

Winter Retreat 2018: Cultivating the Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara Dharma Post #1-B Settling Within Our Bodies

Dear Thay, dear brother Jerry, dear friends on the path,

Touching the Earth

Siddhartha Gautama sat on the Earth beneath the Bodhi tree for a long time as he practiced understanding and transforming suffering within himself. The Earth supported his seat on the ground and perhaps at times he rested his back against that wonderful tree. **As human beings and creatures of the Earth, we are grounded by gravity.** Gravity is part of every being and particle of the Earth—from her very core, out to all that rests or moves on her surface, and to the outer reaches of her atmosphere. We literally are held together by her gravity.

In our daily life and in our practice there may be times where we become overwhelmed and feel **“ungrounded.”** Once during the war in Vietnam and the real dangers experienced by himself and his young sangha, Thay wrote that he had yet to feel grounded. It happens to us all. In times like these, as we recognize what is going on, we can simply come back to our gravitational connection with our mother, the Earth. We may like to feel the solidity of the earth as our feet connect to the ground while we stand or walk, or the stability of a chair, couch or cushion as our “sit bones” move around and find a comfortable, sitting position. Even as we are lying down, we may like to notice the support of the floor, or the mattress of our bed as we relax our body. I have found that even the weight of a rock in the palm of my hand as I sit, or a rice pack on my chest or head as I lie down, sensing the weight of my body or the pull of gravity toward the Earth, helps to ground me back to mother Earth.

A different response to being overwhelmed might be that we shut down, and we actually feel the **weight** of the Earth’s gravity. We aren’t ungrounded—rather, we seem to be **“overgrounded.”** This happens to me more often in the wintertime when the days are shorter and the nights longer. My body may feel heavy or my feet feel like I am wearing lead boots. Sometimes it feels difficult to move at all. At times like these I have found it helpful as I sit or stand to raise my arms upward and lengthen my body up towards the sky or, as I am lying in bed, to stretch my fingertips to the top of the bed and my tips of my toes to the bottom of the bed. I call this my “Happy Buddha stretch”☺ Pushing off with my toes or swinging my arms as I walk also can be helpful.

If we can reconnect with the deeply grounding energy of our mother Earth in the present moment, gently allowing ourselves to focus attention on that unfolding experience, the ungroundedness or overgroundedness may pass more easily and we have a chance to feel settled and stable once more.

Allowing Energy to Move

As Siddhartha was sitting in meditation under the Bodhi tree, the energy of the Earth was moving up through him. I imagine as well that the energy from the Bodhi tree was a powerful support for him as he practiced. Have you ever sat outside barefoot with your feet on the Earth? Or walked barefoot on the beach or through the soft hubris of a forest floor? Or played in a garden with your bare hands in the rich, vibrant soil? By chance, do you remember the vibrational energy moving up through your body with that connection?

Our mother Earth is alive with energy—whether it be electrical, magnetic or chemical and, as creatures of the Earth, that energy moves through us as well. At times we may feel an unpleasant burst of energy inside when we are triggered by a memory or encounter something unpleasant or threatening in the present moment. Grounding practices can be helpful during such times and, as we ground, we may feel a shiver go up our spine, a tingling in our legs or arms, a calming sigh, or even a slight trembling in our bodies. **These are signs that our nervous system is releasing the energy of “overwhelm” and re-establishing the natural flow of energy that supports stability, calmness, flexibility, and normal bodily functions.**

There are physical actions that also can help release stuck energy and set our nervous system right. Some that I have used include hugging myself; curling up into a tight ball and then stretching out; briskly or gently massaging my arms, torso, legs, face, top of my head, feet, or toes; rolling my shoulders forward or backward in large, exaggerated motions; rotating my hips widely as if playing with a hula hoop; squeezing or rubbing my hands together; standing near a wall and pressing my hands and arms firmly against the wall, wrapping up in a blanket; walking or running; walking backwards; rocking in a rocking chair; putting a hand on my heart and a hand on my belly; drinking a glass of cold water or a cup of warm tea, or taking a warm bath or shower. The list is endless and you probably have your own list of actions as well.

