

## *Taking an Active Role*

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When the Buddha was teaching breath meditation, he'd try to get people very quickly into a full-body awareness. Step number three out of his sixteen steps is to breathe in sensitive to the entire body, to breathe out sensitive to the entire body. It's important that we try to develop this awareness as quickly and as consistently as we can in our practice, not only while we're sitting here meditating, but also as we go through life. If you fully inhabit your space, nobody else can invade and inhabit your space.

There's an image in the Canon that someone with mindfulness immersed in the body is like a hardwood door. You throw a ball of string at the hardwood door, and it just bounces off. It doesn't enter into the door. For someone who doesn't have that kind of mindfulness, doesn't have that kind of full-body awareness, it's like throwing a rock into a ball of clay. The rock penetrates into the clay very easily.

This can be an image for your own thoughts: Greed, anger, and delusion can take root pretty easily if you're not filling your awareness with mindfulness, mindfulness of the whole body. Other people's energies can enter into your space as well if you're not fully inhabiting it. Sometimes you'll notice as you go to somebody's house, you go to a room where people have been fighting, and you sense their energy. If you're not totally careful to maintain your full-body awareness, you'll find that their energy penetrates you. You pick it up very easily, like a sponge. You absorb whatever's around you.

At the same time, if your mind isn't fully inhabiting the body, its range gets very small. When its range is small, it can slip out very easily. It's almost as if the past and future were little tubes. If your mind gets very small, it can slip down the tubes. If it's large, it can't. It's too big.

So as you're working with the breath, remember to think of the breathing as a whole-body process. In Ajaan Lee's instructions, he has you start with different parts of the body, finding a center, working through the body and then trying to connect everything. The Buddha works the other way around. You maintain a full-body awareness, and then look at how the breath is having an effect on the different parts of the body. Either way works. The important thing is that you gain a sense of ease and well-being.

Sometimes you find it easier to work with just one small part of the body first before you start spreading your awareness around: getting that one part feeling really comfortable, really good, and then thinking of spreading it either systematically or just wherever it wants to go.

The other way is to keep your awareness full-body and *then* notice the breathing as a full-body process, making adjustments wherever necessary, so that the effect of the breath is calming. In the beginning, it may require that you do some heavy breathing to get everything ventilated, so that it feels good and the energy needs of the body get met. When they're met, you can allow things to calm down. It's as if you've been out in the desert, you come back, and you have to drink glass after glassful of water to make up for the fact you've been dehydrated. Once you get rehydrated, then you don't have to drink so much anymore. Just little sips. The important thing is that you learn how to develop a sense of full body well-being, so that even if there are pains in different parts of the body, or the body's ill in one way or another, at the very least the breath side of things is taken care of, so that the way you breathe is not contributing to the illness, is not contributing to the pain, and actually offers you an alternative place of well-being to focus your awareness.

There may be pains, say, in your knee, or pains in your stomach, but there can be good breath energy in your knee, good breath energy in your stomach, so the pain doesn't take full possession of that spot, so that you're less on the receiving end and more assuming a proactive approach toward experiencing the body, taking advantage of that fact you do have a role in shaping the present moment, learning how to make the most of that role.

This is a point that's really worth exploring: realizing that there are lots of different potentials showing themselves here in the present moment, and you have the choice of which potentials you're going to nourish, which ones you're going to encourage. This is probably one of the most important things to understand about the Buddha's teachings on kamma. It's not that you're presented with the present moment fully formed and then you react to it. Instead, it's as if you've got lots of potential present moments, and you choose among them.

So even though there may be the potential for pain in a particular part of the body, you don't have to exacerbate the pain. You don't have to get weighed down by it. You can be more proactive. Breathe around the pain. Try to understand the pain. When you take that more proactive stance, you suffer less.

This is one of the ways the Buddha says you develop both body and mind. When you're undeveloped in body and undeveloped in mind, pain and pleasure

overcome you. You get weighed down by them. But if you take a more proactive stance, realizing that the pain is not a given—it may be one of the potentials there, but you don't have to suffer from it, you don't have to be on the receiving end—then it doesn't overcome you.

The same with pleasure: You learn to use pleasure for something more than just trying to wallow in it and to extend it as much as possible. You do try to extend skillful types of pleasure, based on concentration, based on mindfulness, but you realize that you don't just stretch the pleasure itself. You work on the causes. Try to keep them going as long as you can. If you find your mind slipping off, ask yourself: What happened just now? Where did you lose your focus? Where did you allow the pain or the pleasure to overcome you, so that you lost your more proactive approach to things?

This way, you're less on the receiving end, and taking on more of the role of the skillful shaper, figuring out how to make the most out of whatever potentials you've got here in the present moment. In that role, you suffer a lot less. You're less the victim of what's coming up in the mind, less the victim of what's coming up in the body, less the victim of what's happening around you.

So always keep this in mind. You have the choice: You can be aware of a tiny part of the body, or you can be aware of the whole body. You can let the breath be miserable or you can work to make it more pleasurable experience. You can be the victim of pain and overcome by it, or you can put yourself in a good position through the breath, or you can be more inquisitive about "Why is there this pain? What's going on here? How can I shape this experience so that even though there may be pain in the body, there doesn't have to be pain in the mind?"

If there's pleasure in the body, you figure out how you can work with it best, and not to try to just wallow in the pleasure. Realize that it's a pleasure based on concentration and mindfulness, so the questions are: How do you extend the concentration? How do you extend the mindfulness? How can you best keep them going?

When you take on this more proactive role, you begin to discover there are many more potentials here in the present moment than you might have ever imagined.