

Buddha in the Body

Embodied Meditation Practice

- Will Johnson

INTERVIEW QUESTION TO WILL JOHNSON: You've said that in order to experience emptiness of mind, one must first experience fullness of body. While this intuitively resonates with many meditators, clear explanations of why that is true and how it can be integrated into a Buddhist meditation practice are hard to find. How do we start to understand this view in a Buddhist context, and how do we address it without feeling as though we are detracting from our usual sitting practice?

This focus on awareness of the body is what the teachings always kept leading me to. The part of the Four Noble Truths that attracted me the most was the explanation about why we suffer. The Buddha's observation that we create upset for ourselves when we're in reaction, and that we manage to do this to ourselves through the twinned actions of desire and aversion— this just rang true to experience.

The teachings tell us that actions disturb our peace of mind, but what I'm suggesting is that we can't just look to what we conventionally call our mind to sort this out. Reaction, clinging, and aversion are physical actions that the body performs and that, no matter how subtle, create muscular tension through the repeated motions of either "pulling toward" (desire) or "pushing away" (aversion). Repeat anything often enough, and you create holding patterns in the body that predispose you to continue doing that action. Sitting practices that focus on relaxing the underlying tensions and holdings you feel in your body, as well as restrictions to the breath, help you mitigate the legacy and habit patterns of reacting, clinging, and aversion.

As the eleventh-century Mahamudra teacher Tilopa

said, "Do nothing with the body but relax." When we start to relax, we start feeling the body. Tensions and contractions in the body serve as a numbing blanket that keeps the tiny physical sensations that exist on every part of the body from being felt. Learning how to relax while remaining upright in the sitting posture allows the body's full range of sensations to come out of hiding and make their existence felt. It's always struck me as peculiar: If I know that sensations can be felt to exist everywhere in the body, then why don't I feel them? And what effect does blocking out awareness of feeling have on me? And finally, if the mind that is "lost in thought" is somehow dependent on my not feeling the sensations of the body, what happens to the mind if I let myself feel the entire body, head to toe, as an unbroken field of sensations? The sitting posture itself can be a kind of crucible for burning off the tensions and restrictions to body and breath that all too often keep us lost in thought and unaware of feeling presence.

A good place to start is examining what happens to the body when you're lost in thought. This, of course, is tricky to do, because when the mind is off wandering in involuntary thought, you're not very aware of the body at all. But if you can include an observation of the body while you're off in a thought, you'll find that the condition "lost in thought" is directly accompanied somewhere in the body by muscular contraction and tensing, stillness and rigidity, and a subtle contraction or holding quality to the breath. In other words, when you're lost in thought, you're tense in body. It follows, then, that if you can consciously work with the body during your sitting practice to soften and relax the tensions and allow more resilient and natural movement to accompany the passage of the breath, the chatter of the mind can be reduced, and your practice can start going really deep.

INTERVIEW QUESTION: Once we begin to burn off the tensions and restrictions, how is this release manifested in the mind and emotions?

Vipassana teachers speak of sankharas, the accumulated residues of resistance and reactions that we store in our bodies and that, through long, focused hours of meditation, gradually come to the surface of awareness in the form of sensations (often not very pleasant ones). If we can simply feel them without reacting to them, they eventually burn themselves up and disappear, leaving a much more pleasurable shimmer in their place (that is, until the next deeper level of sankharas make their way to the surface to be felt, accepted, and released).

Wilhelm Reich, one of the earliest Western psychotherapists who became interested in how the energies of the body affect states of the mind, believed that what we call the unconscious is not stored in some remote repository in the brain but rather in the soft tissues of the body. Think about this for a moment, because it makes a lot of sense. Even though we know that sensations can be felt to exist on every part of the body down to the smallest cell, most people, most of the time, have very little conscious awareness of the felt presence of their bodies. In other words, we are unconscious of the presence of sensations, and so it is in the unfelt sensations of the body that the unconscious is to be found. I would suggest that most people, at any given moment, are probably only aware of 5 to 15 percent of their bodily sensations.

