

Satipaṭṭhāna (10) Observing the Body Internally and Externally

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Today, we begin our discussion of the refrain. The refrain accompanies each of the 13 exercises in this practice of mindfulness.

The instructions for the breathing exercise that begins the *sutta* describe knowing the breath, feeling the whole body as we breathe, and relaxing the constructed body – the tense body – in a deep way. We do the breathing exercise, and it is cyclic. I said in the guided meditation that the breath can be seen, in the metaphor of the turner, as a cycle. We know the breath, we experience the body, and we relax the body. That allows us to have a deeper or different connection with knowing the

breath, which allows us to feel the body more deeply. This allows even deeper relaxation.

That cycle or spiral goes around and around. It is not a linear path – like doing one thing and then the next, and the next – and that is it. As this deepens, the breath becomes more of an object of continuous attention. There is more continuous contact with the breath. The breath gets subtler and quieter. The mind gets stronger, less distracted, and more stable in the present moment – not so likely to wander off into thoughts.

At that point, the Buddha introduces the idea of observing. As I said last week, watching or observing is not something to do when the mind is easily distracted or caught up in things. But when the mind is stable and still, there is a qualitatively different way of settling back and observing what is happening. Just to watch and be here – without interfering, judging, or reacting.

Then the refrain says:

One observes the body in terms of the body internally, and one observes the body in terms of the body externally.

The language of “the body in the body” and “body in terms of the body” does not add a lot to the experience of the body. It does not judge the body or compare it to anything else. It lets each experience of the body be itself – without a past or future, without identifying with

it, without expectation. Just watching – feeling the experience of the body on its own terms, as it is, free of our associations.

The instructions are to do this internally and externally. I would propose that we do not really know what this means. Some people have said it means watching one's own body and other people's bodies. One is watching oneself breathe and other people breathe. I do not find that a very satisfying idea. It might have value. But as something profound, it does not strike me as that interesting.

I like to interpret internal and external in two ways. One way is that we are aware of the sensations arising in the body that are purely internal. We are also aware of the sensations in the body that come from external sense contact – the temperature of the room; your body against the chair, seat, or floor. There might be sounds or smells. You might feel your clothes against your body. Any external contact that stimulates the body can be considered external.

At some point, the mind gets quieter and still and can stably observe what is here. The emphasis on focusing on the breath becomes lighter and easier. The awareness opens up and can now receive – in choiceless, open awareness – experiences of the body from external stimuli and those arising inside.

We are getting quieter and more concentrated. We have less preference or directedness of the mind on the breath. The attention might still be centered on the breath, but it is not directed to the breath. Whereas in the beginning, we are directing the attention to the breath – trying to keep it there, stay there. But as the mind stops wandering away and feels stable in the present moment, we start opening and relaxing. We become aware of the field of experience: the internal experiences coming and going in the body and the external experiences or events touching our senses.

There is a movement towards very relaxed awareness – observing that is not work. In the beginning, it might be a bit like work. It may be like a potter making a pot. At first, with just a hunk of clay, there is a lot of work. Then the work gets more refined, and the potter makes a nice, thin bowl. At some point, the potter sits back and observes it. In the beginning, the potter was so focused on the pot that the mind became very still, quiet, and not distracted. There is a feeling of being unified, concentrated, and present. It is nice sitting there, observing the pot and feeling the sensations inside – the goodness of the feelings of unification, collectedness, and being present.

With time, we can observe, and the observation can be wide. It is sometimes called 360-degree observation.

You are not trying to be aware of 360 degrees, but it feels like you could. The attention is so open that wherever a sensation comes from, we know it for itself. We know it in the simplicity of the sensation.

This is fascinating to do when there is discomfort or pain in the body. Discomfort can be free of our associations, beliefs, expectations, and fears about it. Just feel discomfort as sensations arise and pass.

You might associate a loud sound with your neighbor making noise outside again. But when the sound is free from all associations, you hear it as sound in the simplest possible way. This observing attention is just there – feeling, sensing, being with the sound.

That is one way I interpret internal and external. The text says:

This is how one observes the body in terms of the body internally and observes the body in terms of the body externally.

Tomorrow I will talk about another way of interpreting internal and external. Understanding internal and external in different ways supports a deepening of the practice. We will then go on to the rest of the refrain. Some people call this part of the refrain the “insight part,” where insight begins to occur in mindfulness practice.

We are developing stability of mind, connectedness with and collectedness around the breathing, and relaxed unification so that we can begin seeing – have insight – into our experience. One way that begins is with open awareness that can feel the sensations internally and externally in a very relaxed, centered, quiet way – allowing the sensations to come and go, showing themselves more and more simply.

Tomorrow, as I said, I will offer another way of understanding internal and external. Together these two ways will help as we go into the next insight – the core insight of insight meditation, which is also in the refrain.

May you become a craftsperson in the hands-on craft of mindfulness – sensing and feeling your breathing with hands-on contact. For now, continue practicing with the breath exercise. At some point, we will switch to the other exercises in *satipaṭṭhāna*.

Over these days of discussing the breathing exercise, I encourage you to make breathing a subject of attention. Study it throughout the day as much as you can. You might have reminders to check in with your breathing. How is your breathing right now? Maybe in some situations in daily life, you can settle in and feel the rhythm of breathing as you breathe. I think the more you

develop your attention to breathing, the more you will appreciate the rest of this practice as it unfolds.

Thank you, and I look forward to tomorrow.