

Sensitive to the Breath

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Pay close attention to your breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the process of breathing in your body. There's the air coming in and out through the nose, but there's also the movement of the rib cage, shoulders, abdomen, and diaphragm. That sense of movement is also a kind of breath.

The Buddha talks about the different elements or properties that make up our sense of the body as we feel it from within. There's fire, which is the warmth you feel in the body; water, the coolness; earth is the solidity; and breath, sometimes translated as wind, is the sense of energy. And the energy comes in many levels. There's the in-and-out breath. There are feelings of movement or energy that let you know that you have a body. While you're sitting here, you know where your legs, arms, and head are: There's a sense of energy already there that lets you sense these things. Without that you'd be paralyzed. There's also a layer of energy inside that's very still. It's energy, but it's still. That, too, counts as a kind of breath.

It's important to learn how to acquaint yourself with these different levels of energy because knowing them can help the mind settle down with a sense of ease right here in the body. But to gain that sense of ease, you have to work with this energy, noticing where it feels blocked, tight, or tense. One way to notice is by tensing up different muscles in your body and then consciously relaxing them. Notice the difference. Or you can go down through the body, noticing as you go through the neck and down the back, which side of the body seems to be holding more tension. Sometimes there will be more tension, say, in your right upper back and your left lower back. Or, as you go down through the hip and legs at different levels, different sides will have more tension. If you notice more tension on one side than the other, consciously relax that side. For example, if there's tension in your right knee, relax the muscles around the right knee and then try to keep them relaxed all the way through the in-breath and all the way through the out. Try to be sensitive to how that changes the energy flow in your body.

This may take time. Some people are very sensitive to the energy in the body; other people are not. But it's a sensitivity that can be developed if you pay attention to it. If you notice you're more sensitive to some parts of the body than others, focus on those first. Keep them relaxed all the way through the in-breath and the out-breath. Then allow your conscious awareness of the body to spread from those spots to other spots. This sensitivity is important not only for the meditation, but also as you go through daily life. When strong defilements of greed, anger, and fear move into the mind, they'll have an impact on the body through the breath. The breath is the medium through which the mind is aware of the body and can cause the body to act. It's also the medium through which the body has an impact on the mind. When a trigger goes off in your mind that something is getting you angry, fearful, or whatever, there will be a change in the energy of the body. Many times that change will aggravate the problem.

Learning how to relax everything in the body is an important skill, even when triggers are going off in your head saying, "I can't stand this! I can't abide by that! I'm afraid of this. This is something that I really want and crave..." Even though these ideas may be going through your mind, they don't have to have an impact on the body. If you allow them to have an impact on the body, then the body gets hijacked to the side of the defilements. You want to reclaim your body by being sensitive to the breath energy and learning how to detect knots or patterns of tension that can quickly build up in the body. Allow them to dissipate and dissolve away. Then breathe in a way that helps to maintain that sense of open, relaxed energy so that the feelings don't become overwhelming, despite whatever else is going on in your head. Otherwise, both the voices shouting in your head and the hormones in your body will be ganging up against you.

If you learn to relax the body through difficult emotions, you've got an ally. Your emotions won't be so overwhelming. They'll be easier to deal with and to understand. For example, if you're angry about something,

maybe there really is something wrong going on. Still, your anger isn't going to help right the wrong. Learn how to dissolve that feeling of anger, at least at the physical level, so you can look at its mental side. What's actually going on? What are the issues here? What would be an effective way to respond? When anger comes through, the mind quickly grabs onto anything that seems likely, while your sense of shame and compunction disappear. The mind can latch onto all kinds of outrageous stuff.

It's the same with fear and lust. If you can get the breath on your side, there's a lot less desperation in the mind. You can reinstate your sense of shame, which doesn't mean feeling ashamed about yourself. It's a sense of knowing which actions are shameful. Compunction means realizing the bad consequences down the line that will come from an action and, because you don't want to cause that harm, you don't do the action. When you're feeling better in the body, it's a lot easier for your shame and compunction to function in a healthy, helpful way.

Learn to have the breath on your side. The more sensitive you get to it, the more it can do for you. It's like a friendship. The more you're sensitive to the other person's needs, the more that person will be happy to help when you have needs. Look at the breath as your friend. As with any friendship, though, it takes a while to get acquainted. But that doesn't matter. This is a friendship that's really worth developing and investing your time and energy. After all, if you can't be friends with your breath, what kind of relationship are you having with the basic force in your life? If you're ignorant of your breath, you're totally cut off from what's keeping you alive. And if this inner relationship is out of whack, how can you expect your outer relationships to be healthy?

Develop some sensitivity around the breath, and you'll find that you've developed an important ally in your quest to be as harmless as possible and to cause as little suffering as possible, both for yourself and for the people around you. Look at the world. There's a lot of craziness going on, so wherever you can find a good and reliable ally, take care of it—as the Buddha said, “As a mother her child.” Look after and attend to this ally, because in the quest to put an end to suffering, we need all the help we can get.