The work of Buddhism is to awaken, to come out of the sleepy dreams and notions of reality that we hold to be true and replace them with a direct experience of what is more accurately occurring. To awaken in this way, we need to become conscious of what's actually going on at the very depths of our experience.

INTERVIEW QUESTION: So when we unlock a particular physical tension, are we also releasing potentially difficult emotional aspects of the clinging or aversion that originally caused the tension? Many people report strong emotional reactions to

bodywork—memories of a childhood trauma arising during massage therapy, for instance. In Buddhist terms, is this our karma stored in the tension in our bodies?

For Western somatic therapists and Theravada Buddhists alike, much of the work that needs to be done is to rekindle a felt awareness of the whole body as a field of vibratory sensations. I sometimes joke with people that as we start to become aware of bodily sensations, we very quickly realize why we haven't wanted to feel them! We may have visions of relaxing the body and opening to an awareness of shimmering bodily sensations that feel like soft falling rain, but more often than not what we are first going to have to go through is a phase in which we feel highly intensified, sometimes very painful sensations, and through these periods of practice we face our karma directly. When we silently weep in our meditation practice over the discomfort we might be feeling, it is likely that a sankhara of sadness has come to the surface and is being released through that sensation of pain. When we get angry and irritated in our meditation because of what we might be feeling, it's likely that a sankhara of aversion has emerged out of the repository of our unconscious.

If we're sincere about wanting to truly awaken, we need to embrace the experience of the body as a focus of our practice.

So when I speak of relaxing the tensions and holdings in the body and breath through sitting meditation practice, please don't think that I'm implying that everything is going to proceed like a pleasant Sunday outing in the country. More often than not, large emotional and physical storms may occur during practice before the skies clear. But if we can be courageous enough to work with the simple principles of alignment, relaxation, and surrendered resilience during our sitting practice [see "3 Keys," below], these storms do seem eventually to abate, and what appears in their place is worth the price of admission. Sometimes the clearing of the storms can take persistence.

As important as formal practices undeniably are, I feel that it is even more important to view the rest of our lives as "informal" practice. What I mean by this

is that the awareness of embodied presence need not be confined to the time spent sitting on our meditation cushion. Every single moment provides an opportunity to relax the tendency to create tension in the body and unconscious thought patterns in the mind, and this can be a very gentle process. If intensive retreats are like turning up the flame on the stove, informal practice is like simmering at a low and steady heat that is practically unnoticeable and so allows you to go about your daily life without the emotional upheavals that can occur during more intensive periods of practice.

I think of informal practice as “embodied mindfulness.” In truth, every single moment of our lives presents us with a choice: either awaken to the reality of the present moment, or stay sleepy and push aspects of that reality away. Sensations are here every single moment. Why don’t we feel them? The visual field, in all its dazzling play, is here every moment that our eyes are open. Can we remember to look and actually see? Sounds are here constantly. Blocking them from our awareness creates a great deal of tension in the body.

Let alignment, relaxation, and surrendered resilience be your physical guides not only in your sitting practice but also as you go about your day. These three keys allow you to stay in touch with embodied presence. Merging an awareness of body with the awareness of vision and sound allows you to truly become one with this present moment. As you bring alignment, relaxation, and resilience into your daily life, your breath automatically becomes fuller and starts moving through your entire body, just as the Buddha suggested in his description of meditation. Without forcing a thing, let your breath breathe you: breathe into your entire body, and breathe out just as effortlessly. This condition, nothing more, nothing less, is really the reward and benefit of the practice. And in this way you can walk in full awareness through the city or countryside, like a knife cutting through the softest butter. Always be on the lookout not to bring any tension into this practice. Striving to attain this kind of awareness is simply self-defeating. Relax into

presence. It’s been there all the time.

Exercise: Dissolving Thought into Sensation

Sensation and thought cannot easily coexist. Another way of saying this is that sensation and thought cannot occupy the same space. So, locate where your next thought is positioned in space. It’s probably going to be somewhere around or inside your head, but it’s definitely somewhere in your body. Find out where it is. Plot out its spatial coordinates. Where does it start and stop in your body? What shape is it?