Gently Allowing Posture and Breath

In two of the Buddha’s foundational teachings on mindfulness,¹ he begins by instructing the monastics in posture and breath: “It is like this bhikkhus: the practitioner goes into the forest or to the foot of a tree, or to any deserted place, sits stably in the lotus position, holding his or her body quite straight, and practices like this: ‘Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.

Posture

¹ *Anapanasati Sutra* (Full Awareness of Breathing) and *Satipatthana Sutra* (Four Establishments of Mindfulness)

Pat Ogden and Janina Fisher² said that our posture is dependent on the core of our body—the spine and surrounding muscles. A strong but flexible core and aligned posture stabilizes us both emotionally and physically while also supporting our actions. Thus, as the Buddha taught, a relaxed upright posture is conducive to mindfulness, meditation and right action.

In Buddhist practice, upright posture seems to be a given. However, over the course of our life, posture can change in response to painful or challenging experiences: closed postures, a sagging spine, or a rigid spine can develop over time to stressors within our environment, our life or our body and we may not even realize how posture is related to them.

I remember my experience of walking meditation when I first began practicing. As I walked, noticing each step, I also began noticing how my shoulders were chronically hunched upwards. With mindful walking I found that I could relax them as I stretched my head upwards and let my shoulders gradually relax. It was quite a surprise to begin noticing how often I held my shoulders in that tight, stressful position, and took some time and practice with my body/ breath, my thinking and my emotions before they could more naturally rest in a relaxed position.

Later, in a different situation, people began noticing how my chest was contracted and closed. My daughter offered me some chest opening exercises and a kind dharma teacher encouraged me to image a path of beautiful flowers ahead of me as I walked. Neither of these really helped, but that was because my posture was related to an emerging heart condition, and not from physiological memories of past suffering. Once the condition was corrected my posture improved.

Ultimately, becoming aware of our physical core and exploring an aligned posture, as Ogden and Fisher suggest, are important steps to getting in contact with what is going on inside of us, and finding that literal home inside where we feel secure within ourselves.

If we cannot have a relaxed upright posture when we practice, then how can we fully engage with mindfulness practice as the Buddha suggests? The first step initially is simply awareness. Aware of my hunched shoulders, aware of my closed chest... The second step is practicing with that awareness. **Ogden and Fisher suggest a couple of exercises** which you may like to try to help get in touch with your familiar posture as well as experience a more aligned posture. You also may discover exercises or practices of your own (yoga, tai chi, chi gong, pilates, medicine ball, dance, or your own creative experimentation).

In practicing the following exercises there is no need to try to force a change to your posture. Instead, you gently observe how you experience your posture as it is in the

² in **Sensorimotor Therapy: Interventions for Trauma and Attachment**

present moment. Note: if any of these exercises make you feel uncomfortable physically or otherwise, just stop and listen to what your body may be telling you.

Exercise: shoulder roll (note: this exercise as stated makes me feel dizzy, so I do not practice it, but it can be modified into a more gentle shoulder roll that is acceptable to the body)

- Shrug your shoulders up to your ears.
- Press your shoulders back and your shoulder blades together.
- Then slide your shoulder blades down your back.
- Do this a few times and notice how it affects your posture.

Exercise: lengthening your core

While **standing** with your feet under your shoulders and pointed comfortably forward, your chin parallel with the floor:

- Visualize yourself gently being lifted up by the crown of your head while your feet are planted firmly on the ground.
- Experiment with extending the crown of your head upward toward the sky (while keeping your chin parallel to the floor) and gently pushing downward into the floor with your feet.

While **sitting** with your feet and thighs both pointed forward and your feet flat on the floor:

- gently push downward with the tail of your spine and the soles of your feet and simultaneously gently push upward with the crown of your head.

As you experience both your more familiar posture and a more aligned posture, **you can ask yourself these questions:**

- What thoughts am I having?
- What emotions am I feeling?
- What movements and sensations am I experiencing?
- How is this posture different or familiar to me?

