it off. You may not be able to cure the mind’s inclination to go in the direction of those thoughts. But you can fend it off, at least for a while. Create some space inside so you can be fully right here. That’s what the Buddha means by being here. With having mindfulness immersed in the body, fully present in the body, we tend to be focused in our heads. Especially now, with screens everywhere, everything goes out our eyes. We learn how to counteract that. Because in the mind, if it can’t be with the whole body, it feels squeezed. And then the breath gets neglected. And if you try to focus in on the body, it feels very uncomfortable, so you run away from it again. So you’ve got to learn how to work with it. Think of the breath as a refreshing energy that comes through the body. As soon as you start breathing in, it’s already gone down through the nervous system. So think of it opening things up, filling things up with a sense of good energy. And if it comes quickly, fine. And if it doesn’t come quickly, you’ve got to learn how to be patient. Patience here doesn’t mean just waiting for things to get good. You’ve got to learn how to figure out what’s going on. Far too many people, when they meditate, find that they have trouble settling down. They say, “Well, tonight’s not a night to meditate,” and they give up. It’s when you have to struggle with things that you really learn. John Fung commented one time that he had two types of students, those who think too much and those who don’t think enough. The ones who don’t think enough tend to find it easy for the mind to settle down. But then on days when it doesn’t settle down well, they don’t know what to do. As for those who think too much, they have a lot of trouble getting the mind to be willing to just be right here. They have to fight off all the different distractions that the mind creates for itself and often work through patterns of tension in the body that come from thinking too much. But when they figured out how to get around these obstacles, then on days when things are not going well, they know what to do because they’ve been through the obstacles before. With the second kind of person, as John Fung said, his main concern about them was that they would give up before they got some satisfaction, before they got a sense of ease and well-being out of the breath. But once they had, he said, he wasn’t too concerned about them. They knew what to do. Especially in the modern world, with all our screens, we tend to fall into that category. We think too much. It’s going to take a while for the mind to be willing to settle down because it’s used to sending its energies out, like those old pictures of ectoplasm in the 19th century, when somehow they’d arrange photographs of mediums with ectoplasm coming out of different parts of the body. Our mind sends its energies out. It flows out. In the Thai language, they talk about what they call the grasae, which means “currents.” They mean currents in two meanings. One is like the current of a river. But grasae is also used for radio waves, energy that gets broadcast. So our mind’s used to going out, out, out. We’re trying to turn them around and bring them back in so they can watch themselves. So if the breath feels tight, what can you do to change it in a way that it’s not too forced, in a way that feels just right? We’re talking today about the different breath energies in the body, some of which are beneficial and some of which are harmful. It’s the tight and tense energies that are harmful. Try to create some space around them. One way is to remind yourself that if the breath is tight, it’s because you’re using tight muscles to breathe in, tight muscles to breathe out. Which muscles in the body are not tight? Give the tight muscles a vacation. Let them stop. Then you’ll find that the breath will come in other ways. My last year in Thailand I had malaria. It was a pretty severe case. I found that it was getting more and more difficult to breathe because the little malaria parasites were eating up my red blood cells. The oxygen was getting blocked. It wasn’t getting delivered to the muscles that needed it. So the muscles that were doing the breathing were getting more and more tired, more and more irritated. I found the way around that was to think of the breath coming in other parts of the body that I normally didn’t think of it coming in and letting the tired muscles rest, relax. And other muscles would pitch in. And the more I thought about the pores of the skin opening up all around the body, then the less work seemed to be involved. That’s one thing you might try. Just change your image of what’s doing the breathing in the body. And if you find that you’re using your tense muscles to do that, and your tense muscles tend to define your sense of the body right now, remind yourself that there’s more to the body than the tension patterns. In one of the early versions of Ajahn Lee’s Method Two, he talked about breath ownership as the energy outside the body. In other words, there’s a cocoon of energy around the body. Think of it wanting to come into the body, to nourish the body. See if that helps. In other words, play with your perceptions. Play with your sense of what’s actually going on right here, right now. So even if the breath is not comfortable yet, you have something to play with. You have something to work with. Try to be up for the challenge of figuring out what’s going on and what you might do to get the body into a better rhythm. There were times when I had migraines. I found myself getting into an uncomfortable breath pattern. The way out of it was to breathe in in such a way that I had to expand the abdomen as far as I could, even to the point where it was painful. Do that for a couple minutes, and I found I could reset the breath energy, reset the breath rhythm in the body, so that the breath, instead of aggravating the migraines, actually helped to soothe them. There are a lot of things you can do when it’s difficult. And it’s important that you have the right attitude. If you enjoy breath meditation only when it’s going well, then you’re not going to get the most out of it, and you’re not going to be able to get the use out of it when you really need it. As you get older and the body gets weaker, as you get sick and there’s pain, as you’re dying and the mind starts flailing around, it’s good to have this ability to work with the breath and to enjoy the challenges. You want the breath to be your friend. You don’t want to squeeze it. You don’t want to mistreat it. Allow it some space. Allow it some range to flow in, flow out. Remember, you’re not forcing it into the solid parts of the body. It’s more a question of the energies mingling. Good breath energy coming in and mingling with the breath energy already there in the body. It becomes a lot more pleasant to be here, and you’re more likely to want to stay immersed in the body like this. When you leave meditation, try to make sure that you maintain this sense of whole body as long as you can. Don’t go back to that old habit of rushing all of your attention into the head. Rush all of it out the eyes. Step back a little bit, back into the body. You’ll find that it’s not a distraction. All too often we think we’ve got to get into our head so we can think. But the mind needs this full body, expansive sense. So it’s not feeling squeezed, run ragged. It’s got something to tap into in the energy in the body. Then you gain nourishment. Again, that image that the Buddha has. Concentration is nourishment for the path. Full body awareness is nourishment for whatever you want to do. So don’t cut your awareness off from its food. Feed the mind on whole body awareness. And as you develop this skill, you’ll find that you can keep feeding it all day long.

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