

Mindfulness of Breathing (9) Breathing with the Body

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Summary Keywords

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We're continuing with the third step of the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing taught by the Buddha. These sixteen steps are divided into tetrads – groups of four. We are now in the third step of the first tetrad. This step says that one trains oneself to experience the whole body when breathing in, and the whole body while breathing out.

One of the ways to interpret this instruction is in fact to have a global awareness of the body. The body, *kāya* in Pali, is very important in Buddhism. The body that we 'have' is not quite the right language in Buddhism, but rather the body we experience. The *kāya* is the body we experience. It is a little distinct from our physical body. Of course, the two are completely connected in ordinary life. But the body that we are experiencing is dependent on how the mind operates – the selection process of the mind, concerns of the mind, states of the mind, and the level of concentration or mindfulness we have.

It's possible to have some concerns about our body. Once our attention keeps going to a particular part of the body – and focuses on it – that is a selection process. Some of that might be the part of the body that ails us. Or it might have to do with our physical appearance – somehow our forehead is too high, our nose is too big or too small, or any number of other things. We experience the body through the filter of our concerns about appearance. There's a kind of body consciousness.

If we're afraid of our body and have anxiety about it, the body shifts and changes, ever so slightly in response to the fear the mind has – the projections and fantasies about the future. The body tightens up. If we're full of desires or want something, or there are moods, emotions, desires, or motivations – it's like they have tentacles or threads that reach into our muscles. The muscles react and respond in all kinds of ways, depending on what's going on in the mind. So we start to become aware of this.

When we sit and meditate, we're working with this – the interface between the mind and the body. So as we start settling into meditation, we start encountering the body more and more fully. But, as I said before, it's not the physical body that we encounter. It's the interface between the physical body and the mind. Or it's how the mind influences the body – the effect the mind has on the body.

I used to have very high shoulders when I was quite young. I had anxiety and fear, which I held in my shoulders. That tension in the shoulders is a mind source. Fear in the mind and the heart impacts the body. As I sat and meditated, I became acutely aware of these shoulders of mine. There were times I would sit in meditation with a lot of pain in my shoulders. It was not because anything was wrong, but because I was encountering the chronic tension there. It was beginning to work itself out, relax, and let go. It took a while to do that.

The same thing happened with my belly. I held my belly in for a long time – tight and contracted – and that was born from what was going on in my mind, my emotional life, my inner life. As I started feeling more trust and ease in life, that belly began to relax. As I started to relax the belly, that affected my mind, and my mind started to relax more as well. So there's this interface between the two. What we're encountering in meditation is the mind's impact on the body.

That's a little of what's being worked on. That's why it's so interesting and fascinating when deepening to begin including the body in meditation. While initially, it might feel like we're just encountering the physical body, physical pain, and all that, we're really also encountering the meeting place of the mind and body.

Fascinatingly, in one of the ways that the Buddha refers to this body of ours, another word he uses is *loka*. *Loka* is a common word in Pali, the Buddhist language. It's also used to mean 'world.' The world is *loka*.

Kāma loka is the sensory world in which we live. But the Buddha also used the word *loka* to refer to this fathom-long body – this psychophysical body we have. He said that we experience everything here. The experience of liberation and the experience of practice are all occurring within this *loka* – this physical *loka* here within the body.

The fact that the same word is used for 'world' and for our 'body' also points to the interface between the world around us and our physical body. This is the interface between the mind and the body. So there's an interrelatedness there as well. If we really just sit in the body, it puts us in this wonderful bridge – to the mind and the world around us. Exactly what the relationship is between this physical world of ours and the world around us, maybe that's best left to be discovered.

But certainly the physical body picks up a lot of what goes on in the world. Then, in mindfulness, we learn to be present for it. In Buddhism, we find a lot of emphasis on mindfulness of the body and becoming embodied. The body is not a physical lump of stuff. It's intimately connected to the depths of who we are and how we live our lives. It can open to that depth as well.

It's a fantastic partner for us on the path to liberation, freedom from suffering. The body is really a way to tune in. The more we tune in to our body, the more we pick up on the subtlety that's there. Subtle doesn't mean inconsequential. Some of the deepest stuff – the subtle stuff – is easier to access through the body than only through the mind.

One way we see this emphasis on the importance of the body is here in the first tetrad with the third exercise:
Breathing in experiencing the whole body, breathing out experiencing the whole body.
We'll see when we get to the fourth step that it also includes the body.

The first tetrad – the first four steps – all appear in the three major teachings the Buddha gave on mindfulness: the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* – the discourse on mindfully breathing in and out – and the *Discourse on Mindfulness Directed to the Body*. These contain the most complete instructions the Buddha gave on mindfulness of the body. All of them begin with this first tetrad, where the third and fourth parts of the tetrad have to do with the body. So this is a big plug for the value of staying with the body.

There's this wonderful art or skill of 'breathing with,' of accompanying. One of the skills they sometimes teach in hospice when people are dying – and you maybe can't communicate too much with them – is to breathe with them. Tune into their rhythm of breathing, and breathe with them. Sometimes there's a sense that there is a kind of communion that goes on that way. It's open to question exactly what the nature of that communion is, but it can be quite a profound thing to breathe with someone – accompanying them in their breathing.

It's also a very profound thing to accompany *ourselves* with our breathing. It's very valuable to use our breathing to accompany ourselves in other ways as well. So to breathe with our body, to breathe with the whole body, to breathe with the challenges of our body.

When there's physical pain – I've done this many times – to stay with my breathing, but to also have a careful attention to the place where there's pain in my body. By doing this, I'm doing both the important work of mindfulness of the pain and the discomfort – not denying it, not resisting it, not pushing it away. I'm also not getting stuck or frozen around it, or reactive to it as easily, because the rhythm – the massage of breathing in and breathing out – keeps the mind more fluid and relaxed. It keeps the mind from tightening up and getting stuck. This is the art of breathing with experience.

Sometimes I have the sense, partly maybe imaginary, that I'm breathing through different parts of my body. That imagination is quite nice for me, but sometimes I'm just breathing with. So you might try this: to breathe with your life, breathe with the different things going on. As you go about the activities of daily life – maybe some simple ones, ones that aren't that complicated – see what happens when you breathe with the activity. So you're really aware of your breathing as you're doing whatever activity you're doing.

One of the fascinating places to do this is at the computer – to really track your breathing while you're on the computer. Maybe sit and meditate for two minutes before you start using your computer. Tune into your breath.

Have a relaxed breath, and then stay with that relaxed breath. Stay attuned to your breathing while you're on your computer, and see if you can keep it going – accompanying the computer work with mindfulness of breathing. Probably if you do that, you'll start learning all kinds of things about yourself – all kinds of ways in which you hold your breath, or speed up your breath.

You'll see this interface. You'll begin understanding how much mindfulness of breathing and accompanying your life with breathing can inform and teach you about life. Perhaps more importantly, it can help you stay more relaxed, at ease, and not caught up in things.

So mindfulness of breathing – breathing in experiencing the whole body; breathing out experiencing the whole body. Great! Thank you very much.