Breath

Breathing is critical to life and is one of the few bodily functions that can be conscious and voluntary or unconscious and involuntary. Although ways of breathing change naturally depending on internal or external conditions, an overall pattern of relaxed, balanced breathing is thought to have many benefits: helping nutrient absorption, boosting the immune system, contributing to bone growth, increasing circulation, strengthening organ function and relieving pain. With every

deep breath internal organs are massaged, circulation is enhanced, and lymph flow is increased.

According to Ogden and Fisher, similar to poor posture habits that may have arisen over time in response to a stressful environment or stressful events, our normal style of breathing can be less than optimal at times. We may even have chronic patterns of unhealthy breathing of which we are not normally aware. For example, fear may cause us to hold our breath or breathe only in the upper chest. Tension in our chest or stomach may inhibit our breathing. Poor posture may inhibit our breathing. Fast breathing may contribute to panic or anxiety. Tight shoulders or neck may also inhibit our breathing. Our breath may be uneven, rapid or shallow. We may not be able to “let go” as we exhale.

I remember one time on retreat I was completely focused on taking mindful steps as I walked outside, as Thay suggested. But then, in a moment, I realized that I could not find my breath. Literally, could not feel it anywhere. Did my chest rise with my inhalation or exhalation? I couldn't tell. Not finding my breath was disconcerting. I knew it was there, but I realized that I had not been merely observing my breath. No, I had been forcing my breath, and this put it out of sync with my body and caused me to panic. So I took a break from the walking practice and began just noticing my breath. What was it doing? How did it feel? How did I feel, given what my breath wanted to do?

This began a long period (years) of exploring the patterns of my breath—not expecting it to go deep and slow, not expecting to always find calm and ease. Just allowing my breath to be as it wanted to be was a relief. And it was enlightening, because it's all tied together anyway. Bit by bit, I become more aware. And more free. That really is the basis of our practice—accepting all of life (and ourselves), just as it is in this moment.

Ogden and Fisher offer several useful exercises for becoming aware of the different ways that we breathe and exploring a few different ways of breathing. You can notice and experiment with your breathing in several ways.

1. Begin by noticing your normal breathing. What words describe it? Held, steady, tight, shallow, heavy, sighing, deep, labored, fast, slow, struggled, easeful, irregular, winded, through the nose, through the mouth, ribs move or don't move, mostly in the belly, mostly in the chest, longer inhale than exhale, longer exhale than inhale, other?
2. While sitting or lying down, you can place your hands on your belly. As you inhale, let your belly push out against your hands. Maybe you can sense your ribs lifting outward and your chest cavity expanding with each inhale. How might you describe this experience?

3. Place your hands on the sides of your ribcage, with your fingers reaching around the front of your body. As you inhale, try to sense your hands moving apart, and as you exhale, sense your hands coming together. Try describing your experience.
4. How do you feel when you let your inhale be a bit longer than your exhale for a few minutes? Do you feel a bit more energy? What do you experience?
5. As you exhale, imagine just letting the air fall out of the body without effort, allowing gravity to do the work. Try this for a few minutes, allowing your exhale to be a bit longer than your inhale. What do you experience? Do you notice a pause at the end of your exhale? What is your experience of that?

As you practice these exercises, you might consider which ways of breathing feel natural to you. Which feel good to you? How might you use any of the ways of breathing to support you?

Putting it Together: Mindful Breathing Practice

Mindfulness of conscious breathing is a gift of Buddhist practice. As Thay has said: "...you have to practice conscious breathing in every state until you are liberated. With the conscious breath you arrive at deep insight and liberation. I am sure even after the Buddha was enlightened he continued to follow his conscious breathing. Conscious breathing means you are always the master of yourself. You are the conductor of your own car. You know how to handle yourself in a wonderful way. Even if you become a Buddha you must continue nourishing your body and your mind in a wonderful way. If you leave your conscious breath, you can be pulled away by other things. So even if you become a Buddha you continue to practice conscious breathing in order to be in touch with what is wonderful."

