

An Introduction
to
Mindfulness Meditation

Week 2
Mindfulness of the Body



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Mindfulness of the Body

Mindfulness of breathing is a wonderful beginning to cultivating awareness. It strengthens our ability to concentrate and steadies the attention on our present moment experience. It also weakens our tendency to get lost in reactive emotions and mental preoccupations. With time, attention to the breath helps us to develop a clear, non-reactive awareness that can then be turned to the full range of our human experience. As mindfulness develops, we begin to bring this awareness to other areas of our lives.

Mindfulness is an embodied practice. By practicing mindfulness, we learn to live in and through our bodies. Learning to be mindful of bodily experiences is one of the most useful aspects of mindfulness. It is much easier to have a balanced, healthy awareness of the rest of our lives when we are in touch with our immediate physical experience.

During this week we expand the practice to include the body. Many people ignore their bodies. The busier a person's life, the easier it is to discount the importance of staying in touch with how the body feels. Many people may be attentive to their body, but it is from the outside in; that is, they are concerned about body image and appearance. Mindfulness of the body is attention from the inside out. We notice what the body is feeling, in and of itself. We give a generous amount of time to be with the felt sense of the body. Not only does this help the body relax, remaining mindful of the body is a safeguard from getting wound up with mental preoccupations.

Benefits of Mindfulness of the Body

Mindfulness of the body has several benefits. First, cultivating mindfulness of the body increases our familiarity with our bodies and with how the body responds to our inner and outer lives, to our thoughts and emotions, and to events around us. When we suppress or ignore aspects of our emotional, cognitive, and volitional lives, we tend also to disconnect from the body, from the physical manifestations of our experience. Conversely, when we distance ourselves from our physical experience, we lose touch with our inner life of emotions and thoughts. The awakening of the body from within that comes with mindfulness can help us to discover, not only our repressed emotions, but also, more importantly, a greater capacity to respond to the world with healthy emotions and motivations.

Second, in cultivating mindfulness we are developing non-reactivity, including the ability to be present for our experience without turning away, habitually seeking or resisting change, or clinging to pleasant and avoiding unpleasant experience. All too often, our automatic desires, aversions, preferences, and judgments interfere with our ability to know what is actually happening. Learning to not respond automatically and unconsciously makes possible a deeper understanding of the present moment and our reaction to it, and gives us more freedom to choose our response. Being non-reactively present for our physical experience goes a long way in learning to do so with the rest of our lives.

Last, but not least, mindfulness of physical sensations helps us both to relax tension and to understand its causes.

In the first week, we practiced with mindfulness of the breath. If you think of a human being as concentric circles, we start at the center and put the breath at the center. We use the breath to stabilize ourselves at the center and to center ourselves. Centering means training ourselves to be here and now in the present moment instead of being caught up or lost in the mind. When lost in the mind, we have moved out of the present moment into future thinking, past thinking, fantasy thinking, etc.

So we begin with the breath and the breath stabilizes and centers us, bringing us into the present. Then we move out to the next concentric circle, which is our body, our physical experience, our body's experience. Then beyond that are our emotions, and beyond the emotions is the thinking world. Beyond the thinking world is what's called the mind; and beyond the mind is everything else. The idea is to fill in the center so that the center is a full, stable base. When the center is full, it provides stability to the outer edges of the circle. If you live in the outer edges of the circle without a stable center, you are spinning in a very narrow orbit that is fragile and can easily bend and break. You may live in the world of your thinking as some people do. The thinking world is a very fragile world in which to live. It is subject to all kinds of ups and downs that can cause a lot of suffering for people. Thinking that is disembodied and disconnected from the other circles can become unrealistic because it's not grounded. In mindfulness training, the idea is not to stop thinking. The training is for our thinking to become embodied, realistic, and connected. So we start with the breath and then we go into the body.

Our current subject is the body and embodiment, and paying attention to our physical embodied experience. One of the marvelous things about the body is that it is always in the present moment. Our thoughts and our mind might be somewhere else, but the body is always here and now. So part of the task of meditation practice is to bring the body and mind together so they are in the same place at the same time; so they are working together harmoniously; and so they are not at odds with each other, or going at cross purposes. When you meditate, it is not a matter of bringing your body to the mind, it's a matter of bringing your mind to your body, so the two can be together in harmony. If you are sitting here and thinking about what you are going to do tomorrow, then your body is here but your mind is in tomorrow. If you're sitting here and thinking about what's on television tonight at home, then you're here in the present but your mind is in another place. It's really important for the purpose of mindfulness meditation to bring the body and mind in harmony. In mindfulness circles they talk about unification—bringing the mind and body into unity. So in meditation we train the mind to come and be in the same place as the body.

