

BODY AS REFUGE

In daily life, as in the daylong, we are mostly working with the first frame of reference: mindfulness of the body. The body includes the breath. That's what we learn in the first lesson of the beginner's class—to put your mind on the breath. We feel the breath in the body is by using our body. By sensing the breath through your body.

We first start by focusing on one point and then allowing, or letting, feeling the breath move into the other parts of the body. Feeling the breath spread into the other parts of the body.

The reason that we work so hard on developing the breath is to achieve insight. We work to free ourselves of our stress, to free ourselves of suffering. When you feel ease in your body, the present moment is pleasurable. You have a steady seat or a steady footing, firm ground from which to observe your mind.

It's kind of like in martial arts. The first thing you're taught in martial arts is how to stand so that your opponent can't knock you over. As meditators our opponent is not someone else. Our opponent is really ourselves. It's our unskillful actions, our unskillful relationship to our experiences—our worrying, our thinking obsessively, our aversion. All these unskillful actions compound stress through karma.

Karma can be felt in the body. It's felt in the ways that your body has learned to react to times of stress; ways your body has learned to protect itself. You have been teaching yourself—you have been teaching your body how to react your whole life, whether you realize it or not. Most of us don't think about that until we come to a practice like this. In this practice, we are retraining ourselves and teaching ourselves how to react to stressful situations.

We are always in this process of conditioning. There is always conditioning going on. We have been conditioning ourselves since childhood: conditioning our responses, conditioning our actions and our thinking. Conditioning is how we relate to our thinking, how we relate to our bodies, how we relate to our environment and people in our environment. And your body takes on all of this. In this practice, we're taught to pay attention to how we have been conditioned.

The body takes on this conditioning. When we're not conscious of it—when we're not observing it—we tend to hold on. We tend to hold on to the pain. Hold on to the stress, to the disliking, to the aversion, to the desire, to the wanting things to be different than the way they are. We tend to hold on to the pain if we're not aware of it. This is a conditioned response. A reactive response. The more that we respond that way, the more we continue to respond that way. Stress creates more stress.

We talk a lot in this practice about letting go—letting go of pain. We all want to let go and be happy. That's our goal, right? But how do we do that? How do we get there? It's through our bodies we get there. Through a skillful relationship to our bodies, we can begin. Through a sensitivity to the breath, we can retrain ourselves so that we are not just reacting to experiences in the world.

We can start looking at those unskillful ways in which we relate to ourselves and our environment. We can sense the stress through the breath in the body. We can develop a sensitivity to where there is stress and see how it's connected to our thinking. We can trace how it comes into the body, becomes embedded or enmeshed in the body, and how the body holds on to that. As we become sensitive to the sensations in the body, we can also become more sensitive to the ease we feel. To the ease in the breath. This gives us another place to go to. We don't have to live in the stress.

When I'm meditating at home I usually start out with a body scan like we did in our first meditation today. I do this to feel where there is a difference in sensation in the body— where there is tension, where there is ease. These points of tension— usually in my back— I imagine this knot in my shoulders as a fist clenching. I replace that perception with a hand opening— a hand relaxing and opening up. I start to move the breath through that area to open it up. Muscles have the memory of stress. The clenched fist—the constricted muscles in my back—is the place where my body is holding on to stress.

Using the perception of an open hand is a way to retrain what the muscles are doing, what the body is doing, how the body is relating to the stress. The perception offers a way to reorient myself and create a new relationship to my experience that is skillful. It is skillful to go with the ease and pleasure in the body.

Every time you sit down to meditate, or in walking meditation, there is an opportunity to develop skills and find a new relationship to the breath, the body, and the mind. The mind conditions the body and the body conditions the mind. When you meditate, you can develop a new relationship to body and mind that is skillful. Instead of coming from a place of agitation, you can relate through compassion or good will. Instead of relating through desire or aversion, you can relate through equanimity, through joy.

The breath is air, wind, energy. You can think of it as energy. It's one of the four elements. In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha instructs us to be mindful of the elements as part of the first frame of reference. With our twenty-first century minds, our post-Enlightenment minds, considering the body as made up of elements, for some of you might feel a little arcane or pre-scientific. Maybe slightly alien. What the Buddha is asking us to do is break down the body into its very basic form. It is not a test of science; it is more about thinking of the body in its most basic form. This is a useful perception.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, mindfulness of the four elements is part of practicing with the body, the first frame of reference. Just like practicing with the breath, the Buddha starts out with the breath, but then he moves into other areas of the body, or other categories which fit under the category of body.

