

## *Knowing the Body from Within*

*December 23, 2008*

As you're meditating and listening to the Dhamma talk, give most of your attention to the breath, to your actual meditation object. The talk is here in the background, pointing things out that may or may not be appearing right now in your breath, in your mind. The actual Dhamma is right there in the body, in the mind. It's not in the words of the talk. One of the Pali terms for a Dhamma talk, *dhamma-desana*, literally means pointing to the Dhamma. In other words, the words aren't the Dhamma. The words point to the Dhamma that can be found in the breath, in the mind, in this area of awareness where you experience the body from within.

There's an old Peanuts comic strip where Linus comes up to Lucy and says, "Feel how cold my hands are." So he touches her and she says, "Brrr, yes, they *are* cold." Then she asks, "But how do you know how they feel when you're inside them?" And this is a big problem for most of us. We're not really that conscious of how we feel the body from within. Yet this is the area where the Buddha says you're going to find the Dhamma. The texts talk about touching the Dhamma with the body, even *seeing* the Dhamma with the body. Where you're experiencing the body right now: That's where the important things are going to be discovered. The experience of concentration is going to be sensed right here. Even when you go into the formless realms, it's going to be right here where your sense of the surface of the body begins to disappear. Right where the body was felt, that's where you're going to start noticing space and consciousness. When your awareness of the deathless comes, it's going to fill the area where your body is now. That's where the Dhamma is seen and touched.

So right here is where you want to look. And get used to looking again and again and again, so that you can see things more precisely and accurately. Now, words are useful to help you to discern and distinguish some of the things you might be experiencing here. It's like people who are trained to be professional tasters. Part of their training lies in learning how to notice very carefully what their taste buds are telling them, but an equally large part is learning a vocabulary that helps them make precise distinctions. This is the purpose of these words pointing to the Dhamma: to help you notice subtle things happening right here that you might have overlooked or glommed together. You might have missed some subtle distinctions.

When most of us look at this sense of the inside of the body, we can notice whether we're feeling well or not well, but that's about it. Some people can't even experience that much, can't even experience the body. Either because of abuse when they were small or some other trauma, they have trouble feeling their bodies, being sensitive to what's going on inside. One way to get around that is not to imagine that you're looking at the body from the area of the head or the eyes. Instead, back up into the body: Notice how the back feels, notice how the different parts of the body feel as you back into them. And use the breath as your guide. Think of the different aspects you notice in the body as an aspect of the breath energy.

Altogether, there are four elements or properties that make up our sense of the body from within: breath, fire, water, and earth. The sense of energy—which can be either moving or else still but buzzing—is breath. Don't think of the breath only as the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the energy buzz throughout the body. When you start thinking of the body as an energy flow or energy buzz, you begin to notice parts of the body where the flow or the buzz is not quite right. You might have accepted them in the past as feeling solid, thinking, "Well, that's where the bones are. That's where the muscles are tight." But if you tell yourself, "This is breath," you realize that some parts of the breath seem to be stuck; others are stagnant. They don't move. They don't flow. What can you do to get them to move? What can you do to get them to flow? Changing your perception will also change your questions, change your ideas of what's possible.

Then there's the warmth, the fire property. Sometimes it seems too warm, sometimes not warm enough. Which parts of the body are warmest right now? Do they feel comfortable or overly warm? If they feel comfortable, think of spreading that warmth throughout the body, to the places that are cooler. If you're feeling too hot, you want to do the opposite: Look for the cool areas and think of the coolness spreading throughout the body. That's the water, coming in to dampen the fire.

Earth is a sense of solidity or heaviness. Does the body feel too heavy, or do you feel too lightheaded? Can you bring things into balance? If you're feeling too heavy, think more of lightness, the breath energy lifting you up. If you're feeling too lightheaded, think more of earth: There are bones, there's all this solid stuff in your body that can keep you grounded.

Once you've been able to detect these different properties within the body, the next step is to try to bring them all into balance so that things are not too warm, not too cold, not too heavy, not too light. They feel just right. When the body is brought into balance, your sense of the breath is going to change. The energy flow in the body becomes less and less a matter of having to pull energy in from without. It's more that the pores of your skin are wide open, and they connect with breath channels throughout the body. Different parts of the body are nourished with breath energy, and all you have to do is think of them sharing the breath energy with one another, with other parts of the body that seem more starved. The more the breath channels connect within the body, the less you're going to need the in-and-out breath.

