

# Mindfulness of Breathing (10) At Home with the Body

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## Summary Keywords

body, feel, sense, settled, relax, attention, present moment, Buddha, experience, face, shoulders, teacher, atrophy, subtle, breathe, karmic body, sensations, *ānāpānasati*, Ānanda, Abraham Lincoln, corpse, mindfulness, awareness, conscious, disconnection, "at homeness"

## Gil Fronsdal

The third step of *ānāpānasati* is to train oneself: when breathing in, to experience the whole body; when breathing out, to experience the whole body. To experience the whole body means really sensing and feeling with our sensations – with all the sense doors we have – this body of ours.

One of the ideas that has encouraged and inspired me to really tune into the sensations in my body is that when I die and my body becomes a corpse, the nerves in my body are no longer firing. There's no more electricity. There's no more activity in the nervous system of my body. If someone touches a corpse with

their finger, there's nothing in that corpse that will register, sense, feel, or send nerve signals to the brain.

Everything that I sense, every sensation in my body, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, is a symptom or a sign of being alive. It's not always going to be here – the sense that this is what living is. This is what aliveness is. This precious experience of being conscious and alive encourages and supports me to really be present. I feel delight knowing that I'm alive when I feel all this. To feel and experience the body is so important in Buddhism.

There's a wonderful story that soon after the Buddha died, someone went to Ānanda, his cousin. Ānanda was one of the Buddha's leading disciples, who spent – I think they say – 20 years as his attendant. They asked Ānanda, "Now that your teacher is dead, who is going to be your teacher? Who is going to be your good spiritual friend?" Ānanda said, "Now that our teacher is dead, our teacher will be mindfulness of the body." He didn't say our teacher will be our body. What he said was our teacher will be mindfulness of the body.

This is a remarkable statement. That this wonderful, amazing founder of Buddhism who had so much wisdom and realization – that his disciple who knew him directly would point to our capacity to be mindful of the body as having some equivalence to the Buddha him-

self. It's quite a statement about the potential of our body to really be our teacher – to be our Buddha in a sense.

But again, it's important to realize it's not the body by itself. It's mindfulness of the body – the ability to have awareness coursing through the body and awareness sensing and feeling the body. As we practice meditation, ideally, the body becomes more and more alive and conscious – there's more awareness of the body.

It's easy to be unconscious or unaware of parts of our body – to disassociate from parts of the body. Some of this might be because we're simply too much in our heads – thinking too much. I think computer work – sitting at the computer for long hours – is a kind of mental activity where many people lose track of their body. They're not settled in their body. There can be whole professions where people have their center of gravity above the neck. So there's a disconnect and atrophy of the living aliveness of the rest of the body.

There can also be emotional difficulties where it's too difficult to be in the body – because to feel parts of the body is to touch into those unresolved places or the pain that's there. People will stay maybe above the neck or waist, and not feel what's happening.

Breath meditation – Buddhist mindfulness meditation – can be seen as reclaiming our body – really opening up, filling up, and feeling our body. So that over time, we discover for ourselves how wonderful it is to be at home in the body, and how much mindfulness of the body is in fact a teacher for us – because it reveals so much. The path of practice and spiritual freedom is revealed through really living mindfulness of the body.

But, as we do so, what we are experiencing in the beginning is what I've called the "karmic body." The karmic body is when the body – our bodily experience, our sensations, how we experience our body – hasn't really caught up to the present moment. This means that if we have some unresolved issues, emotions, or experiences held and trapped in the body, then as we meditate, we have to work through them in order for the body to really catch up to the present moment.

It can be as simple as if you've learned through life experiences to be tense, anxious, and afraid – and that fear translates into the shoulders being raised – then when you sit down to meditate, sooner or later you'll start feeling sooner or later the tension in the shoulders. That tension is a legacy of the past. In a sense, it's a continuation of how we were conditioned by past experience, thinking, and attitudes. They get stored. They get perpetuated and locked in. But as we start feeling the shoulders being tense, maybe we can relax

a little. As we settle, get concentrated, and more and more here, the shoulders relax more. Then at some point, the shoulders no longer contain this momentum from the past. When that momentum is no longer there, the shoulders – in my language – have finally arrived in the present moment. They're here.

There might be holding patterns all over the body that represent ways in which we've repressed our body – not paying attention to it, the way we hold the body, the tension we have. All these things are part of the karmic body.

Abraham Lincoln said, "By the time a person is 40, they're responsible for their face." I think what he meant by this was the chronic holding patterns of how we use the small micro-muscles of the face. After a while, they get locked in. Or certain muscles get strong and developed, and others atrophy. This subtly shapes the human face.

I've seen that in people who have the same ethnicity, but grew up in different cultures, speaking different languages – those subtle, subtle shifts and changes of their faces. Maybe because of the language, they used different muscles to speak.

So, if we're always afraid or angry, there are subtle micro-muscles in the face that hold that. The face can

be a legacy of the momentum of the past. The face can relax, and we can catch up and be in the present moment.

Part of mindfulness is to let the body catch up to the present moment. To do that, it requires being willing to feel and sense all that's in the body – to leave nothing out. There are messy rooms with this idea of being at home in the body. There are rooms that still need to be cleaned out for the house to be settled so we can really feel at home in it.

We have to be very patient with all that. This is where mindfulness of breathing can be helpful. In mindfulness practice, we really want to feel this body – to feel the tensions and pains we have. We breathe with those discomforts, and we breathe through them – to help them relax, open, and soften.

It's almost like when there's space – breathing room for the body – the body knows how to unfold, unwind, and relax. The idea is to breathe with the discomfort, rather than thinking about it, reacting to it, pushing it away, being discouraged, being upset, going into fantasy to avoid it – to really be here in this body, and breathe with it. So to breathe *with* – opening to the body, feeling at home in the body, learning to be grounded here.

I'll repeat what I said at the end of the meditation. Many

people thrive or really benefit from others offering their attention. It's a great gift we give to others – to listen and pay attention to them well.

But the attention we give also conveys other subtle attitudes. If we're always leaning forward, showing we're paying attention, but we have a little fear or anxiety around it – or we're trying too hard to do something for them – we convey something very different, than if we're settled back and paying careful attention. In that way, we convey a sense of "at homeness" – a sense of safety and comfort in this body and the world. To convey that to others, "Yes, I'm paying attention to you." And we can be at ease and settled here.

To say this, maybe it's not very compelling to you how important that is. But if you're with a four-year-old child, the child picks up on how you're paying attention. If you're paying attention with anxiety, they learn the world is an anxious place. But if they see someone paying attention and being there, and that person is at home in their body, feeling safe and settled, they learn something very different.

This is possible! It's possible to feel relaxed and at home in the world. Mindfulness of the body – one of my goals in life is to be a cheerleader for mindfulness of the body.

I hope that over the next few days you really explore this. One of the ways to explore mindfulness of the body is not to make being mindful a big project.

Make it a study to become aware of all the ways that you're not aware of your body, the ways that you might wander off from it, and are not in touch. Notice that. Become like an expert. Really recognize quickly, "Oh, I'm not in touch with my body. I'm not aware of what's happening here. I'm in my thoughts and ideas. I'm lost in my project." Do that regularly – just that – and see what happens to you, independent of any need to actually come back to your body. Notice how much you're away.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to continuing this series on Monday.