

Awareness of the Body in Practice

by Rebecca Dixon
September 26, 2021

The Buddha said that all the dharma can be found in this fathom-long body.

There are several meanings for the word “**dharma.**” It can mean all that the Buddha taught, and it can mean all that there is: all experience, phenomena, things.

Both meanings apply in this quote. Everything we experience comes into our awareness through our physical senses.

Paying attention to the body will teach us all the Buddha taught.

A lot of people forget their bodies, would almost *walk off and leave them behind.*

To others, the body is just a *transportation device*, or a source of pleasure or discomfort.

Mostly, it's an *object*, seen and judged by others. We lavish attention on the body as an object, and little to it as life itself.

In meditation practice it's very important to be in touch with the body, to **inhabit** our **experience**.

Rather than our usual attention to the world around the body, we bring attention inward, so we feel the impact the world has on us, physically and emotionally.

All experience comes to us through the body, and echoes there as emotion and thought.

The body is **always here & now**. The mind has no boundaries in time or space. It's the body that **holds** the truth of our immediate experience.

It holds our traumas, remembers how much a cup of liquid weighs, and has a wisdom we too often ignore.

The Buddha wrote poetry collected in a book called the Dhammapada. Verse 299 says in part:

They awaken, [are] always wide awake:
those yogis
whose mindfulness, both day & night,
is constantly immersed
in the body.

The **tradition** of Buddhist meditation **I teach** is sometimes called Mindfulness Meditation, sometimes Vipassana, or Insight meditation.

These names refer to awareness turned inward, **rooted** in the **body**.

There are 4 Foundations to the *state of mindfulness* that can liberate us from the sources of suffering, in other words, free us from stress or dukkha.

These are laid out in the “Satipatthana Sutta”

The **1st Foundation** is the **body**. The other three build on this awareness of the body. So it’s where we start and continue throughout our practice.

The Satipatthana Sutta sets out very detailed instructions for how to become mindful of the body.

This evening I’ll offer just the basics.

The usual object of concentration in meditation is the **breathing**.

This is where the attention is focused, for many reasons, not least: the breathing is always there.

Also importantly, this *draws awareness* to the **internal experience** of the body.

We start by **looking** for sensations of breathing that are *easiest to follow*.

Choices include sensations in the chest, belly, mouth or nose.

Sometimes it’s very subtle, other times it’s deep and fast and impossible to miss.

Also, it is felt from the inside of the body.

Once we have a lock on these, we can shift to subtler sensations, which is like exercising with heavier weights.

Half of **concentration** is guiding our attention to one object. The other half is keeping it there.

So, the Buddha’s instructions are to be aware of breathing in, out, long, short, deep, shallow, etc. – for every breath

This engages interest – essential for *investigation*. We watch as if constantly asking, what is this moment’s experience of breathing like?

We can also use pleasure and effort to sustain concentration. Many people only use effort and miss the more efficient means.

Inevitably, while we sit here watching the sensations of breathing,

thoughts arise. This week, while I was on a solo camping retreat, I saw many thoughts pass through my awareness without

“sticking.”

Like **thieves**, some thoughts often sneak up and run off with our attention before we know it. Then, all of a sudden, we realize we’re lost in thought.

This is *great*. It’s natural for the mind to wander.

But we have **noticed** it. This is a return to **mindfulness**, and it should be celebrated, definitely *not judged as a failure* of meditation.

It's so important to *meet this moment with acceptance*:

of ourselves and the truth of what is: that the attention has wandered. We have noticed, and can now direct it back.

Let me emphasize that the ability to accept *what is* must be cultivated for us to progress toward freedom from suffering.

Another opportunity we have when we realize the attention has wandered is that it gives us a chance to *train the mind* to come back to mindfulness. If the thoughts are attractive, this can be challenging. We just keep inviting the attention back to the breath.

