

Analyzing the Breath

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April 18, 2005

When the Buddha teaches mindfulness immersed in the body, the first thing he discusses is being mindful of the breath. It's good to stop and think for a few moments about why he starts there. One of the reasons is that the breath is your most immediate experience of the body. We have a tendency to identify ourselves with the solid parts of the body and think of the breath as something secondary, something that comes in and out of the part we inhabit. But actually you wouldn't know about the solid parts of the body, the solid sensations in the body, if it weren't for the breath. For one thing, you'd be dead. And even if there were some way of being alive and not having the breath, the only way you'd know that there's something solid is because something is moving against it, moving over it. So think about this as you're focusing on the breath.

One way of approaching the body is thinking of it as primarily breath sensations. Ajaan Lee lists a whole series of them: the breath that moves up the body; the breath that moves down the body; the breath that goes out through all the blood vessels, tensing and relaxing the muscles in the blood vessels; the breath that goes out the nerves; the breath sensations that spin around in place; the breath energy constantly radiating from the diaphragm, the breath constantly coming up the spine. There are all kinds of breath sensations in the body. One way of making the body more comfortable is to think of it as *all* breath. Every sensation has a breath aspect to it, so focus on that breath aspect. If anything seems tight or tense, don't write it simply off as being a solid part of the body. Think of it as a breath sensation that somehow got tightened. Loosen it up. Approach it as you would a breath that should be moving through the body. See how that changes the way you relate to it.

This is one way of making the body interesting. An important principle in concentration practice is that if you try to rely solely on willpower to stay with an object, you won't have much staying power. But if you find the object absorbing, it's a lot easier to stay. So look at the body in a new light, from a new perspective, and see if it becomes more interesting to be sitting right here, not doing much of anything else, just staying with the body, exploring how it feels to be right here and not traveling around outside. If you try to lock the mind into the body, it's like locking a child into his room: He's going to try to figure out some way to get out the window, or start doing something in the room he knows his parents don't like, just to spite them. The mind is like that: If you lock it in with an object, it'll start doing things to spite you.

So the trick is to leave the windows and doors open, but give the mind lots of things to play with, to get absorbed inside. That way the child will stay in its room without your having to force it, without your having to lock it in. The

breezes come in the window and they won't blow you away, because you've got something interesting right here in the present moment. When the breath energy flows more smoothly through the body, aches and pains will calm down. You'll be healthier in general. As you really get to know the breath, you find that it can induce a sense of refreshment which, as you allow it to stay, gets more intense and shades into rapture – all simply from being with the breath.

So, if you find that the breath is boring, it's because, one, you're not paying attention; and two, you're not asking the right questions. You're assuming lots of things you don't really know about the body in the present moment. Learn how to question those assumptions. Is the body as solid as it seems? Certain sensations of tension or tightness: Do they have to be there? Maybe the way you're breathing is what's maintaining them. As you allow yourself to get absorbed in the breath, exploring these things, you require less and less willpower to stay here. This is the kind of concentration that has discernment as one of its integral factors. In terms of the bases of success, it's the fourth one: concentration based on the powers of analysis.

So give it a try. Explore what's actually happening as you just sit here. The breath comes in, the breath goes out, the breath spins around in place, gets blocked here, flows there, dissipates here, gets strong and constant there. Explore these things. It's part of learning how to take care of the body. And you find that in taking care of the body this way, you're taking care of the mind as well.