

Getting Connected Inside

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There are basically two sides to our awareness. There's a background awareness of what's going on in the body, what's going on around us, and then there's what you might call the spotlighted awareness. That's where you focus your attention and things get clearer, more articulate. In the background awareness, things are pretty vague. What you focus on is what you see clearly, what you can actually articulate to yourself and talk to yourself about.

As we're meditating, we're trying to bring those two aspects of awareness together. We're trying to have a whole field of awareness that's clear—and that requires several skills.

Normally, our spotlighted awareness seems to be centered up in the head, while the background awareness is everywhere else in the body, and often there's a disconnect. Things are happening in the body and we don't know, but they're having an impact on our more conscious awareness, coming in from the back. So we try to back into our background awareness to be as fully aware of the body as possible. Part of that means just learning to stay focused on one thing as steadily as possible, and then allowing your awareness, your clear awareness, your focused awareness to spread out so that it fills the whole body. One way to do that is by learning how to spotlight different parts of the body, so that your center of awareness isn't always in the head or only in the head. Learn how to make your center of awareness in your shoulders, in your back, down in your hips, down in your legs, in your feet, your arms, in your chest, in your stomach, so that you get a clear sense that awareness is not just a head thing.

Training the mind is not just training the head. It's training us to be fully aware all around. This is a lot of what directed thought and evaluation is for, because as you move through the body you find there are certain parts that are difficult to focus on, or difficult to stay centered in, and all too often you go back to the old model of being up in the head, and this other spot that you're looking at is someplace else.

This is one of the reasons why you go through the body section by section to see what feels good in the different parts of the body. What kind of breathing feels good in your abdomen? What kind of breathing feels good in your chest? How about your feet and your legs? It's more subtle there. The further you get away from the lungs, the more subtle things become, but it's there. At the very least, you can check to see if the blood flowing well in different parts of the body. If there's tension, say, someplace in your spine or down in your pelvis, that will cut off the flow, so that the parts of the body below that blockage will feel even more remote, and it's going to be more difficult to stay centered there.

So as you survey the different parts of the body, you may not notice a flow of breath energy, but you can tell if things feel tight or not. If they feel tight, what can you do to relax that tightness? Some spots will be easier to relax than others, largely because of the way you hold

your body. Sometimes you'll find that parts of the body seem to disappear, or they're just not there. Say, for instance, you don't feel much in your shoulder. In that case, locate where in your neck or in your head you *do* have a sense of the presence of the body. And how about down in your hand, or in your forearm, do you have a sense of the presence of the body there? Can you see how those two spots are connected? They may be connected in a way that doesn't correspond to the way the body looks from the outside, but that doesn't matter. You can feel it inside.

This is a lot of what the practice is all about: seeing how your body and mind feel from the inside. Our attention is normally way too much focused on things outside. We know lots of things about the world, we know about the news, we know about computers, we know about media, we know about politics, we know about the environment, but how about your inside environment? What's going on in your chest right now? What's going on in your back? After all, those things are very close to what's going on in your mind. As you get to know the body in different ways, you begin to realize how much the mind has closed off certain ideas or certain of its own activities, so that some parts of the mind's activities are hidden from other parts of the mind. But as you begin to open things up in the body, you begin to open things up in the mind as well. This is where the meditation gets interesting.

But for right now, your main area of practice is right here in the body, getting to know it from within.

You find sometimes that as you scan through the body there's not much work to be done. So you give it a quick scan and then you settle down. But it's good, at least once a day, to go through the body section by section to check out the latest developments in the news. Because things can happen overnight. Things can happen in the course of the day. Like that creek in Zion where I like to take pictures: I was there the other day and there were some iridescent patches that come from bacteria floating in the water. I got some pictures of the patches, but one didn't come out very clearly, so I figured, well, the next morning I'd go back and take another picture of the same spot. I went back the next morning and everything, all the iridescent patches, had been swept away.

The same goes with the body. You go to sleep and you may wake up with something blocked that wasn't blocked the night before, or something's washed away that *was* there before.

Ajaan Fuang had a student, a nun, who had all kinds of diseases. First it was something here, then it was something there. And so he told her, "Every morning, first thing when you get up, sit and meditate and do your own medical exam. Just go through the body as you feel it from the inside and see where things are blocked. Then allow them to open up, open up, as best you can."

