

Satipaṭṭhāna (6) Breathing Aware of the Whole Body

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

rhythm, waves, fire, movements, relaxed, attention, river, alert, bird, updraft, glide, ride, absorbed, sensations, breath body, emotions, sandcastle, cat

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We continue to explore our capacity for awareness and how attention to breathing can be supportive and helpful. The more you can be connected to following the rhythm of breathing in and out, the less mental energy or attention is available to feed thinking. If all our attention goes into thinking, we reinforce thinking. If what we are thinking is not helpful or is debilitating, we are reinforcing unhelpful trains of thought. But if we pour our attention into the simplicity of breathing, this is considered, in Buddhism, to be very wholesome and helpful. It leads to good states of mind.

Some people might feel their concerns are so important that they have to think about them. They cannot help it because there is so much energy in thinking. Even if

they do not want to, the mind is pulled strongly into thinking.

Sometimes we have to retreat from certain challenges to get refreshed or put ourselves in a good state of mind so that we can address them better. This is one of the functions of meditation. It is not to withdraw from life but rather to step away, in a sense, and not be involved in the usual things. More importantly, it is to step away from the mind's preoccupation with things long enough to get refreshed. Then we can return with better insight and wisdom to address our challenges.

The rhythm of breathing is a place that may help. There is something about the rhythm of things, like the rhythm of the waves washing across the shore, that is easier to stay with and follow. Some people can sit and watch this for a long time. Watching a still lake does not invite the same kind of absorption as would a flowing river.

Similarly, it is possible to watch a fire in a fireplace for a long time – watching the patterns moving, coming and going, appearing and disappearing. There is something about the eyes and the mind gently moving, following something lightly without work, and being very relaxed about it. It is much more stressful if you fixate your attention on a single point without letting it move.

The idea is to find a place of relaxed attention with the breathing. To watch the movements in the rhythm of breathing in and breathing out – just as if you are watching a river flow by. It can be stressful if you are too focused on being concentrated, bearing down. But if you do not have enough attention on the breathing, the mind will wander off into thought.

An alert and relaxed mind is the middle way between having too much tight attention and not enough attention. The engagement with breathing is more like play or love than it is like work. It does involve some getting absorbed, getting involved in it, settling in. So I sometimes offer images to help illustrate that.

Today, in the guided meditation, I provided the image of a bird soaring on the inbreath. Somehow you know the updraft as the inhale. As the movements of your body go up and expand, you can imagine your wings catching the updraft. It may be more compelling, with this image, to ride the inhale up and then glide down with the exhale. This might give a sense of how to stay closely connected to the breathing without a lot of work.

Another image I have used is waves washing up, back and forth, across a sandy shore. I do not know if that will work for you. It does help me find the right balance between not being tight or forceful in the attention, but also not being too lax. Just right there.

Over time, this is self-reinforcing. As more attention goes into the sensations of breathing and less into thinking, the mind finds it easier to be absorbed in and present for the breathing. It is not just to be aware of the breathing – but to ride the sensations of the breath, be with the breath, and experience the whole body. We can experience the whole breath body as all the different ways in which the movement of breathing come into play in the body.

There are the coarse, big movements of the chest, diaphragm, and belly and subtle ones, like in the back of the rib cage. If you are very sensitive, you can feel little movements of the upper spine as you breathe. Sometimes I can feel a slight alternating sense of pressure and release in my hip joint as I breathe in and out. The shoulders also might move.

As we are aware of the expansion of the sensations of breathing – the breath body experience – that can be a place where we feel emotions. As the chest expands, you might feel sadness in the area of your heart. Include that as part of experiencing the whole body – not as an emotion, but as physical sensations.

It is like a sandcastle someone has built on the beach. As the waves come and go across the sand, they wash around the sandcastle. The waves are untroubled by

the sandcastle. They just come and go, wash around the sides of the sandcastle. Slowly the sandcastle dissolves.

Some difficult emotions might dissolve if we just let them rock, move, and be washed over. But more important than the emotion dissolving is having the experience of feeling the physical sensations of emotions without being troubled by them or making a story about them.

When we feel emotions as emotions, we may have ideas, beliefs, and concerns connected with them. Sometimes we identify with our emotions making them more complicated than they need to be. In the rhythm of breathing in and breathing out, we just feel the physical sensations of the emotion moving through us, back and forth. We are not concerned with what happens with emotions. Just be concerned with moving through them.

I like the analogy of petting a cat. Whatever is going on in the sensations moving through the body, awareness is like stroking a cat. Whether the sensations are difficult or not, we keep stroking the cat. Here we are learning how to stay involved with breathing without getting pulled away into the thoughts, ideas, and concerns of the mind.

As I have said earlier, this is not denial, pushing away, or a dismissal of how we are feeling. It is very respectful to feel the physicality of our experience without adding lots of stuff on top. It is also a way of becoming refreshed or creating more clarity so that we are more present for the challenges of our life.

Learning to breathe through and with our experience is one of the great skills that can come from this practice. Whatever is happening – breathe with it, breathe through it, and stay grounded in your breathing. As you learn how to breathe with your experience, you might find that you end up more balanced. You might find that you become less reactive or tense. Just breathing with whatever is happening.

The Buddha begins this teaching by emphasizing the importance of taking a supportive meditation posture and establishing awareness with the breathing. This is where we are anchored. This is where we are going to be rooted for meditation and for breathing. Of course, it is not easy to be rooted there, but that is the understanding.

Then become aware of what the sensations of breathing feel like. Get more familiar with them. Hang out with the breathing and stay with it, especially with the rhythm of breathing. As you get settled into it, feel the whole breath body as you breathe in. Feel the influence that

the movements of breathing have in the body. And feel that whole influence as you exhale.

I use the word “influence” because there are many different ways in which breathing can affect us. Breathing affects not just the physical movements of the body but also relaxation, opening, and softening. There are many kinds of emotional impacts that the motion of breathing can have. Cultivate the sense of allowing yourself to be influenced and opened by the experience of breathing. Rather than being the one who is directing the show, be the one who is receiving the full experience of breathing in throughout the body and the full experience of breathing out throughout the body.

I hope that this encouragement to explore and discover breathing inspires you. Take time to become more familiar with your breath and with the skill of breathing *with* things. Discover what is happening as you breathe through and with the whole body. Stay connected there. If you are talking or engaged in work, discover what happens when you are breathing with that experience. Even if you have been meditating for a long time, there is always room to discover greater value in attention to breathing.

If this appeals to you, you might spend the next 24 hours with the practice of experiencing the whole body as you breathe in and experiencing the body as you

breathe out. Really feel that experience. Get familiar with it. Make it second nature to be connected to it. Discover all that opens up when you are with your body and your breathing – which might not open up if you stay locked in your mental concerns and thoughts.

Thank you. I look forward to being here tomorrow.