The simple concentration and acceptance developed while we're sitting enables us to follow the rest of the Satipatthana instructions, which include:

mindfulness of the body lying down, getting up, standing, walking, working

So, in our formal practice, we create an anchor of awareness in the body and it serves us in the *rest of our daily life*.

Another of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is what goes on in our heads – what *stole our attention* away from the breath, usually *thinking*.

What's the difference between **thinking** and mindfulness of thought?

Keeping some attention on body. This is a shifting of attention back and forth. It can happen incredibly fast.

Buddhist psychology, called the Abhidhamma, talks about mind-moments, which are an unimaginably small unit of time.

That's how fast our minds can shift from one object of attention to another.

This shifting of attention needs to be practiced, and it creates a mental split screen. Just trust that the mind can do this, like when you trusted you could ride a bike and off you went.

Repeatedly inviting attention back to breathing *trains the mind* so that when our ability to go back and forth like this is strong enough, we can observe what thoughts are without getting lost in them.

Now let's talk about mindfulness of **emotions** – also called *feelings*.

That "lost in thought" experience is not without value, either, because The stories it contains often evoke emotions.

A lot of people describe their emotions in terms of the story about what happened to "cause" their emotions, with no idea how their emotions **feel** in the body.

So, with either thoughts or emotions or other mindstates, the place to *investigate our experience* of them is the body.

We can observe emotions with mindful attention to the body – purposefully looking for where the emotion registers, without being consumed by it or swept back into the train of thought that evoked it. So, we need to use concentration to stay with the body's experience and thus stay out of the story, the train of thought.

If the location of the emotion isn't obvious, investigate the usual suspects: the stomach, jaw, chest and arm muscles, etc.

The usually unconscious purpose of **story** is to get us out of the discomfort of the "*feeling*." We retrace the events involved, maybe fantasizing about changing what happened.

Usually, thinking can't solve our discomfort, but instead, thinking **actually prolongs** our dukkha.

So when we watch the physical sensations, we attend directly to our own true experience. What happens in the body is true, here & now. In contrast, thoughts can & *do lie*.

Paying this close and honest attention is like *visiting a friend* who is suffering. This **direct attention** is what most people **want** in life. We want loving attention, and this is how we can give it to ourselves.

Paying attention to our own suffering is healing. It allows emotions to run their course.

When our attention is *stuck in the story*, our minds store those emotion, all that dukkha, away in stiff muscles, bad mental habits. The mind and body are not healed.

This *working through our dukkha* is progress in Mindfulness practice.

Many people think progress is *improved concentration*, when it gets easier to stay on breathing.

But mindfulness practice can progressively free us from suffering in our daily lives.

How does that work? Well, I can tell you how it worked for me.

Early in my practice I realized how helpful it would be if I could be mindful during daily life, so I tried to be aware of my breathing as often as possible through the day.

Powerful emotions were a trigger to pay close attention to my breathing.

Eventually I learned to also focus on the way my hands and other parts of the body felt as I moved them to do work.

When we get to where we can easily identify the way the body experiences our emotions, we get another benefit.

Then body will tell us when we're under the influence of those emotions and in danger of doing something we'll regret.

Like when we're angry, afraid, or jealous. If we're aware of thoughts and emotions that cloud our judgment, we have a chance to make better choices about how we respond.

There are payoffs at every level of our lives:
lower stress, clearer thinking and better judgment, a deeper understanding of our own minds, wisdom, and improved relationships with others.

Now I'd like to end with a poem by Megan Minutillo, entitled

I hope you find a home within your body.

May you take comfort within the curves of your skin,
and the laugh lines around your mouth,
and the creases next to your eyes.

May you see how there is strength within your bones,
and the force that exists within your lungs,
and the power that exists within your heart.

May you find joy in the sound of your voice,
and wonder in the thoughts that live within your head,
and delight in your ability to love with your whole self.

I hope you find a home within your body.

I hope you treat it with tenderness and care,
and with honesty and truth,
and with grace and acceptance, too.

I hope you find a home within your body,
for your body is the first place that will always shelter you.

Thank you.