

## *Seeing with the Body*

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One of the Buddha's essential insights was that the suffering that really weighs down the mind is a suffering we create—and it's unnecessary. Even though we create it and we suffer from it, we cling to it. This has some unexpected implications. One is that for a lot of us, if we didn't suffer, we would be lost. Even the simple idea of not suffering would leave us hanging. This is because our strongest sense of who we are often comes from being treated unjustly. We define ourselves through the suffering that comes from being treated unjustly. If we were to deny ourselves that perverse pleasure, we'd feel lost. But when other people treat us unjustly, we start treating ourselves unjustly. When other people criticize us unfairly, we start criticizing ourselves unfairly. We suffer from all of this, but we would feel lost without the sense of self provided by that unfairness. The mind can be really perverse.

To work around this problem, the Buddha has us focus simply on the problem of suffering without asking who's causing this, or who you are, or what you have to do to your sense of self to make it better. He says, "Just look at the suffering in and of itself." That's important: the "in and of itself." That helps get you out of the entanglements that come from *your* clinging to *your* suffering. When you can look at these things as events simply on their own terms, simply as a pattern of cause and effect without asking how *you're* involved in it, when you can simply see the fact of suffering as it's being caused, then you see the connection to its cause. You realize that you don't have to engage in the cause. That helps loosen up your attachment to the suffering.

So it's important to understand this process: that you're clinging to, identifying with, the very things that cause you to suffer. Even though that's what defines you, it's simply a definition you've imposed on things. You don't really need it to function. You don't really have to worry about being annihilated if you stop the suffering.

For many people that's a scary idea, because the connection between their self and their suffering is so strong. This is why the Buddha focuses you back on just the suffering in and of itself. Don't ask who's doing this. Don't ask how *you're* involved in it. Just ask, "What's happening here?" Look at things in and of themselves as events, as processes.

Start with the breath in and of itself. That's pretty neutral. And ask yourself, "What's going on in the process of breathing?" You breathe in until breathing in starts getting uncomfortable. Then you breathe out until breathing out starts getting uncomfortable. Then you start breathing back in again. You're bouncing back and forth between the discomfort of too much in and too much out. Yet you need to breathe. If you tried to stop breathing by holding your breath, that would be painful too. You've got to breathe, yet it's breathing between one extreme of breathing out too long, and the other extreme of breathing in too long. The breath is an impersonal process, something you can watch in and of itself, and it teaches you a lesson about suffering in and of itself.

Fortunately for us there are not too many elaborate theories about the deeper meaning of breath. Just the fact: The breath is now coming in; the breath is now going out. You can't watch your future breaths; you can't watch your past breaths. You've just got the present breath. And it's impersonal. You know that everybody has the same breathing. You simply ask the question of whether it feels good or not. That's all you've got to ask right now. As for other larger issues, you can put them aside. Get used to dealing just on this level, the immediate experience of the breath, in and of itself.

In doing that, you help to de-personalize the issue of suffering. From this point you can begin to spread your attention to other problems that need depersonalizing as well. But make sure you've got this foundation strong. Simply stay with the issue of how the breath is coming in, how the breath is going out. Are you enjoying it? Even though the breath moves between two different types of pain, if you adjust it properly you can make the experience of the breath in between, the *feel* of the breath in between, really gratifying—as it feels good coming in, coming in, down to the lungs, down to the abdomen. It can feel refreshing, gratifying. And just that fact of how it feels in the present moment, without your having to get involved in thoughts of identity, the narratives of your life, your worldviews: Get used to looking at things simply on this level, just the experience in and of itself.

This gives you a new foundation. You get in touch with the ability, in the midst of the potential for pain, to make the present moment pleasant. And it's not threatening. It's gratifying. You shift your center of gravity away from the sense of self that needs to suffer in order to maintain its identity, to a different sense of self: one based on a sense of pleasure, combined with a greater sense of competence. You're developing a skill and you see the results immediately. This new center of gravity then acts as the fulcrum from which you can pry loose your other attachments, the old ways of identifying yourself.

They've done studies of people going through psychotherapy, trying to figure out which method—Jungian, Freudian, or whatever—works best. And

they've discovered that the actual method doesn't make all that much difference. What *does* make a difference is the ability of the patient to get inside his or her body, to fully inhabit the body, and then from that standpoint to work through whatever issues there are in the mind. This is what you're doing as you work with the breath. You're getting into the body, getting more sensitive to the body, creating a new center of gravity for yourself, a new area of sensitivity.

A lot of the Buddhist texts, when they talk about the knowledge you gain from meditation, express it as a form of vision, something you see. You're working toward knowledge and vision, they say. The first experience of Awakening is the opening of the Dhamma Eye. Full Awakening comes with knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be. But there are also passages that describe this knowledge as something sensed not through the inner eye, but through the body. All the teachings about jhana are concerned with gaining a sense of ease and wellbeing from the breath and then allowing it to permeate the whole body. Some of the texts talk about "touching" the various formless dimensions that can be accessed through jhana, touching them with your body. One of the texts says that those who practice jhana touch the deathless with the body. And one of the verses in the Dhammapada says that you *see* the Dhamma with the body. The Sutta Nipata describes the Buddha as the All-around Eye: His whole body was an organ of vision, an organ of sight.

So one of the things we want to do as we practice is to get out of our heads—where we have all these notions about who we are and how we relate to other people, how we have to maintain our identity, which is centered on suffering, in the face of the onslaughts of the world outside—and learn how to fully inhabit the body. As we inhabit it, the body itself becomes an organ of vision, an organ of sight. You see things going on in the body you didn't see before. You re-sensitize the body. As a meditator you work from a new center of gravity so that when you start taking apart your habits of creating your sense of self—the habits that make you suffer but that you cling to so tightly—it's a lot less threatening. You don't feel that you're going to be obliterated by the process. Taking apart these old habits becomes something you really like to do, because you're looking from another point of view. You're looking from the point of view of full-body awareness, full-body competence.

This is why it's so important to get in touch with the breath and to learn to breathe with the whole body: whole body breathing in, whole body breathing out. It develops a sensitivity and a foundation you need to do some really radical work on how the mind is causing itself to suffer, and how you can uproot all the ways that cause you to suffer. It's only from this different point of view that the work can actually be done.