

Body awareness as a vehicle for Enlightenment

Personally I became interested in awareness of the body when I realized that I had one but didn't know much about it. How to use it in the best way and how to stay out of trouble? Then I got fascinated and it felt good to have a better relationship with this body...

Then through meditation on the breath it is as though we can draw our awareness more and more into the body, bringing body and mind together in a new way. The body becomes more part of our world and we come to feel at one with nature. Then calmly seeing and accepting the body as it really is can become a source of liberating wisdom and compassion, like the Buddha himself appearing in the heart. This leads to the gradual process of letting go of attachment and the end of all suffering and stress.

Surprise, surprise!

This, can be enhanced by developing our awareness of the body in various ways. For example it can be good to engage in a physical discipline like Yoga or T'ai Chi. These are practices that both improve our awareness and also have a benevolent and calming nature. We can then also practice with and examine the body more deeply in various ways:

1. We can develop composure through a refined awareness of posture and movement.
2. We can investigate further the way that the breath affects the body and mind and thereby expand the mind to include the whole body.
3. We can build a new, peaceful and stress-free, sense of 'the body in the mind' rather than experiencing the mind in the body.
4. We can look at our bodies and those of others with fresh eyes.

Just as a doctor studies the body in a certain way which is aimed at freeing us from physical suffering, the spiritual practitioner can study the body in a way aimed at freeing us from the suffering of the mind.

We consider three different appreciations of the same object, in this way they almost become like three different bodies in our minds. The big perceptual leaps occur when these come together. The contemplation of the body is aimed precisely at this. However, in order to achieve this all three will need to be worked on. Our intention in relation toward these three bodies is:

Strengthening the body (a) this is the sense of the actual physical body in movement and posture – the body here and now.

A more detailed system of progressive bodily awareness to make body perception (a) more refined and consistent would be:

- i. consciously breathing and experiencing breathing as actively 'doing' something.
- ii. allowing breathing to happen on its own and experiencing the breath as 'allowed'.
- iii. consciously moving and experiencing movement as 'doing'.
- iv. being conscious of movement that happens by itself, of movement that is 'allowed'.

- v. experiencing movements as a combination of 'doing' and 'allowed'.
- vi. repeating (iii.) to (vi.) keeping also the breath in mind.
- vii. experiencing the body as elements (i.e. earth, water, air and fire).

This system might be familiar for T'ai Chi exponents as it could be said to develop awareness of Yin and Yang.

Calming the body (b) this is done through calming the feelings related to the body (pleasure and pain) and the attitudes about the body (attraction or aversion) – or in other words, by further relaxing the body and by being relaxed about the body.

Sharpening the awareness of the body image (c) here we are referring to the image of the body in the other senses, i.e. as an object that is seen, heard, smelt and tasted.

Then, when we have done our best with these techniques, if the images from (c) are compared directly, here and now, with perception (a) without the interference of feeling body (b) then a very clear and completely new image of the body will arise easily and spontaneously in the mind. This method may seem complicated but an image will form much more naturally, clearly and easily in this way than if we would try to develop it through the more obvious methods of feeling it out or imagining it.

We will discover that this awareness of the body tends to get lost in purposeful physical activity or in thoughts and feelings. We will also come to see how very similar our physical and mental/emotional activities are in this respect. Coming back to being centred in the body can be a way to rest from both thoughts and feelings and find perspective on these processes. Then the more we practice the more we can take our bodies along with us and stay at rest and keep our perspective.

A much more detailed explanation of how and why this all works can be found in my forthcoming book 'Realistic Virtue' but the recommendation is to try to investigate for yourself as far as you can.

I offer this for your reflection.

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