The four elements are air, wind, earth, fire. We can think of air as being breath energy or wind energy. The earth is solidity: the solid parts of the body, the bones, the skin, the nails, the teeth. The water element is liquid or the coolness of the body. Fire is the body's combustion, warmth, and heat.

By practicing with the four elements, we can learn to depersonalize our relationship to the body. We can get away from the liking and disliking. We can get away from the 'selfing' of the body. Mindfulness of the four elements helps us to have some distance from the body. Gives us some space for experiencing the body in order to observe it. Helps us to not get caught up in the tensions of the body and not to rush in to all the unskillful attitudes that we might have around the body. This practice gives us some space and helps us to not over-identify with our bodies. Gives us space to see the not-self nature of our bodies. It gives us space to let go.

Mindfulness of the four elements also can help us towards finding serenity and balance in the body. A feeling of balance. Which in turn affects the balance and peace and serenity in our minds. The mind and the body feed each other. If we can find some peace in the body, some balance in the body, this is going to start to affect our minds in a positive way.

When we are looking for, sensing, and cultivating ease in the breath energy, we are cultivating ease in the whole body and in the mind. We find ease and pleasure in the body. And if we are finding pleasure and ease in the body and balance in the body, then we are not walking around like a clenched fist. We're not tightening, we're not contracted. And our minds feel at ease.

We're trying to balance the elements in the body. You can get a sense of where you're at in any moment with those four elements. If there's a lot of energy, it's like you drank a lot of coffee, five cups of coffee, you have too much energy. It doesn't feel good to have that much energy. It agitates. A way to balance that is to connect into the solidity of the body, the earth element to offset that high energy.

If you have too much grounding, too much solidity, you get sleepy and so you want to bring your attention to cultivating the energy, the wind, the air in the body. The breath is your energy.

Sometimes the body is too cold, sometimes the body is too warm. But the body is not all cold, not all warm. Can you find some part of the body that if you feel too cold that you can bring in some warmth? Try changing your attention just by focusing on the unnoticed element.

By developing sensitivity to the body in the present moment, you can observe small changes as they arise and fall away. You can develop an even flow of energy that is not agitated. You can develop a serene that moves easily resulting in greater ease, pleasure, equanimity, stillness. Pleasure, rapture, serenity, equanimity are all factors of awakening. When you develop the factors, you deepen more into the present moment and deepen your concentration.

You are using your body as a means to let go, as a means of release. There's a bit of irony in that. You get to Nirvana through your body.

I would like to end with this passage from the sutta of *Mindfulness Immersed in Body (Kayagata-sati Sutta)*.^{*} There are parts of the sutta where the Buddha speaks and the monks reply-- "We breathe in, breathing in long, he discerns--the monk discerns, I am breathing in long. Breathing out short, he

discerns I am breathing out short." These phrases you can use in your meditation to help you focus on your breath. "I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication."

Then the Blessed One, emerging from his seclusion in the late afternoon, went to the meeting hall and, on arrival, sat down on a seat made ready. As he was sitting there, he addressed the monks: "For what topic are you gathered together here? And what was the discussion that came to no conclusion?"

"Just now, lord, after the meal, on returning from our alms round, we gathered at the meeting hall when this discussion arose: 'Isn't it amazing, friends! Isn't it astounding! — the extent to which mindfulness immersed in the body, when developed & pursued, is said by the Blessed One to be of great fruit & great benefit.' This was the discussion that had come to no conclusion when the Blessed One arrived."

[The Blessed One said:] "And how is mindfulness immersed in the body developed, how is it pursued, so as to be of great fruit & great benefit?"

"There is the case where a monk — having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect and setting mindfulness to the fore. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

"Breathing in long, he discerns, 'I am breathing in long'; or breathing out long, he discerns, 'I am breathing out long.' Or breathing in short, he discerns, 'I am breathing in short'; or breathing out short, he discerns, 'I am breathing out short.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.' And as he remains thus heedful, ardent, & resolute, any memories & resolves related to the household life are abandoned, and with their abandoning his mind gathers & settles inwardly, grows unified & centered. This is how a monk develops mindfulness immersed in the body."

So, close your eyes and connect to your breath, connect to your bodies.

- Kristine Marx, 9.28.19

* <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.119.than.html>