

2015-01-11 Mindfulness of The Body

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SPEAKERS

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Last week I as the first Sunday talk of the year, I gave a talk on the Four Noble Truths, which in some ways is a core foundational perspective on our lives that Buddhism encourages. And today I'd like to offer what I think is a different core fundamental practice or place the Buddhism begins. And that is in our bodies. Maybe the teaching the Four Noble Truths a little bit, the teachings, which kind of can be rests contentedly in your mind. But for Buddhist practice, to really take root and be rooted in us, we want to be centered in our body. And so as a second talk of the year, and really to emphasize the tremendous importance that Buddhism gives on mindfulness to the body, I'd like to give a talk on topic. And in particular, maybe it's even more kind of is foundational to that. I'd like to say some words about our posture. And perhaps the subject of today's talk can be called mindful postures. The me I saw I read about, I guess a YouTube little phenomena or TED Talk phenomena or something of some of a woman who's come up with power postures. And I saw that power postures, we should have mindful postures. And posture is very important. And what's maybe unnoticed unless you kind of think about it, is that you always have a posture. No matter where you are, what you do, there's a posture that you're In, you're sitting or standing, lying down walking, or everything in between. and, and so that's something we're doing. When I came back from the three years in a Zen monastery, one day I went to have a formal interview with my Zen teacher. And the formal interview means you sit cross legged, like I'm sitting now, kind of maybe two, three feet away from each other and it's in a very quiet still room. And you kind of had this face to face meeting, it's kind of a little bit can be intimidating, and I'll speak quite intimate, very powerful kind of way of meeting someone. And I said to him in that meeting, that one of the things that had happened coming back from them three years in the monastery is in the monastery. Much of the posture, good part of the day, is choreographed. You supposed to stand in his mind. History there are times was a stand a particular way, put your hands in a particular way. It was a sit in a particular way there times you walk a particular way. You handle a particular like you're eating eating bowls and eating utensils you had handled them with a certain posture certain way. And so it's kind of a given to you. This is how you use your body throughout the day is kind of choreographed, there's a kind of a dance or a ritual or a way of doing it. That's quite powerful, and quite useful as a training and mindfulness of the body. When I left the monastery, and this is what I told him, and it was back in living in more ordinary life, I'd left the dance I'd left the performance I'd left the choreographed kind of situation. And when I sat down in a chair, you know, you know these four legged chairs, which, you know, in the monastery, sat cross legged, so much It sat down into a four legged chair. I realized that I had a lot of choices. I had a lot of choices about how I sat there. Before I went to the monastery, it never occurred to me I had a choice. So how he sat in the chair, I just sat in the chair. And maybe that's more freeing, I don't know. But in some ways, but also it means I was unconscious about the choices that I was making. We make choices about our posture all the time, how we sit, how we stand, how we are. And what does end training did for me, was to make me aware that I have choices and that I was making choices. And the choices are consequential. So to slump is a choice.

To twist and turn is a choice. To sit straight is a choice to use a backrest as a choice. How much the backrest you use is a choice. And, you know, if we're just kind of semi consciously just following our comfort, which is fine to up to a degree, the, you know, we might not really be availing ourselves of the full power or value of really paying attention to her posture and making it a choice a possibility. So I told my Zen teacher this, I said, You know, I feel like I have so much choices now I sit in the chairs, you know, I have to decide how to sit and all these choices. And his response to me was very uncharacteristic of what happens in Zen monasteries. Remember, we were sitting this formal way and we do a lot of bowing in Zen right like if you approve someone you bow if you don't approve them if you don't know whether to approve or not approve you, but it's wonderful. Anyways was formal thing, right? So I told them this about my choice. And that's how many choice is now about how to posture and how to hold my body and my daily life. He reached forward and shook my hand. You know, that communicates a certain posture that communicate communicates a certain something in, in the way, you know, in the world when you shake someone's hand and, and I felt it was a different kind of respect, congratulations different kind of kind of just, you know, great. And so it was nice. So we're always in a particular posture and our postures can support us, or they can undermine us. And one of the things about, I think one of the interesting things about posture, the word posture, is how posture in English can mean the physical posture you're in, but there's also the word posturing. You know, All those people were posturing at work, you know. And so, you know, I think that the idea is that it's some kind of bridge between what we do with our physical posture. And sometimes this, you know, what we're trying to accomplish socially and how we hold ourselves and all that, because a lot of stuff gets expressed in our posture. Our discomfort gets expressed in our posture. And if you're with someone, then they're uncomfortable. So for some reason with you, you probably don't get them full front and center just really they're with you. They might be pulled back slightly or twisted or turns slightly. This hasn't happened for many, many years now, but I was kind of amazed when this happened. A series of times, it was in my in the kind of in the wake of my Zen training where you know, you can little bit overdue and training where you can't really present for things. Sometimes I've been around Zen people who are so present that like, give me a little break You know, and so I was a little bit in that kind of wake. So I like to kind of face people directly. And when I talked to them, and there were some people who there were some people occasionally, they returned 45 degrees to me and kind of looking over their shoulder. So I thought that's kind of interesting. So I would turn, we're standing an open space and I follow them around. So in order to in order to face them, so we could, you know, catch up to them and where their torso is facing, right. And when I did that, they turned and, and literally, we went around 360 degrees. And more more amazing. As far as I could tell, they were completely unconscious of what was going on. They had no idea that you know, maybe we were doing a slow dance, right. They had no idea what was going on. So but it was what was it but they are uncomfortable with contact with the kind of being looked directly or being present Was I being too much? You know what was going on there in that? You know in with them in that kind of encounter. I've seen in that it's easy in myself and I assume in many people, that certain moods and emotions that we have are attitudes that we carry with us, we almost automatically translate into our posture, how we hold ourselves. And so if we're feel discouraged or depressed, there's a slumping, there's a sinking.

