

Relaxing into the Body

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Sometimes it's useful, before you focus on the breath, to just scan through the body. Notice where there's any tension and relax the tension. What you might do if you don't see clearly where the patterns of tension are—in other words, everything seems to be a mass of tension—is to compare different parts: your left hand with your right hand, your left arm with your right arm. Which one is holding more tension? Relax it.

Then do the same with the rest of the body from the feet on up to the head, because it's hard to settle down in the body when things are tense. If your awareness is hard and the body is a hard object, they just don't go together. But if you can soften them both up, your awareness can penetrate the body and settle in. The concentration we're trying to develop here is a lot easier to keep going if it's based on relaxation rather than on straining and stressing. So you might start with your fingers, go up the arms: Relax things.

Some people have trouble seeing the different energies flowing in the body as breath energies. There are some energies that are not really directly related to the in-and-out breath, but they have a similar quality of movement—of flow. Sometimes the flow is spinning around in some parts of the body. Sometimes it's flowing one way; other times it's flowing another way. That's what they have in common with breath. When the Buddha talks about the different elements of the body—the breath element, the water, the fire element, the earth element—he's talking about how things feel from the inside. And in English, we have a very poor vocabulary for describing those feelings.

This is where the concept of the elements come in useful. The fact that you're sitting here in a body: When you have your eyes closed, how do you know there's a body here? Well, there are sensations, and it's good to be able to have a vocabulary to classify them. If there's heaviness, that's the earth element or property. If there's coolness, it's water. Warmth is the fire. Then the sense of energy: That's the breath, and the in-and-out breathing is just one aspect of that particular property. It's how you *know* that you're breathing: You have that sense of energy flow. We're reacquainting ourselves with what it feels like to be in the body. Instead of looking at the body in the way that a scientist might try to divide it into chemical elements or processes that can be measured from the outside, we're looking at things from the inside, because this is where we need to settle down.

If you can relax into the body, it makes it a lot easier to see these things. Then you can gain a sense of what's out of balance. Is there too much warmth or too little? If there's too much warmth—I understand there's going to be a heat wave in the next couple of days—try to think about the cool parts of the body. Where in the body is it coolest right now? Focus on that, then think of that coolness spreading out. On days when it's cold, you can think of the warmth. When the body's feeling too heavy, think of the breath energy giving it an uplift.

At other times, you have to think of the breath energy going down. If too much energy goes into your head, you start getting a headache. That's when it's good to think, as you breathe in, that energy is flowing. Here, all you have to do is hold the perception, the mental image, in mind. You don't have to force anything. Just hold the image in mind that the energy can flow. That helps in allowing it to flow. As you breathe in, think of it going down: down the arms, down the legs, out the hands, out the feet.

If you have an old injury, you might notice there's a sense of tension around it. Think of the breath energy flowing right through it, loosening things up. As things get loosened up inside, you can slip inside them. Your awareness is getting more sensitive; it gets softer in this way.

Ajaan Suwat often would talk about the paradox of the fact that when your energy gets very tender, it also gets very strong. In other words, you can slip into the body and gain strength from that. There's a certain solidity. It's not the solidity of the body, but there's a certain solid, unwavering quality to your awareness that's both sensitive and strong, tender and solid. You can induce that by relaxing into the body and allowing your awareness to get more and more sensitive to where little patterns of tension may be. If you don't immediately relate them to the in-and-out breath, that's okay. You can approach them from either side.

Years back, I was teaching a meditation retreat. There was a woman whose background was in Tibetan meditation, and someone had invited her to do a Hīnayāna retreat. We were going over the ten recollections, one of which is mindfulness immersed in the body. I had people visualize the bones in the body, starting with the tips of the fingers and then working up the arms, then starting with the tips of the toes and working up the legs, the torso, up to the head. As you visualized each bone, you tried to gain a sense of where that bone was in your body. If there was any tension in the muscles around it, you were to allow those to relax; then work your way up. At the end of the session, she burst out crying. She said she'd been working on concentration for years and never had gotten the level

of stillness she did simply by doing that exercise. So if you find that an understandable way of approaching how you're experiencing your body, try that.

You'll notice as things get more relaxed, the tension begins to unwind a bit. You'll notice that there is a relationship between the way you breathe in and out on the one hand, and the flow of some of the energy in the body on the other. It's not as if you're trying to force air into the solid body. The body simply seems less and less solid. After all, it's made out of atoms that have a lot of space. There's a lot more space in the atoms than actual matter. Energy can flow very freely among these things. So you're not trying to force air into a solid, just allowing energy to flow through an area where there are no clear boundary lines.

A lot of this depends on the power of perception. Perception means the mental label you have for things. If you carry in mind the perception that there are these impenetrable, solid parts of the body, they're going to be impenetrable. Perception has a lot of power, especially over the way the energy flows in the body. If you hold in mind the image that things are open, energy can flow from one atom to the next to—all over the place. There are no clear boundaries: That helps the energy to flow. You sense it.

So play with your perceptions for a while; deconstruct them. This is called de-thinking or de-perception. Ask yourself: These concepts you have of what's going on in the body, to what extent have you actually experienced these things and to what extent are they ideas you've picked up from outside? See if you can use the Buddha's vocabulary of the elements or the properties—"properties" is probably a better translation—to help make sense of the various sensations you've got in the body and how you can use them, how you can manipulate them to make the body an easier place to settle down.

As you become more sensitive, the sense of the body becomes more refined, and that's when the mind and body can interpenetrate. That's how you settle down without having to push things together. You simply allow them to interpenetrate, and there they are. When they're there together, they give each other strength.

Ajaan Lee's image is that you're like a person in a house. The house protects you, and then you look after the house. If you're not in the house, animals can move in; all kinds of things can move in. Holes can develop in the roof and nobody knows. The house begins to rot. It gets all dirty. But if you're in the house, you notice: Okay, there's a leak here; there's something there. So you work on keeping things clean. You keep everything repaired and chase out all the animals. As a result, you have good shelter. Both you and the house benefit.

It's the same with the body and the mind. You make your awareness more sensitive so that it can seep through the body. You can loosen up your perceptions of the solidity of the body so that awareness can seep in even deeper. The mind has a good solid place to stay, and the body has someone looking after it so that its functions and processes go a lot more smoothly. It's good for the health of the body, good for the health of the mind.