

Satipaṭṭhāna (29) Resting in the Wisdom of the Body

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

fifth exercise, sensations, body, pain, breathing room, embodied, pyramid, sensory experience, awakening

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This part of the discourse on the foundations for awareness is the simplest of them all. It is simply a description. It says:

In this body, there is the property of earth, the property of water, the property of fire, and the property of air (or wind).

And that's it. It also gives an analogy, which I will mention tomorrow.

This passage is a recognition of each of these properties as they appear within us. This is so simple that it might be overlooked. We might not understand how profound it is. Actually, one of the central ways that vipassana is practiced is by really delving deep into the level of the sensations of our experience.

It is easy to not be in the sensations. It is possible to have sensations of some kind and then start interpreting them, making stories around them, and having reactions to them. It is possible to not be connected to our sensations at all – to be living in an abstract world of thoughts, ideas, and feelings that are disconnected from our body.

Part of mindfulness practice is to awaken the body. One Mahayana sutra says that awakening and enlightenment happen through the body. The Buddha himself said that there is no awakening without mindfulness of the body. By dropping into our sensations and feeling them as they appear, we are expanding our awareness throughout our body. As more and more of our body starts awakening, we feel really connected to it. We start feeling embodied.

This does a lot of wonderful things for us. One result is that the body itself can process so much of our life – so many of our difficulties, emotions, thoughts, concerns, and tensions. This is partly because when we are not in our body, we are often in reactive thoughts – interpretations and stressful ways of thinking that reinforce the tension in the body. If we drop down into the body, then there is room for things to unfold. There is breathing room for things.

Some things will naturally unfold and resolve themselves – like tension, for example. Some things do not resolve themselves. There can be chronic physical tension in the body. But there is an art to simply feeling that tension without adding any second arrows to it. Without adding any extra tension to it.

Then we can delve even deeper into the pain, so we are no longer experiencing it at the conceptual level. Take the word “pain” as an example of what I mean by this. The word pain is an abstraction. It is an umbrella term for sensations that are quite intense. But those sensations can be varied. There can be intense burning, stabbing, twisting, stretching, pulling, and tightening going on. There can be intense exhaustion of the muscles when they are really aching. So all those specific sensations will be called pain. Two people can say they have pain, and yet be experiencing very different sensations.

Sometimes when we call something pain, we react to all the ideas, notions, or abstractions we have about pain – what it means, where it is going, what is going to happen in the future – rather than just dropping into and feeling the particular sensations of the pain itself.

At the level of calling it pain, it can feel like it is constant. But when we drop into the level of sensations, we can discover – if we are really focused – that the sensations

are not constant. They are inconstant: they come and they go. They appear and they disappear.

When I was a new Zen student, I used to bring my attention to the pain in my knees, which I had a lot of. Sometimes the pain would be reduced to just a little square centimeter. In that centimeter, there would be a dance of intense sensations – sparking sensations of stabbing, tightening, and other different sensations. It was fascinating to watch the dance of sensations flicking around. There was no one sensation to hold onto or react to because they were constantly moving within this little square centimeter.

The ability to just feel at the physical sensation level gives breathing room for some things to unwind, dissolve, and resolve themselves. For other things which are pleasant and enjoyable, there is breathing room for them to grow and expand. Some of the great feelings of well-being that come with practice are much more accessible if we can feel them more fully in the body.

The more we are awake in the body, the more the body becomes a field of sensations. Much of our feelings of happiness, joy, and well-being can be experienced in an embodied way. If we can really feel them as they course through the body, then these feelings are more stable and full. So the ability to drop down and feel the

sensations increases our capacity for experiencing joy and happiness.

So we drop down and are embodied with our experience – referring everything back to the body and letting the body hold it. Then the body wakes up and becomes more expansive, in a sense, with our sensations. We are not living from the neck up.

When embodied, it also turns out that we have a lot more capacity to be with difficulties. The mind can sometimes get very claustrophobic with its stories, ideas, reactions, beliefs, memories, and projections into the future.

But if we can be centered, grounded, and stable in our body and make room to feel the sensations, then we have a much bigger capacity to deal with challenges. We have a much greater capacity to be uncomfortable and are not knocked over, pushed around, reactive, tense, or feel like our boundaries are being pushed. Because we are stable and embodied, we have the capacity to hold it all and be aware of it.

It is like the analogy if you put a pyramid on its pointed head, it is not very stable. Maybe you can get it perfectly balanced for a moment but if someone just taps it, it falls over. But if you turn the pyramid right side up, so it is sitting on its base, then when you push it, it is not

going to tip over at all. There is something about being stable and centered in the physical sensations of our body that conditions us to not easily get pushed over or thrown off balance by events of the world.

So this simple exercise opens up a vast world of possibilities – the world of our body. Being centered, grounded, and embodied we let the body process our life and let the body be the place where we compost things.

When I have difficult emotions, I find it so valuable to sit and meditate and just feel those emotions in my body and trust the body, as if the body is composting them. I put the emotions back into my body and feel them as sensations within the body. It is a relief to realize that the wisdom of the body knows how to take care of things – sometimes much better than the mind, which is trying to figure it all out, or trying to navigate, negotiate, mediate, or bargain with reality.

To begin increasing your vocabulary for sensations you might want to draw up a long list of all the ways that direct sensory experience is felt. The longer that vocabulary list, the more ways you have to enter into the world of sensations and feel them. Eventually, you enter in so fully that you start feeling the dynamic way in which the sensory experience changes, moves, flows, and comes alive as you rest in the body.

I offer you this exercise to support this sensation meditation. Draw up a long list of all the words in your language that describe sensations: twisting, pulling, hot, cold, heavy, light, itching – whatever it might be. Get your friends involved. Maybe they have different words than you do, so your vocabulary increases. As your vocabulary increases, perhaps your sensitivity will also increase and you will be able to identify the differences between some of your sensations, which otherwise you might have missed.

I hope that there will come a day – maybe today – when you love your body. Much *mettā* to your body. May your body be one of your valentines. Thank you.