And if we kind of give into that, or kind of allow for it, then the posture continues to reinforce the particular mood, the discouragement, the depression, there's a reciprocal relationship between what goes on in our body and what goes on and our inner attitude and mood and all that. And so, you know, sometimes I think it's a spiral that If can be undermining us more and more, we feel maybe sad or discouraged or depressed. And so we kind of give up a little bit with our body posture and kind of slumped back. And that just kind of reinforces the fact that things are not so good for us. It's difficult. And so then we feel more depressed. And then you know, we slump even more, and so it can sink and

sink. The first time in my life where I saw this operating and it was a time when I was depressed in college. And I probably wasn't that depressed but you know, if you hear the story, so don't don't think that I now say that's depression is this easy at all, but you know, I came back from school one day and I slumped, I kind of crashed down on the couch and, and I was feeling really depressed and maybe sorry for myself. But my posture I was so completely thoroughly slumping that literally, my shoulders were in the, you know, in the corner between the seat and the backrest of the couch and I was like, you know, couldn't be more horizontal and kind of with the upper torso and like you know the couch you know, you know, things are hard.

And it was so dramatic for this I thought this is interesting. So what happens if I sit up right I thought and so I set up right and my depression went away. So I remember I said it's not that easy always I probably had a very mild depression. And the, but that got my attention, Wow, look at that difference in the posture. So sometimes our posture undermines especially if we give into you know, kind of attitudes and emotions which themselves are draining our energy or vitality. But also posture can be strengthening for us and can be supported. For us. And so in that particular couch situation, when I sat up straight, it supported me and enlivened me it kind of, kind of lets me clear the year cleared my mind or my heart in some kind of way. That was kind of dramatic at that moment. Sometimes the benefit we get from sitting upright and you know, upright in a balanced, upright way maybe isn't so dramatic, but maybe all that all the benefit we're getting is the posture is not undermining us. And that counts for a lot. But I think that often we get a little bit could be a very small benefit. But sometimes that benefit of sitting upright and present for experience, or really being there in a full embodied way for the here is uncomfortable. Because in that kind of situation, sometimes we have to kind of really feel what's happening more fully. Sometimes when we collapse and pull down or kind of risk. And our posture is there is I think sometimes there's a way in which we kind of are pulling back from really being present or recognizing what's fully there. And so sometimes to really sit there upright means you have to kind of feel the discomfort, the fear, the, you know, whatever that might be the anger, whatever it might be there that's uncomfortable. I was in a meeting on Friday of a meeting where there was some very strong emotions and feelings going on around the room. And some people felt very hurt by some other people in the group and, and were very expressive in a very nice way about how they felt and, and it was very, I felt very sad listening to this. But the strongest thing I felt was I felt a deep ache in my heart, physical ache, kind of like a little heartbroken. By all this and as I felt that my role, one of my roles in that situation was to keep sitting upright, with the chest open and kind of exposed present, and just making space with an open space for what I was feeling inside, to let it be there to let it be part of the scene. I could feel a movement to recede and pull back. But I feel no here this is a place this is the time in place to allow this ache to exist. The ache is part of the group, it's part of what was going on at that time. And it has to be there in the room. It has to be part of the whole thing a lot of other people aching to it wasn't just me, right but but it's just you know, to sit there and be present and upright. So when we come to meditation practice, the posture you take is consequential. So if you're doing seated meditation, that's what you can do, whether you sit in a chair or sit, you know, in a cushion, cross legged, that posture that you take is not just like an, you know, incidental thing, just you want to just take apart, you know, some convenient posture that where you can forget your body, you know, you want to just kind of like the body is kind of a nuisance. You know, the bodies with care, you, you know, gets you around, you know, you know, and as long as it gets you around properly, then it's, you know, does his duty, but, but the body is you as much as anything else. And part of the practice of Buddhism is to integrate the body and the mind, body and the inner life. So they really become one as a whole operating together. And so, the body shouldn't just be some internal thing. Just take some convenient posture so you can be comfortable for the duration of the meditation, and don't have to think about your body anymore. So you can really do the important mind stuff, the mind work of meditation. Think of mindfulness I prefer to actually in my own mind to call mindfulness a body fullness, because of how