Now shift your awareness. Remember: sensations exist in every part of the body, and thought and sensation cannot occupy the same space. So relax and let yourself start to feel the tactile sensations, the feeling presence, that also occupies that space. Just let the feeling presence in this space start to come forward. Where is your thought now?

Exercise: Expanding Sensation into Presence

Never look upon the involuntary thought process of the mind as an enemy that needs to be subdued or vanquished. Look upon it instead as an infallible guide that is constantly “re-minding” you that you have momentarily lost awareness of sensations. Once you have dissolved thought into sensation in the area of your head, expand your awareness of sensations to include your entire body. Without bringing any tension into this shifting of awareness, staying completely relaxed, feel the entire body from head to foot, all at once, as a unified field of tactile sensations.

Now expand your awareness to include the entire field of vision. Soften any tension around your eyes so that you can see the entire visual field all at once. Next include the entire field of sound. Be aware of every little bit of the ever-changing field of sound, as though you were listening to a symphony and hearing what every single instrument was playing.

Feel the entire body. See the entire visual field. Listen to everything that is here to be heard. Stay completely relaxed as you do this. In this condition of awakened presence, where have the thoughts gone? Where have YOU gone?

3 Keys: Alignment, Relaxation, and Surrendered Resilience

Alignment: The tallest skyscrapers and trees are only able to attain their remarkable height because of their vertical alignment. Gravity supports structures that are balanced and aligned in this way. If you can consciously, but effortlessly, bring the major segments of your body into a predominantly vertical alignment, gravity will support you as well.

Relaxation: The purpose of alignment is that it allows us to relax. A body that is not aligned relies on constant muscular tension to remain upright, for if it were to relax its tension, it would fall to the ground. Tension blocks out our awareness of sensations, so once we are able to relax, we can start to feel the body and our formerly unfelt sensations start emerging.

Surrendered resilience: To stay relaxed, the entire body must be able to remain in subtle but constant movement, like an amoeba that continually expands and contracts. Breath, for example, can be felt to move through the entire body, causing subtle movement to occur at every joint. If we resist this natural bodily movement by holding ourselves still, we will bring tension back into our body, forfeit our relaxation, lose awareness of sensations, and yet again become lost in the involuntary story lines of our mind.

Mindful, he breathes in, and mindful, he breathes out. He, thinking, 'I breathe in long,' he understands when he is breathing in long; or thinking, 'I breathe out long,' he understands when he is breathing out long; or thinking, 'I breathe in short,' he understands when he is breathing in short; or thinking, 'I breathe out short,' he understands when he is breathing out short.

trains oneself. 'Calming the activity of the body (also translated as: "stilling the bodily formations"), I shall breathe in,' practicing thus, one trains oneself. 'Calming the activity of the body, I shall breathe out,' practicing thus, one trains oneself.

"Just as a clever turner or a turner's apprentice, turning long, understands: 'I turn long;' or turning short, understands: 'I turn short'; just so, indeed, when one breathes in long, understands: 'I breathe in long'; or, when he breathes out long, understands: 'I breathe out long'; or, when one breathes in short, one understands: 'I breathe in short'; or when one breathes out short, one understands: 'I breathe out short.' One trains oneself with the thought: 'Experiencing the whole body, I shall breathe in.' One trains oneself with the thought: 'Experiencing the whole body, I shall breathe out.' One trains oneself with the practice: 'Calming the activity of the body I shall breathe in.' One trains oneself with the practice: 'Calming the activity of the body (stilling the bodily formations) I shall breathe out.'

"Thus one lives aware of the body in the body internally, or one lives aware of the body in the body externally, or one lives aware of the body in the body internally and externally. One lives aware of the origination-things in the body, or one lives contemplating dissolution-things in the body, or one lives contemplating origination-and-dissolution-things in the body. Or indeed one's mindfulness is established with the thought: 'The body exists,' to the extent necessary just for knowledge and remembrance, and one lives independent and clings to naught in the world. Thus, one lives contemplating the body in the body."

Satipatthana Sutta The Buddha's Instructions

"'Experiencing the whole body, I shall breathe in,' practicing thus, one trains oneself. 'Experiencing the whole body, I shall breathe out,' practicing thus, one