

Exploring

October 24, 2003

As you meditate, one way of sensitizing yourself to the breath is to pretend that you've never experienced having a body before. What would it be like to suddenly find that you've got this body sitting here right now? What would the sensations seem like? Where would you notice movement in the body? Where would you notice warmth? Coolness? Heaviness? Solidity? These are the basic properties we're dealing with as we sit here with the body, getting to know it from the inside.

We've lived in the body for a long time, and we've experienced it through the filter of our preconceived notions of what's going on here. A useful exercise to get past those notions is to pretend that you don't know anything about the body at all. If you were suddenly lifted down from some other, non-physical plane and found yourself in this body, what would it feel like? One thing you'd notice would be the strange flipping back and forth between mental events and physical events; they seem to share the same space right here. It's almost like *you're* flipping back and forth: Sometimes you're with the body, sometimes in a mental world. And they're both right here. But what you should try to do right now is to keep that reference with the physical world, the physicality of having a body.

When we focus on the breath, we focus on the sense of movement in the body, the energy-flow. When you breathe in, where does that energy-flow seem to start? How do you know when to stop breathing in? When to start breathing out? Explore these things. The more you explore them, the more you get sensitive to what's going on here. Instead of sloughing over things and saying "Of course, of course, of course! I know this," ask yourself, "Well, do you really know it?" A lot of the great discoveries in the history of science happen when people look *again* in places where everybody thought they knew everything already, and realizing that they didn't.

Think of Isaac Newton. Everybody knew it was the nature of objects to fall. Certain objects fell; other objects didn't fall. The moon didn't fall, for instance, which meant, they thought, that the moon was made of something different from, say, apples or rocks. But he asked a question that everybody thought was a stupid question: "Why do things fall? How does falling relate to other types of motion? What does it mean that it's something's nature to fall?" And because he was willing to ask these stupid questions, he discovered gravity and the laws of motion.

So when you sit here to meditate, be willing to ask some stupid questions: “What is this energy-flow? Where is it coming from? How does it start? Where does it end? How many layers of energy-movement do you have in the body? What is your primary sense of the body?” Often we think that our primary sense of the body starts with its solidity, but when you think about it, the movement is what lets us know that we have a body. Without that sense of movement, we wouldn’t know. Which means that the sense of movement is primary; the solidity and shape of the body are secondary.

So allow yourself to think that thought. And then see how that thought influences the way you relate to the different sensations in the body. Allow yourself to think the thought that everything you experience is primarily breath energy, and the nature of energy is to flow unobstructed. Do you feel any obstructions? Things you used to think of as okay—that that was the way that part of the body had to be: “It had to be hard right there,” “It had to be held tight right there”: If you experience those sensations as energy, you realize that there’s something wrong with that energy. It’s not flowing. So think the thought that simply allows it to flow in *any* direction at all. See what happens.

You learn a lot of lessons this way. One is that it becomes more interesting to stay in the present moment. Instead of chaining the mind down to just the “in-and-out” breath, you’re giving it something to explore. There’s something to learn right here both on the physical side and on the mental side. You begin to see how much your perceptions play a role in how you experience things. When you change the perception, you change the physical experience. Once you allow the breath to do new things in your body, that’s going to change your perceptions about the body as well. This shows you how physical events and mental events influence each other.

So when you approach the meditation like this, it becomes a lot more interesting. You begin to see how concentration and discernment come together in the meditation: The questioning is the discernment side; the concentration is looking, looking, looking—trying to be as consistent in your looking as possible.

For most of us, the way we look at the present moment is like a connect-the-dots game. You see a little bit here, and then there’s a big empty space where you’re going off into some mental world, and then you come back to the physical side of the body, the physical side of your experience. Then you try to figure out what happened in between. And most often, the little dots are so disconnected that you could make anything out of it: You could make a plane, a duck, or a boat because there’s so much empty space and so few dots.

What you’re trying to do here as you meditate is to make a consistent *line* through time. When you do that, you begin to see cause and effect more clearly. The mind grows more stable, more grounded in the present moment. The

consistency allows the mind to gain some rest. Otherwise, the mind is constantly hopping around. Even when it lands on something, it's always tensing up, getting ready to hop again, not knowing how long it's going to be able to stay there. But when you give it a place to stay for good, long, consistent periods of time, it can begin to relax, can begin to unwind, loosen up, soften up. And that allows you to see a lot more clearly what's going on—all the little bits and pieces that work together to create this sensation of "the body" in the present moment. Instead of just being one big lump, the body is a cluster of lots of sensations. And they can do all kinds of different things depending on how you perceive them.

When you take this attitude toward the meditation, the concentration and the insight go together. And the faculty of desire in the meditation—the desire to *do* the meditation—is given free reign as well. Often we think we should have no desire at all in our meditation, but that's being like a dead person. When you're doing something, you have to want results; otherwise, you wouldn't do it. Desire is considered one of the *iddhipada*, the bases of success. By giving yourself something to explore—and exploring in a way that gives you a greater sense of comfort, physical comfort, mental ease—that makes the meditation more attractive: You want to do it again. It becomes desirable, absorbing.

So remind yourself as you're meditating that you're not here simply tying the mind down to an object, you're not trying to program it, you're not trying to clone what might be an enlightened state. You're exploring what's going on. The Buddha gives you the tools for exploration in terms of mindfulness, discernment, concentration, has you ask a few questions—keep them few, don't get involved in too many questions, but just explore what's going on—and see what ways you can conceive of the breath energy that make it more comfortable, a more attractive place to stay. And that way, your ingenuity becomes a part of the practice.

Use your imagination: You can make your imagination part of the path as well. This is another one of those factors we're told to avoid at all costs, but that doesn't work. When things aren't going well, you have to imagine other ways that they might be able to go.

When the admissions people in some of the more advanced universities throughout the country interview candidates who want to be brain surgeons, they have to assume that everyone who walks in the door is smart; no dumb people are going to apply to be brain surgeons. But not everybody who's smart is going to be a good surgeon. So the admissions people need the right questions to ferret out the qualities that make a smart person a good surgeon. And they've found that one of the best questions is: "Can you tell us about a mistake you made recently?" And the best follow-up question is: "If you had a second chance to do it all over again, how you correct your mistake?" The candidates who

answer that they can't think of any mistakes are the ones who are thrown out immediately. The ones who say "Oh, I made a mistake the other day...and this is how I'd do it again the second time around": Those are the ones who'd make good surgeons.

Well, the same attitude makes you a good meditator. If you see that things are not going well, you have to use your imagination to figure out what might be another way of approaching things. So imagination here doesn't mean simply wandering off. You apply your imagination to what's going on in the present moment, to what you're doing in the present moment, to get better and better results.

This way, those factors we're told are our enemies—stupid questions, imagination, desire—actually become aids in the practice. As Ajaan Lee once said: "A person with discernment can use anything to a good purpose." And this is how you develop your discernment in the meditation: Take these mental faculties that you're usually told to drop and see if you can use them to deepen your concentration, sharpen your discernment, make your awareness more consistent, make your perception of connections clearer as you explore what it's like to experience this body and mind here in the present moment.