The body is an important help in this process because if you are connected to the body you are in the present moment. Now, any time we do mindfulness meditation, which is this very simple practice of noticing, we bring our attention to the experience, living that experience, and registering what's here. If you are with your breathing, it's not only being with your breath—breath in breath out breath in—it is also letting the experience of breathing be registered in that experience. You are taking in the sensations of that experience in a deeper, fuller way. It's like you are on the beach on a nice sunny day, you're on the edge of the ocean, and you stand there and take in the breeze, the smell of the ocean, the sight. You really register the experience; you take it in. So, in the same way, you sit with your breath and take in the fullness of the experience of breathing in.

Now what's often confused with mindfulness is commentary, judgment, or an evaluation of the experience. I like to use the metaphor of "canned laughter" or the "laugh track" on a television show. The jokes may not be funny but because of the canned laughter we get pulled in. The same as with mood music. You may be looking at a beautiful, pastoral scene in the woods. It looks very happy but then you hear the ominous mood music and, "Oh no!" you're frightened just looking at the scene. So the scene is what it is but the mood music affects your experience of what it is. As another example, the commentator affects the experience of watching the football game. While there is nothing wrong with that and that's just part of the fun of football, the same phenomenon happens in our own minds. We take the commentary in our minds to be integral to the experience we're having. The commentary influences the experience. So we might be in some benign situation and someone walks in. We might have a judgment about that person—that person is lousy—and so the commentary goes on. Even if it's just a flip of judgment with no basis, the commentary affects the way we see the person. So the person and commentary have become entangled. The same goes for judgment about ourselves. We may follow a few breaths and then the mind wanders off. Then there may be commentary, "I'm a bad meditator, I wonder if I should be doing something different." So the commentary might not be so friendly, it might be critical. Then we can get frustrated. We don't separate the fact that the breath is very simple and that we have gotten distracted.

We've gotten complicated with judgment and evaluation. Unfortunately no one yet has discovered a mute button for the mind so it is not easy to stop making the commentary and judgment. One very important aspect of mindfulness meditation is learning to recognize the commenting, judging, evaluating mind and becoming able to tease apart the commentary from the actual experience. This is crucial from the perspective of mindfulness meditation for the purpose of discovering our freedom. So to distinguish between what's happening and our interpretation of it; what's happening and our judgments about it; what's happening and the meaning we assign to it.

Here is a meaning-making story I like. Sylvia Boorstein is a teacher at Spirit Rock. Many years ago she decided she would do a personal retreat at the San Francisco Zen Center. She'd spend a few days there. She called up the office, and they said, "The guest manager's not here right now. He'll call you back." So the guest manager called her back and she wasn't home. He left a message saying: "This is the guest manager, call me and we'll book your room." So she called back the Zen Center and the office stated the guest manager wasn't in. So Sylvia said, "I think this means I'm supposed to come." And the Zen Student at the office said, "No, I think it just means Robert isn't in." She was making meaning out of it, and it was just that he wasn't in, very simple.

The movement toward meaning: you need to separate that out and try to stay really simple. You might still be making commentary and judgment, but see it as that and don't be fooled by it. Don't think that's the real picture. Realize there is a difference between what's happening and the judgments about what's happening; what's happening and the thinking about what's happening. At least, in principle, understand that mindfulness meditation is choosing to not live in

the thinking mind and the commentary and judgment but instead to live in the awareness and the attention to what is happening. This is a principle you understand. There is a choice being made in mindfulness meditation. You are not saying, "Don't think." We're saying don't live there, don't get swept away in those thoughts, let the attention be open and soft and relaxed. Have a silent awareness like you would, if looking at a sunset at the beach. You don't think about the sunset; you take it in; thinking about it is not the sunset. There is not much discursive thought that goes into watching the sunset. So we're not living in the thoughts, but we're taking in the actual experience.

