

Embodied Awareness

When I began my practice in Theravada Buddhism, in the insight meditation form, we liked to say that as dharma students we were seeking an “in-the-body” experience. Indeed, in practicing the Buddha’s meditation, we learn to develop an “embodied awareness.” What this means is, as dharma students we learn to develop awareness of the full body. In doing so we learn, importantly, to be aware of the interior landscape of the body, including mental experience as it manifests as bodily form.

The skill of mindfulness enables us to have embodied awareness. The dharma student practices mindfulness of the body. The development of mindfulness of the body is a critical element in the unfolding of the Buddha’s path. The Buddha was emphatic in addressing the role mindfulness of the body plays in the practice of the dharma.

As he said:

"When one thing is practiced & pursued, ignorance is abandoned, clear knowing arises, the conceit 'I am' is abandoned, latent tendencies are uprooted, fetters are abandoned. Which one thing? Mindfulness immersed in the body."

(AN 1.2)

As dharma students, we make an effort to cultivate mindfulness of the body. We put the mind on the body and attempt to keep it there. When mindfulness of the body is established, we're able to be aware of our human experience of body and mind. We're able to understand our experience of body and mind. We're able to relate skillfully to our experience of body and mind.

Typically, we relate to our experience in a less-than-skillful way. When the weather on a winter day is cold and bitter, we react by disliking the unpleasant sensations. We suffer. When an emotion like anxiety arises in the body, taking the form of a dissonant sensation, we cling to it. In turn, we engender stories, painful narratives, regarding whatever we're anxious about. We suffer.

If we're not aware of our bodily experience, we're likely to suffer. In the sutta on "Mindfulness of Breathing," the Buddha uses a vivid metaphor to illustrate how our inability to be mindful of the body causes us to relate to our bodily experience in an unskillful way, a way that brings about suffering.

"In whomever mindfulness immersed in the body is not developed, not pursued, Mara gains entry, Mara gains a foothold.

"Suppose that a man were to throw a heavy stone ball into a pile of wet clay. What do you think, monks — would the heavy stone ball gain entry into the pile of wet clay?"

"Yes, venerable sir."

"In the same way, in whomever mindfulness immersed in the body is not developed, not pursued, Mara gains entry, Mara gains a foothold."

(MN 119)

2,600 years ago, the Buddha taught that we must learn to be aware of our mental experience – including emotions – as it registers in the body, as physical form. The manner in which mental experience takes shape as sensation in the body is something that contemporary research in neuroscience has come to perceive. Today, some of the most effective psychology forms include body-oriented models such as Somatic Experiencing. These therapies engage patients in an exploration of the inner landscape of the body in an effort to understand their mental and emotional experience.

Much of the recent emphasis in therapy models in having embodied awareness has derived from trauma research. The research shows how we hold mental qualities, like fear and anger, in the body. Years after she's been hit by a car on a city street, the accident victim feels fear when she walks down that street. There may not be a vehicle anywhere in sight. She feels fear because she's been holding it inside her body; she's never learned to process it.

Many of us have suffered childhood trauma. As a young person, we experienced certain painful feelings, and, under certain circumstances, we still feel these feelings. As a young boy I was often criticized by my father. And throughout my life when someone has criticized me I have felt the fear and rage I felt as a child. Of course, the feelings we experience as a result of past trauma are not merely reproductions of what we felt in the past; they're the compounded result of having felt these feelings, and having held on to them, numerous times over the span of the years.

The truth, the Buddha tells us, is that the body is a storehouse of mental pain and suffering.

The truth is, we've all experienced trauma on various levels. We're all holding painful emotional content within our fathom-long bodies. We all have suffering; we experience this suffering inside, in the body. As Freud noted: "In the last analysis, all suffering is nothing else than sensation; it only exists in so far as we feel it...."

The way out of suffering, the Buddha realized, is to be aware of our bodily experience. It entails learning to pay close attention to the body, its physical and mental sensations, the way it feels.

