

Immersed in the Body

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Some people think that when the Buddha describes the five aggregates he's describing what we are, but that's precisely what he's not saying. He's saying that we're *not* that. But the mind does identify with these things – sometimes with the body, sometimes with feelings, perceptions, thought formations, sometimes with sensory consciousness, sometimes different combinations, sometimes all of the above. If you could take a movie of the mind's sense of itself, it would be erratic and mercurial, like a reflection on water – slithering here and there, identifying with this, identifying with that, shape-shifting all the time. In changing position all the time like this, the mind expends a lot of energy. One of the things that we want to try to do as we meditate is to get it to stay in one place, to save some energy. As long as you're going to have a sense of self, keep it solid – rock solid – immersed in the body.

Breath meditation is one way of staying immersed in the body. The term in Pali is *kayagatasati*, mindfulness immersed in the body. And the quality of immersion is important. You want to fill the whole body, occupy the body, inhabit the whole body, as much as you can.

Where is your observer right now? For many of us, it's like a weird bird perched on our shoulders and peering through our eyes. It watches the body as if the body were something separate. But as we meditate, we're trying to get away from identifying with that particular observer; we want to be an observer filling the whole body. Your feet fill your feet, your hands fill your hands. Your entire sense of who you are fills the entire body.

This puts you in a position of strength, because if you're leaving big gaps of unoccupied territory in your body, other things will occupy it – different thoughts, different defilements. But if your awareness occupies your whole body, other things can't get in so easily. The image in the Canon is of a solid wooden door: a ball of string thrown at the door won't leave a dent at all. Even if things do come in and make a dent on the mind, you're going to know it, you're going to see it because you're right there. You're not off in some other corner of the body looking at something else.

So as you focus on the breath, try to get past the idea that you're in one part of the head watching the breath in other parts of the body. You want to occupy the whole body, bathed in the whole breath. The breath and the body should be surrounding your sense of where you are. And then you want to maintain that sense of being centered in the body like this, filling the whole body with your awareness as you breathe in, as you breathe out.

Why? For one thing, this sense of filling the body helps you stay in the present moment. When the mind goes off thinking thoughts about past and

future, it has to shrink its sense of awareness, shrink its sense of itself, down to a small enough dot so that it can slip into the past or slip into the future. In other words, you latch onto the part of the body that you use as a basis for thinking about the past or the future, while other parts of the body get blotted out. But if you're filling the body with your awareness and can maintain that full awareness, you can't slip off into the past and future unless you want to. So this is one way of nailing yourself down to the present moment. Your inner hands are nailed to your physical hands, your feet to your feet. You can't move.

Think of the breath coming into the *whole* body. Every cell of the body is participating in the breathing process, and you're sitting here in the midst of it. This gives your sense of observing self a greater solidity, so that when thoughts come into the mind you're not knocked off balance by them. You've got a solid foundation. The word they use for the object of meditation in Pali, *arammana*, literally means "support," the idea being that your mind is standing firm on something. You're standing here in the body. This is your location. This is where you take your stance. And when your stance is solid, nobody can kick you over or knock you down.

It's like riding on the subway in New York City. The subway sways back and forth and up and down and all around. If your stance is planted just right – so that you don't get knocked over either by the acceleration or deceleration of the train or the swaying to the left or the right – you can maintain your balance no matter what. But life is a lot more erratic even than a subway train. The things that happen around you – sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, things that people do, things that people say: They can hit the mind with a lot more violence, with a lot more force than the wobbling or sudden braking of a subway train. So the mind needs a really solid stance.

This is why we work on providing this support for the mind not only while we're sitting here meditating but also throughout the day. Some people complain that it's asking too much of them to pay attention to the events of the day and to the breath at the same time. Well, if you're sitting in the back of your head watching the breath in the body and watching things outside, it does add an extra burden: You've got two things to watch at any one time instead of just one. But if you think of yourself as immersed in your body, inhabiting your whole body, this puts you in a different position. You're standing in the breath, in a position of solidity, a position of strength. From that position you watch things outside, so that instead of having extra things to do, you've simply got a better place to maintain your stance. If your sense of self is inhabiting one little part of the body, and things come in from the outside with great force – somebody does something or says something that hits you the wrong way – you can get knocked off kilter really easily because your stance isn't solid. The mind is so used to flitting around from one position to another that it's very easily knocked off balance. But if you're standing, filling your whole body with your awareness –

this is your stance, this is your support – then no matter what comes, you can keep your balance.

So try to maintain this sense of inhabiting your body, being bathed in the breath, being surrounded by the breath on all sides, not only while you're sitting here but also as you go through the day. Try to maintain this quality of being fully immersed in the body, fully aware, fully mindful, fully alert. Once you can maintain this stance in different situations, then you can start observing the sense of self you've created here. If your sense of self is flitting all around – first with a feeling, then with a perception, then back to a feeling again, then to perception and feeling, like those weird amoeba-like shapes that flit across the surface of water – it's hard to observe, to get a sense of, "What *is* this self? Why does the mind need a sense of self?" But as you maintain this one sense of self inhabiting the body, immersed in the body, surrounded on all sides by the breath, it's there long enough for you to observe it: What's it made of? What's the form here? Where's the feeling? Where's the perception? Where are the thought formations? Where's the consciousness? It's all right here, relatively still, enough that you can really observe it.

There are lots of advantages to having a sense of mindfulness immersed in the body, your sense of self immersed in the body. Eventually you take that sense of self apart, but in the meantime you learn how to use it so that you don't get knocked over by all the winds and currents of the world. You don't get knocked over by all the currents flowing out of the mind either. When they talk about taking the body in-and-of-itself as your island, as your refuge, this is what they mean: The current of the river flows past, but the island stays solid because it's deeply rooted. It's made of rock, like Manhattan; it's not a sand-bar. You've got your awareness deeply rooted in your hands, in your feet, in the different parts of your body, not just in your head, not flitting around from here to there. You've got a large sense of awareness filling the present.

This puts you in a position of strength, which you want to maintain for as long as you can. It helps ward off the currents that come flowing from outside or inside, and it also allows you to see your sense of self a lot more clearly, to understand what it is – where there's still suffering even in this position of strength, where there's still stress and uncertainty and inconstancy. But first you do your best to make it constant. How are you going to believe the Buddha's teachings on inconstancy until you've found some constancy in your awareness? You push the limits. It's only when you really push the limits that you can gain a true sense of where things start pushing back. When the Buddha gave his teachings, he didn't simply ask for people to believe what he said. He said to push back inside yourself to test them.

So. Inconstancy, stress, not-self: How do you test those? By creating a constant sense of ease in the body, because this awareness has to be relaxed in order to last. And you can identify with it, inhabit it fully. It's only in this way

that you can push against the limits and see where the principles of inconstancy, stress, and not-self will push back even in this state of mind.

But work on it first. Remember, this is a skill: taking this stance, maintaining this stance, being concentrated in the body, but concentrated with an expansive sense of ease so that it doesn't become oppressive. Work at filling the body with your awareness so that if they were going to take a picture of your sense of self, of the mind's sense of self, it would be like the image in the Canon: a person totally surrounded by a white cloth from head to toe. Or like Ajaan Lee's image of the mantle of a Coleman lantern – all its threads bathed in a bright, white, unmoving flame. Try to saturate your body with this sense of relaxed but steady awareness, and see what happens as a result.