So this is true with our body. It is very important in meditation to learn to separate out the immediate experience from the interpretation; the judgment; the commentary. This in theory makes meditation very simple; it just simply is what is here, simply what the experience is. And we're not getting involved in the world of thinking and meaning-making and judgment and analysis and getting very complicated very quickly. It's very simple.

Our bodies are very important parts of who we are, parts of the human experience. There are certainly plenty of people who are disconnected from their bodies. Some people are that way because of their professions. Perhaps they spend their whole work time thinking a lot, at the computer perhaps. And because of years and years of habit they are not so connected to their bodies. Some people may disconnect from their bodies for psychological reasons. To be in their bodies means to feel all their feelings and they don't want to feel all their feelings. Perhaps there was trauma early in their lives and so they disconnected, and they don't want to touch into that part of their life. Mindfulness works a lot better if you are connected to your body. So, for many people, it's a slow training to reawaken the body, to rediscover the body. The ability to sense what exists in the body becomes stronger and more heightened as we do this meditation practice. Becoming present here and now is not just something we do with the mind—it helps a lot if you show up with your body, and to think about that when you sit down to meditate. You're not just checking out of your body in order to have some kind of strange, mental, spiritual experience. You want to sit down and pay attention, and sit in a way in which you show up with your body. Your body is a tremendous support for the practice of attention and awareness. If you show up in your body you can sense the fullness of being in your body and feel – "Here I am." You feel solid, connected, rooted.

The mind might wander away to other times and other places, and the idea is not just to come back and pay attention to here, but to come back and feel "here," connected here, rooted here, to feel present here, and to feel in your body here. It is a slow process for many people, but over the months and years as you do meditation, you will probably find that your body will become more and more awake, and more and more the source of intelligence, understanding, love, and compassion. Many of the best qualities of the human being come through being embodied and if we're not embodied it is hard to have some of the best of what is human come through us.



Support Quotes

Week 2 - Body Awareness

"It's helpful to realize that this very body that we have, that's sitting right here right now ... with its aches and its pleasures ... is exactly what we need to be fully human, fully awake, fully alive." ~ Pema Chodron

"The body too has its rights; and it will have them: they cannot be trampled on without peril. The body ought to be the soul's best friend. Many good men however have neglected to make it such: so it has become a fiend and has plagued them." ~Augustus William Hare and Julius Charles Hare, Guesses at Truth, by Two Brothers, 1827

"I finally realized that being grateful to my body was key to giving more love to myself." ~ Oprah Winfrey

"Few of us have lost our minds, but most of us have long ago lost our bodies." ~ Ken Wilbur

"Our own physical body possesses a wisdom which we who inhabit the body lack." ~ Henry Miller

"Our bodies communicate to us clearly and specifically, if we are willing to listen to them." ~ Shakti Gawain

Here and Now

there's no knowing
there's no telling
what will happen

all we can know
is how we feel
here and now
this we know

focusing on things
we become lost
focusing on feelings
we become found

~ Benjamin Dean



Assignments for Week 2

Mindfulness of the Body

□ **Reading Assignments**

1. "Support Quotes"
2. "Mindfulness of the Body" (3 Pages)

□ **Meditations**

1. Body Scan for a minimum of 20 minutes per day, six days per week.
2. Mindfulness of the Body – Daily Life – At least twice per day.
3. In the midst of your regular activities, devote two one-hour periods during the week to being mindful of your body. During this time, perhaps using a timer or some other cue to remind yourself, periodically check in with your body, maybe every five minutes or so. Notice, in particular, your shoulders, stomach, face, and hands. If you find tension in any of these places, relax.
4. Devote one meal to eating slowly and mindfully, paying attention to the tastes, textures, temperature, and other qualities of your food, and to the experience of your body eating. (When does your body tell you that have had enough?) If possible, take the meal in silence, with no other activities to distract you. You might want to put down your spoon or fork between bites. Whenever your mind wanders, or whenever you get caught up in reactions to what is happening, relax and come back to the simplicity of eating mindfully.
5. Start noticing when, how and by what, your attention becomes distracted or fragmented. Are there any common themes or patterns in the kinds of thoughts, feelings, activities, or pre-occupations where your mindfulness disappears?

Notes/Thoughts/Questions: _____