Some body-oriented therapies like Somatic Experiencing employ the practice of “Focusing,” developed by Eugene Gendlin, as a method for cultivating awareness of mental phenomena as bodily sensation. In Focusing, the practitioner brings his awareness to the body, to the felt experience of suffering, emotional pain, mental dis-ease. He’s aware of the emotion as it arises as physical form. He observes its physical makeup. He notes its shape, color, texture, and so forth. He labels the emotion, choosing the most appropriate description: “anxiety” or “anger” or “disappointment” or “dissatisfaction.”

In dharma practice, we develop similar skills. We learn to be mindful of an emotion like anxiety as it appears as form, sensation, in the body. We learn to observe this “sensation,” in an effort to understand our relationship to it: we learn to see how we hold on to it; and how this holding on brings about suffering. We learn to understand the sensation itself, discerning its impermanent, conditioned nature; we learn to see that if we let it be, we don’t suffer. These insights are arrived at by looking at the sensation as it arises in real-time, in the body. Without this kind of embodied awareness, our ability to develop insight – liberating insight – is all but impossible. When we have embodied awareness, we’re able to develop insight.

The dharma student, developed embodied awareness, is in a position to attain wisdom. But mindfulness of the body is not easily accomplished. The journey to the body requires that we learn certain skills. The main skill the Buddha teaches that enables us to develop embodied awareness is mindfulness of breathing.

The Buddha lays out certain steps that dharma students follow in making the journey to the body. These steps comprise the most detailed set of instructions he gave. They’re the

steps he followed. They're steps that all dharma students can learn to follow. The practice of these steps is something that can be accomplished by practitioners living in the world, as householders, with the day-to-day responsibilities of work, relationship, etc. I have taught these skills for many years and I have no question that this is can be done. You don't have to live in a monastery or attend countless retreats. If you practice in a wholehearted, determined fashion, you can develop the steps of breath meditation and, in turn, make the journey to the body.

First, we establish a foothold in the body by putting the mind on the breath. The act of "putting the mind on" is, essentially, mindfulness. That is to say, the Buddha's mindfulness. It's a process of keeping something in mind. In this case, the breath. As dharma students, we learn to make a proactive effort to keep the mind on the breath.

We put the mind on the breath, utilizing what the Buddha called "directed thought." Essentially, we tell ourselves to focus on the breath. But this effort to put the mind on the breath will take us only so far. To a large degree, in putting the mind on the breath, we're "forcing" our attention to the breath. Most meditation techniques rely on forcing the attention on to the object. The Buddha came to realize the limited effectiveness of this approach. He realized that in order to keep the mind on the breath, we need to shape our experience of the breath. Which is to say, we need to cultivate an easeful, pleasurable breath; we need to establish a place in the body where the mind will want to stay.

The fact, we come to see, is that the mind doesn't want to stay in the body. It's resistant to the prospect of remaining in the body. Why? The mind doesn't want to stay in the body because it perceives the body as a painful territory. And it's right. The body is a receptacle of much pain: physical pain and, as we've discussed, mental and emotional pain. The mind considers the body inhospitable terrain. One of the basic truths the Buddha realized

as he sought awakening was that if the mind was going to reside in the body, the experience of the body had to be pleasurable.

In order to keep the mind on the body for a reasonable duration, it's essential that we have a place to put the mind where the mind will want to stay. It's essential that we have a pleasant abiding in the body, what the Thai ajaans call "a good home for the mind." This is the task the Buddha sets forth in the next instruction in breath meditation practice. We learn, by practicing the skill known as "evaluation," to cultivate an easeful, pleasurable breath. Then we allow our awareness to expand, so that it fills the entire body. And we spread the easeful breath energy – known as "piti" or "rapture" – throughout the body, so that the body is filled with easeful, pleasurable energy. When we have this sort of pleasant abiding, the mind is content to stay right where it is, in the body.

It's important to understand that the Buddha's concentration includes having a full body awareness. As the Thai Forest monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu explains, there is no occasion in the Pali Canon when the Buddha talks about concentration when his description does not include having full body awareness. When we learn to cultivate a pleasant inner abiding, we're able to maintain full body awareness.