Sister Dang Nghiem (Sister D), in her book, "Mindfulness as Medicine," offers an easy-to-understand explanation of the breath and its central importance to our practice:

"As a spiritual practitioner, if you don't cultivate awareness of breathing, you can't go far in the understanding of your mind. In Chinese, the character for 'breath' is telling. ...It signifies: 'The breath is from the mind. The breath is mind itself.' You can understand this physiologically. When you are angry, you breathe rapidly, and your breath is shallow. When you are sad, you sigh, and your breath is drawn out and laborious. Each mental state such as sadness, despair, anger, or excitement is manifested through the breath. Indeed, it's from the mind that the breath manifests, and it's the mind itself that the breath is manifesting. The mind itself is abstract and elusive. We can't use a finger to point to the mind. The breath, on the other hand, is observable. We can see our breath on cold days. We can taste the breath, smell the breath (hopefully not too much), hear the breath, and touch the breath. Through the

five sense organs we can be in contact with the breath. Undoubtedly, it's comforting and beneficial to befriend our mind through our breath."

As a way to ground myself in the present moment and in my breath, I begin my mediation, based on the Buddha's instructions, something like this:

As I walk into my meditation room, I notice the sensations of my feet as they touch the floor. As I sit down, I feel the seat of my chair, supporting the weight of my body. I notice the smoothness and softness of the seat of the chair. I notice the firmness of the chair as it supports my back. I notice the bottoms of my feet resting on the cool softness of the wood floor. I feel the sensations of my hands, resting in my lap, one of my palms holding my other hand, fingers lightly touching each other. And once I feel fully present in my body, in contact with my physical environment, I bring my attention to my breath...breathing in, I physically experience breathing in—just as it is. Breathing out I physically experience breathing out—just as it is. What happens physiologically when I do this? I notice these sensations as well.

Sister D describes our mindfulness of breathing practice: "In our breathing exercises, at first we practice to be aware of our natural in-breath and out-breath. This is a cultivation of mindfulness—awareness of something as it is in the moment. Then, we practice following each in-breath from the beginning to the end, and following each out-breath from the beginning to the end. This progression is necessary because each breath takes about three to five seconds, and it takes only a split second to identify an in-breath or an out-breath; thus, the mind still has the rest of the time to think and to wander off! This second exercise trains us to string the beads of mindfulness into a beautiful necklace of concentration. Following the breath all the way through is a great challenge, even for just a few breaths! Recognizing our restless mind is to have more love and empathy for ourselves and to cultivate concentration more diligently in our daily lives."

Practicing with our breath: Sister D says, "Meditation is a bird with two wings—one is stopping and the other deep looking. In sitting meditation, we always start with stopping. We stop the mind from ceaseless thinking and aimless wandering by bringing the mind back, first to the breathing, and then to the body. Once the mind is anchored stably in the breath and body in the here and now, we can proceed to the second wing of meditation with a specific topic for contemplation."

She suggests the following guided meditation to practice stopping by being aware of the breath:

1. Breathing in, I am aware that I am breathing in.
Breathing out, I am aware that I am breathing out.
In-breath
Out breath

2. Breathing in, I am aware of the characteristics of my in-breath (short or long, shallow or deep, light or heavy, comfortable or uncomfortable, etc.)
Breathing out, I am aware of the characteristics of my out-breath.
 Characteristics of in-breath
 And out-breath
3. Breathing in, I follow my in-breath from the beginning to the end.
Breathing out, I follow my out-breath from the beginning to the end.
 Following the in-breath
 And the out-breath

In Thay's commentary on the four body-centered exercises of the Full Awareness of Breathing, he says, "The first four exercises of fully aware breathing help us return to our body in order to look deeply at it and care for it. In our daily lives, it is important that we learn to create harmony and ease in our body, and to reunite body and mind."

Gently settling within our bodies and our breath, accepting them just as they are, we begin our contemplation on the five super powers of Avalokiteshvara. As we weave mindfulness and contemplation together, what do we discover about ourselves? About our loved ones? About our environment? About society and humanity? And why does it matter anyway?