This is important, because the more things come to balance and stillness like this, the more clearly you'll be able to see what the mind is doing right here—and particularly the very peculiar activity that the mind has of taking a sensation in the body and using it as a kernel for a thought. It becomes a little symbol in the mind and then the symbol turns into a thought world. The more quiet and balanced things are in the body, the more clearly you will be able to see this happen—and how arbitrary the whole process is.

Of course, this process does have its uses. It enables you to think and function in the world. But you also want to be able to pull yourself out at any time, in case a thought world turns vicious, so it's good to gain practice in just staying with the body. Think of "body, body, body," keeping the body in and of itself as your frame of reference. If a thought does arise, and you can sense where in the body it's lodged, think of breathing through that spot. Or just think of the energy in

that spot untangling itself and getting connected with the energy of the different parts right around it, dissolving the tangle. When you can stay with the sense of the body and not get sucked into a thought world, it's called keeping the body in and of itself as your frame of reference. This is why the Buddha starts here when he teaches mindfulness.

And in teaching mindfulness, he teaches you the themes of concentration. You want to maintain a sense of being centered right here where you're aware of the body from within, so that as the movements of the mind go flashing out, you can see them and yet not ride along with them. That's how you begin to understand things like greed, anger, delusion, craving, and all those other mental states that cause suffering—learning how to watch how they form and how not to get hoodwinked into running along with them. But this requires becoming more and more sensitive to how things are happening here in the body, how the mind and the different properties of the body interact. When you find yourself in a bad mood, don't immediately focus on how bad things are outside. Don't focus on the object of the mood; focus instead on the mood itself, realizing that it comes from something wrong with how the mind and the body are interacting. Learn to look inside, and not take the mind's comments on the world outside so seriously.

Again and again, this is the message of the meditation. You want to put yourself in a position where you can watch these processes as processes, rather than as reliable information about the world out there. The realization becomes clearer and clearer that everything you know about the world out there is being filtered through this area of your experience, the area we're all not very clear about, not very articulate about, not very observant about. Which means, of course, that we're going to get deluded by the information the mind puts together.

The way to get past that delusion is to get more and more clear about this clearinghouse, the area where you're aware of the body from within. This is where everything important is going to appear. If you don't yet see anything happening here, then you're not looking carefully enough. Everything that's going to shape your life has to go through this filter. You want to get to know the filtering process very well, so you can recognize when it's filtering things in an accurate and useful way, and when it's filtering them in a harmful way that gives rise to suffering.

So we focus on the breath not simply as a means for getting the mind to settle down and be still, but also as a means for looking at the mind itself and gaining insight. And the insight we're gaining here is not so much an insight that you can put into words. The words help you to articulate some of what you're experiencing here, but the actual Dhamma is going to appear right here in your inner sense of the body and immediately make sense in a non-verbal way.

This is why it's so important that you get sensitive to this area—and that you're continually sensitive to this area, without rushing in, rushing out, rushing in, rushing out. You're going to stay right here. If there's any rushing in and out, you can watch it, but you're not going to rush along with it. That's how you learn how to see things, to see *through* things, so they lose their power over you.

As you get more and more sensitive here, ultimately you'll arrive at the point where you do touch the Dhamma with the body. You see the Dhamma with the body—i.e., you see it where the body is right now. It's a very intimate kind of

seeing. Actually a lot of the Dhamma is already here right now. A lot of the processes of the body, the processes of the mind, can be sensed from within. But if you're not looking here, if you're not looking continually, or you're not looking sensitively from this perspective, you're going to miss them.

So try to be continuous in your sensitivity. Make this your frame of reference, stick with this frame of reference, and you'll come to see a lot of things you never saw before. They were happening here all along, but you were distracted. You were carried along by the flow. This is why the Buddha calls the things that defile the mind *asavas*, effluents, things that go flowing out. For all too long we've allowed ourselves to be carried along with the flow, and then end up deposited wherever the flow ends, in the mud and mess of the Mississippi delta. But now you want to take a stance right here. The Buddha said, "Make the body in and of itself your island" in the middle of the river, so as the flow goes out, you don't go flowing along with it. You get to see, "Oh, these are the things that get carried along with the flow. This is where the flow goes." As long as you're standing on the island, you aren't getting sucked into the flow. You aren't getting deluded. You can see what's happening and let it go.

This is why it's so important that you take your stance here, and that you maintain this stance in all your other activities.