

Full Body, Empty Mind

By Will Johnson

WILL JOHNSON explains that by turning our awareness to the full range of physical sensations, the body becomes a doorway to awakening.

In many Buddhist groups, the body is addressed only in basic instructions on posture for meditation, sometimes lasting no more than a few minutes. Many practitioners are drawn to body-based practices such as yoga, martial arts, or the Alexander technique to complement or even enable their sitting practice, but they are often on their own when it comes to integrating these traditions with their larger spiritual path. What is being lost in this gap? One of the most convincing voices for the importance of the body in meditation belongs to Will Johnson, author of several books on the topic, including *The Posture of Meditation; Aligned, Relaxed, and Resilient*; and *Yoga of the Mahamudra*.

Johnson, the director of the Institute for Embodiment Training in British Columbia, Canada, began his Buddhist practice in 1972 and was certified in the deep bodywork system of Rolfing in 1976. Drawing on his experience in these traditions, Sufism, and others, he now teaches embodiment training, what he calls “a path of awakening that views the body as the doorway, not the obstacle, to personal growth and spiritual transformation.” I exchanged emails with Johnson to discuss how meditators can explore the body and what they might gain from the practice. —Andrew Merz

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, for me, the teachings always kept leading to. The part of the Four Noble Truths that attracted me the most, for example, 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, just rang true.

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.

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.

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.

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 box, page 39], 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 quite a bit of time (this is not fast-food therapy), and it is for this reason that I increasingly prefer to enter into retreats that last several weeks. Meditation practices that instruct students to focus solely on the activities and contents of what we conventionally call the mind may unwittingly contribute to keeping contained the deep unconscious sankharas, which always appear as sensation. Many techniques can bring about a calming effect at the surface level of the mind, but if we're sincere about wanting to truly awaken and become truly conscious, we really need to embrace the experience of the body as a focus of our practice and allow the deeply unconscious and unfelt sensations to start coming out of hiding. And yes, this can be a very intensive undertaking, one definitely not for the faint of heart! But what, really, is our choice? We either face our karma and release the accumulated tensions of the past, or we continue to avoid feeling the reality of the body and enshrine the tensions forever.

As you say, this does indeed sound like an intensive undertaking and one that many practitioners today may feel they simply don't have room for in their busy lives. When we sit down and encounter our deepest unconscious feelings first thing in the morning, how do we then get up and go about our day effectively? How can we approach this work in a manner that doesn't threaten to make us fall apart completely?

The kinds of emotional storms that we're talking about generally only erupt during long, intensive retreats. When we return home to our more familiar environment, things will settle out after a day or two, and so I don't think you really have to worry about falling

apart while driving to work. If we're sincere about truly going deep and purifying out some of the residue of our karma, then I think an intensive retreat at least once a year is very important. When we come back from retreat, it's helpful to keep up our formal practice by sitting daily for an hour or for however long our schedule permits.

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.

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