



Recollecting the Body and Working with Pain

Ajahn Amaro¹

Published online: 14 July 2020
© Amaravati Publications 2020

Notice how the mood changes as the day wears on. As the patterns of light change throughout the day, so do our moods. You may feel alert, then sleepy, enthusiastic, depressed, comfortable, uncomfortable—make it a habit to keep bringing attention to how things are right now. How does the body feel? How does the mind feel? Bring a quality of freshness, an interest, a clarity of attention to what you are experiencing. We're not just drifting along, caught in habit or half-awake while we are busy with our thoughts, but we are learning to look, to notice, to consider, to reflect.

At the beginning of each sitting, bring attention to the posture. Do not just plonk yourself down and be immediately drawn into trying to work with the mind. First establish the basis of practice—establish the qualities of energy and relaxation in the body in a balanced and integrated way. Invite the body to sit upright and notice any feelings of tension or tightness. Consciously relax that tension, and then, when there's a balanced, integrated quality in your physical posture, bring the attention to the breath. Develop this pathway, this pattern of approach, so it becomes the way in which you work with your mind and body, developing an all-round mindfulness—*satisampajañña*, mindfulness with clear comprehension—not just seeing what we do but also the context in which we are doing it and the other elements that play into it.

Let the breath be at the very heart of your attention, like the calyx of a flower or the innermost circle of a mandala. For this period of time, consciously put all other concerns aside—there is nothing you are required to plan, to remember or to figure out—let the rhythm of the breath be the only object you are interested in.

You can remind yourself of this, saying internally such as, “There is only the breath, flowing in, flowing out, nothing else needs to concern me for the next half hour. The world will keep turning regardless.”

There is no need to fiercely cling on, fixating on the breath with tension and intensity; instead, let the breath rest upon your attention like a downy feather resting on your upturned palm. Settled, light, gentle—ever ready to let go of distraction and to come back to the center, to the heart of this present reality, to the breathing.

As the meditation proceeds, work with bringing the attention to settle on the breath. We can become very focused on working with the mind, following the patterns of distraction and letting go, developing more and more of a focus on the breathing. But through getting wrapped up in the world of the mind, we can become oblivious to what the body is doing. The body drifts into the background, ceases to be attended to, so it's always helpful to let go of feeling the breath every ten or fifteen minutes during the sitting and bring attention to the posture for a few moments. Has tension come back into our jaw? Are our teeth clenched or are the muscles around our eyes tightened up? Is our body slumped over? Are we sitting in a listless, crumpled way? Has our stomach tightened up? How is the body? What kind of changes have taken place while we were busy trying to focus on the mental world? By paying attention to the body and bringing that quality of reflection and investigation into it, you may notice that there's tension once again, even though you relaxed everything at the beginning of the sitting. The habits of resisting, stressing, and fretting easily creep in and take over again. So if you find that your stomach has tightened up, let it soften and relax. If the muscles around your eyes are tense and tight, loosen them. If you bring attention to the body and discover that even though you thought you were quite attentive, you are now hunched over, notice that. Arouse more energy; invite the spine to straighten. Bring energy into the body, flowing up through the spinal column. Re-establish that quality of alertness, attention. Then, once you have re-established that integrated balance of energy and relaxation in the posture, bring the

Excerpted from *The Breakthrough* by Ajahn Amaro. Amaravati Publications, 2016.

✉ Ajahn Amaro
ajahn.amaro@gmail.com

¹ Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP1 3BZ, UK

attention back to the breath. In this way, we are bringing into focus the realms of both the *rūpa* and the *nāma*, the world of the body and the world of the mind, and respecting how they affect and influence each other.

During the latter part of a period of sitting meditation we are likely to experience physical pain. It's natural for the body to ache and for different parts of our legs and back to hurt and become uncomfortable. So just as we foster a quality of acceptance and loving-kindness towards our thoughts or feelings, it's equally important to relate to the pains in the body in the same way. Just as we can unconsciously create negativity and aversion towards the chattering mind which will not stop thinking about this and that, we can also easily create negativity, fear, and resentment towards pain in the body. So when we experience, say, an ache in the leg or a sore knee, we can find ourselves tensing up against it, resisting it, resenting it, unconsciously creating even more causes for pain.

It's much more helpful instead to cultivate and apply an attitude of radical acceptance to feelings in the body. When you feel discomfort and pain in the back or the legs, or wherever it might be, notice that it is having a strong effect, that it really hurts. Bring attention right to that spot. Look and see what the attitude towards that pain is. Is there fear, resistance, resentment in the attitude? Is there a tightening up against the pain in the body? If we do not simply go along with that habit of resisting and tensing up against pain, but rather consciously relax the muscles in that area, around that knee or in the back, and let go of that physical resistance and tension, this at once diminishes the causes for the pain. So we relax the body in relationship to that area and relax the attitude as well. Pain is one thing, but the suffering we create around it is another. We can, surprisingly, be quite peaceful with pain and discomfort

on their own. So we can change our attitude towards discomfort. Simply recognize that although a painful feeling has a bitter, unattractive quality, it is merely a feeling. In itself it's not good, it's not bad; it is just what it is—a pattern in nature, a configuration of consciousness. So the pain is there, but we do not turn it into a problem, we do not complain about it or resent it, and we do not create negativity in relationship to it.

We also have to recognize the limitations of our body. We do not ignore the degree to which our joints or bones or tendons can be put under strain. So it's quite all right to change one's posture during the sitting meditation, but it's always helpful to work with the feeling of pain for a little while, at least a few minutes, before we do so.

Most importantly, if we have this clear and balanced, non-reactive attitude towards the painful feeling, we are much more able to attune to the natural limits of the body. In this way, when we change our posture, it's an act of kindness towards the body rather than an act of aversion and fear towards the pain. These two attitudes have very different effects, since the former comes from kindness and harmony, from mindfulness, whereas the latter comes from aversion and resistance. Accordingly, they naturally have very different results, the kindly attitude being a cause for peacefulness, while the aversive reaction is a cause for further pain and stress.

So as and when you feel pain, see if you can work with it in this way, learning to respond rather than resist, learning to look at the attitude, let go of contention, negativity, and fear, and activate a new approach of kindness and acceptance.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.