Because the more open things are, the more your awareness can become whole, so that the spotlighted part and the background part become a unified awareness. You'll eventually get to

a point in the concentration where you don't have to do that much evaluation. You've sorted things out, you've checked things out, done the best you can, and then you just settle in. And as your concentration gets stronger, your ability to focus and stay focused gets quicker. The need to go through the body gets less and less necessary, but it is important to do it at least once a day, just to keep tabs on things, and also to make sure that you're not getting sloppy in your sense that you've got the whole body together, your whole awareness together. Sometimes things can get blurry and cursory, and as they get blurry, then they begin to fade out.

Like people with glaucoma who don't notice that there's a big blank spot in their vision. It's only when they're asked to look at something that's in the blank spot that they realize there's a blank spot there. The same with us in our concentration. Sometimes it's easy for our "whole-body awareness," quote, unquote, to get more and more limited without our realizing it. So it's good to check once a day to make sure that all the parts are there, that your awareness is there in all the parts, and that it's all connected, well connected as best you can manage.

As Ajaan Lee points out, there are times when there are certain sections of the body where, no matter how hard you try, things are not going to open up. So you have to learn how to work around them. Often a physical blockage is connected to a mental blockage, and the reason there's a mental blockage is that one part of the mind doesn't trust your conscious awareness, so it hides out, builds a shell, and doesn't want to be noticed—like an animal.

You know how wild animals don't like you to stare at them. It frightens them. They feel threatened. So if you're going to hang around a wild animal, you have to pretend like you don't notice it. You look away and the animal will feel a lot more secure. And it's the same with these parts of the body. You have to work around them. Don't focus attention right at them, focus attention just around them, and think of softening things up, being more gentle. It's almost as if they have to learn to trust you, and it may take time. But if you're gentle and persistent, they will begin to open up.

Now, if you've had an injury or some other physical problem, those areas may not open up so easily. But you learn to work around them, to minimize the tightness, to minimize the patterns of tension that can go through the body when it's not well aligned. The purpose here is both to give you a more comfortable, more spacious place to settle down, and at the same time, to begin to notice how your foreground awareness and your background awareness are related. You see the way you've been shutting things off. As you reconnect things, you're able to bring your awareness to areas that were in the shadow, in the blank spots, areas that you were ignorant of.

After all, ignorance is the cause of suffering, and you're trying to decrease that by spreading your awareness around, making it more inclusive, more connected. This is how you get deeper and deeper into meditation, by trying to re-establish connections or establish new ones. Because the more the breath energy is connected in the body, the less need you'll have for the in-and-out breath to nourish the body. In the beginning, you'll have to start with a couple of

good long, deep, in-and-out breaths just to make sure you're breathing as deeply and as fully as possible, as the body needs. And as the needs of the body are better nourished, better met, then the breath can become more gentle. And you don't even have to think about making it more gentle. It just becomes gentler on its own.

You may have read that the breath stops when you get to the fourth jhana, but you don't try to stop it. Just keep things well connected. Notice where in the body are things not connected. Can you think of a connection being established? Sometimes if a blockage seems persistent, maybe you're trying to establish a connection where it's not needed. Try to find areas where you're not blocked, which may seem out of the range of where you think your body might be at the moment, but then again, that may be just one of the ways that awareness hides things from itself.

So think of things opening up in all directions, connecting in all directions. And if the breath is healthy, then the need to breathe will get more and more gentle, more subtle, without your having to determine that you're aiming at this jhana or that jhana. It happens on its own as things get more and more connected.

That's what Ajaan Lee means when he says that you focus on this one current of breath and it will take you all the way to the fourth jhana. Just allow it to connect, connect, connect, stay nourished, stay healthy, stay strong. Because a lot of the concentration lies in getting interested in staying here and finding that there's a lot to learn simply about being aware of what's going on as you sense the body and the mind from inside.

So keep these things in mind as you try to get the mind to settle down. You're working from the inside and it's going to take time to get acquainted. There are several skills that you have to juggle in the beginning: spreading your awareness, connecting the breath energy, trying to get centered. Sometimes they seem to be working at cross-purposes, but as you get more and more acquainted inside, you these skills all begin to come together. That's how the concentration becomes solid all around, and a good basis for seeing more deeply inside, both into the body and into the mind.