As dharma students, we learn to maintain full body awareness in "all postures," throughout the course of our days, as we engage in the affairs of our lives. This is a mark of attainment in concentration: we're able to maintain our concentration. As dharma students, we seek to maintain mindfulness of the body, wherever we are, whatever we're doing, when we engage in relationships with friends and family, when we're working, when we're walking along the sidewalk, when we're riding the bus, when we're eating breakfast.

As the dharma student navigates her life, she's mindful of her experience of body and mind. And she develops insight into her relationship to her experience, what she's doing that's causing suffering, what she needs to do to let go of her suffering. On a cold winter day,

she's mindful of the unpleasant sensations in her body; and she's mindful of the way she's reacting to the sensations by disliking them. She's able to see the line between these two separate phenomena: the sensations and her mental reaction. She's able to understand that her disliking is what's causing her suffering.

In the morning, as she heads to work, the dharma student is aware of the sensations of anxiety as they arise in her body. She's aware of an inner dissonance. Observing the sensations – perhaps they take form as vibration in the chest – she creates some space between herself and the experience of sensation. She takes a step back from the experience. Observing, she sees that her “problem” isn't the sensation of anxiety, but rather the manner in which she involves herself with it, clings to it, weaves a narrative from it. She's able, in turn, to begin to understand that if she doesn't cling to the sensation, she doesn't suffer.

The dharma student, practiced in mindfulness of the body, becomes more and more attuned to the emotional qualities in her body. She's aware of the “geography of emotions” in the body. She knows what certain emotions feel like, where in the body they manifest, what it's like when she grasps, what it's like when she doesn't.

As her skill develops, she becomes sensitive to the most subtle forms of emotion. She picks up the subtle thrum of anxiety or disappointment or desire. She's mindful of subtle dissonances. To paraphrase the Buddha, she becomes like a skilled musician who's able to discern when her instrument is out of tune.

The practice of the dharma is, in many ways, quite difficult. To gain understanding, in the Buddha's design, we need to be able to look at our suffering. We need to look at it in real-time, as it takes form in the body. It's challenging. But the Buddha offers a compassionate means by which to achieve this task. We learn, first, to cultivate a pleasant abiding in the body. Then, from a place of strength, we take up the challenge of looking at our suffering. The fact is, it's not possible to be with our suffering if we don't have a pleasant abiding

within. When we don't have access to inner ease and pleasure, we're desperate to get rid of our suffering. Confronted with our pain, we seek to escape it. However, when we have easeful, pleasurable home in the body, we're not quite so desperate to escape our pain. We're able to be with it. It's okay for it to be there. In fact, body-oriented therapies like Somatic Experiencing emphasize the necessity of having a "safe place" in the body, a place where the practitioner can find refuge as he makes an investigation of his pain.

When we're able to maintain embodied awareness, we're able to see clearly into the truth of our human experience. We're able to develop the insight that comes, as the Buddha says, from seeing things "according to reality." We're able to awaken.

As we spend more time in the body, we move closer to the heart. The dharma student, I like to say, learns to move out of the head, into the body, and, finally, into the heart. As awareness becomes embodied, it moves toward the heart. As the Thai meditation master Ajaan Maha Boowa said, as concentration develops, awareness converges at the heart. The Pail word for heart is "citta." The citta exists in the body, in the region of the chest. It's not an abstraction; it's a real thing. It's something that, as we become embodied, we know on a felt level.

As dharma students, we seek to develop an understanding that transcends intellectual understanding. We seek to know things in the heart. As Ajaan Maha Boowa explains, this quality of wisdom is found in the body: "When the citta enters into a deep state of calm and concentration, the conscious awareness that is normally diffused throughout the body simultaneously converges from all areas of the body into one central point of focus at the middle of the chest. The knowing quality manifests itself prominently at that point."

As dharma students we learn to "look" at our experience of body and mind from this place, from the heart. In the end, it's the heart that knows; it's the heart that understands the truth; it's the heart that will set us free.

As we develop an embodied awareness, our understanding of our experience comes straight from the heart. We understand, in the heart, what it is that we have to do to know true happiness. This is the fruition of the path. Gradually, as we develop mindfulness of the body, we live from the heart.