

Obstacles to Full-body Awareness

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One of the important steps in breath meditation is to be able to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. The Buddha, in his sixteen steps, put it as step number three. Ajaan Lee, in his seven steps, puts it more toward the end as something you work up to. But either way, it's important. Otherwise, if—as the breath gets comfortable—your awareness gets very small, you tend to either fall asleep or go into delusion concentration, when the mind is still but it doesn't really know anything, which is not what you want because nothing gets accomplished by that kind of meditation.

The problem is, when you expand your awareness, sometimes there are things that get in the way. One is—especially if you're in the beginning stages of your meditation—that there seem to be just too many things going on in the body at once. It gets distracting. Which is why Ajaan Lee says first you focus on one spot, get that one spot established, then you think about going through the different parts of the body. You don't do the whole body at once. You do things section by section to acquaint yourself with how the breathing feels in the different parts of the body and to see if you can make adjustments.

This is where you sometimes run into the second obstacle: There are the parts of the body that are very tense or in pain, and there seems to be nothing you can do about them. So you have to learn to work around them. Find another part of the body where you can get some good breath energy. Don't go diving right into the difficult parts right at first. There's a part of the mind that's like a vacuum cleaner. It picks up all the dirt first before it picks up anything else. It gets drawn to problems. So turn off the vacuum cleaner.

If you're going to solve the problem, you need to have some strength on your side. You need to have some allies on your side. So focus first on the parts of the body that at least feel okay and be very determined to stay with them. As for the parts of the body that seem tense or tight or just too solid, leave them to the solidity, leave them to the pain, leave them to the tightness. You work on your allies. Because as you focus on the comfortable parts of the body, you do get a sense of what kind of breathing feels good, and what kind of adjustment is just right.

That way, when you ultimately turn around and start thinking about looking into those tight or tense or solid parts of the body, you're coming from a position of sensitivity and strength. You're coming with good breath energy. If you're too determined to get rid of the tightness or the pain too quickly, the breath energy is going to turn on you. Or you're going to distort it. Then

everything gets all tangled. So acquaint yourself with the parts of the body that are okay, the parts that you tend not to pay attention to. And be very determined to stay with them. Learn how to protect that okay-ness. Then gradually work from that position of strength—and look into your perceptions.

There's one perception that's very common, which is that the parts that are tense or tight or painful tend to be the parts that you use a lot to bring the breath in because of your subconscious thoughts about what needs to be tightened up for the breath to come in, or about where it gets pulled in. See if you can change those perceptions. Give the tight parts a holiday. Tell yourself that you're not going to breathe in until some other part of the body pitches in. And it will.

Then learn how to perceive the solid parts as not quite so solid. There is space. After all, the body is made out of atoms, and atoms are mostly space anyhow: space between the atoms, space inside the atoms. See if that perception helps to take away some of the solidity that seems to be getting in the way.

You can also work on your posture. If there's a lot of tension around the jaws or the skull, it's often because there's something wrong with the way the breath energy is flowing down in the base of the spine, or near the base of the spine, down in the lumbar region. So check that out. And again, check it out with breath energy that's sensitive, calm, and soothing. Here again you want to be careful that you don't force things too much, or else you can make your headache even worse.

Another perception you can work on is: Where are you in your body? Here it's good to keep in mind a distinction that the Buddha makes between consciousness and attention. Consciousness is simply the receptive quality of receiving sensations. In this case, the body's receptive all over. We talk about spreading awareness to fill the body, but actually that aspect of awareness is already there throughout the body. You could test it. You could, as Ajaan Suwat once said, take an iron spike, stick it in any part of the body, and it would be sensitive to it.

Your attention, however, tends to be more localized. That's where your desires are, where your interest is. The rest of your consciousness tends to be blotted out. What you want to learn how to do is to get more in touch with the consciousness side so that the attention side is not so headstrong. Think of the focus of your attention dissolving back, back, back into the basic awareness that's already there throughout the body. That way you often find that the different parts of the body that seem to be out of joint get back in alignment. And you're not so much in your head.

So, in one way, developing whole-body awareness is a question of perceptions: how you perceive your awareness, how you perceive where you are, how you perceive the problem. In another way, it's learning some sensitivity. There are the parts of the body that already are functioning well. Familiarize yourself with exactly what kind of breathing is going on in those parts, so that you can use that kind of breathing instead of your preconceived-notion breathing, which is often aggravating the problem.

So, find your strengths. Find your allies. Nurture your allies. Gain some appreciation for them, and you'll begin to realise that the parts of the body that are not cooperative are not really enemies. They're simply parts of the body that have been abused and they're used to being abused by you, so they tend to clam up. But if you begin to show some gentleness, some sensitivity, and some patience—at the same time that you question your basic assumptions, question your basic perceptions—you find you have a whole range of tools for re-establishing trust.

But here again, be careful. Don't think that just because you have so many tools that the job will be done quickly. This is a meticulous job. As I've said in the past, it's like those prison breaks that you see in movies where everything is very meticulously planned, carefully orchestrated, and they have to be very, very patient. If they get impatient, they reveal themselves and then the prison break is off. But if they can maintain their patience, they can get out. So bring a lot of patience to your meditation. This doesn't mean just sitting there, doing nothing. It means realizing that you have meticulous work to do, and doing it very carefully, very patiently. You're working with your perceptions, which can be very subtle. You're working with the energies in the body, which can also be subtle as well.

Ajaan Fuang commented once on how it's often said that breath meditation is appropriate for everybody, but he went on to say that that's not the case. It requires some refinement. People who are insensitive in their approach to the body, insensitive in their approach to the mind, will see nothing but in and out, in and out, and a fair amount of pain in the body. But if you bring some sensitivity, if you bring some finesse, along with a willingness to look for subtleties, then everything can open up.