important it is to be aware or centered or grounded in the body. As we practice. I think of it as you know this wonderful trying if you sit cross legged, this wonderful triangle how you sit that some people call a mountain pose, you know, steady sitting like a mountain.

And, and I think of the mountain having a wide base that offers its support. And so you know, our, our wonderful little insecure thinking mind gets to have the pride of place. And being for some of us, I don't know where you are. But you know, up in the head, the top of the mountain, top of the pyramid, but then we have to have this huge base that supports it. And you know, 99% of who we are is like this, the support for this That old thinking thing that's just not that important after all. And no, the whole thing is important, your importance, but the whole thing, so to feel them to be grounded and centered in the body. So to sit down in such a way that your posture is intentional, mindful postures are intentional postures. So there should be some intent in your posture, you don't want to just kind of find a posture that you know, just kind of it was kind of easy and just kind of don't think about it anymore. But there should be some other kind of a groundedness or an or awareness of mindfulness in being intentional in the posture you take. So sit down and take a little bit of time. To find your fingers, find your posture, if you have a common posture, take a little bit of time to really settle into it. There's all these little nuances of difference that your ordinary posture can take depending In what's going on in your everyday life and where you're tight or where you're loose or what's going on, and it's nice to kind of take time to feel your way in to feel what's the right way, take this posture today. You know, and one of the great things in, I felt was in Zen training was how much we were instructed to rock before we sat, rock out who was to actually sway and the voice of instruction was sway really wide first, and then kind of make smaller and smaller arcs until you come to center. And that's kind of a way of feeling away what's right now what's the right place right now to sit there you could also kind of swayed front and back. And then you can move your shoulders a little bit and move your head sideways. You can say no little bit. Some people like them, you know, they haven't said no enough. And then it's also good to say yes, some people haven't said yes enough. And so you can do that to kind of cut just to kind of line up your neck a little bit and feel your way into how it should be. And then I think it's great when you sit to feel what's happening in your chest. How does the posture you take affect your chest, your heart, you know, did you know some people collapse here and pulled in? Doesn't have to be dramatic, which little man? It's, you don't wanna be puffed up of course, right? But, but there's a way of kind of just being open here and adjust where you feel maybe a little bit it's can be a little tender and vulnerable. But I suggest that in your meditation, where it's hopefully when you wherever you meditate, is generally a safe place. You know, no one's going to take advantage of you and your close your eyes and meditate. It's a safe place to have it open, vulnerable, chest or heart if that's what you feel, to make space for that to hold that or if you feel a lot of anger or you know, you know That goes on you're simmering inside. Oh, can you can you make space for that? Hold that. So this idea of making space, I think is also a physical phenomenon make space with your chest, let your chest be open that will make. In zen, they, one of the things they thought is, rather than lifting out your chest, they talked about, take the spine between your shoulder blades, and pull that in gently. And that little bit has the same effect of opening this, but you're not pushing it open into usph being you know, you're not pulling it open, you're kind of like it's more passive, what's you know, it's a result of the spine coming in. And then if you take a take a posture, which feels a one of the things we're trying to do with posture and meditation is to have a posture where we're basically aligned if we can, the best we can, so that gravity can help the body relax.

Where we can the body can Relax most deeply as much as possible. If you're the, you know, the couch slumber. And one of the things happens if you slept really good in the couch like I was that day, you know, you're leaning back and your shoulders kind of you lean back and your shoulders kind of roll forward. And then you say, Well, let me relax. You know, if you're, if you're sitting I really like your

shoulders up to your ears and rolled forward. And you said, let me relax, there's actually not much space to relax in. But if you pull your shoulders back, then actually maybe the way that the shoulders fit in their sockets, arm fitness sockets there, maybe there's more room for the body to relax. If you're if you're scrunched over your belly. Your belly has a hard time relaxing, but if you're open in your belly, then the belly can open and sink if your same thing with the chest. So to have a posture that allows the body to relax. Many many years ago, I read a study in a journal I guess comes from going to physiology study where they measured which postures human beings could relax the most deeply and was the corpse posture and yoga, we just kind of lay on your back and kind of think that, you know, I don't know if it's true for everyone, but maybe it's more like, you know, generally. And so a CT posture posture, which makes some sense, you're completely kind of let go. But what surprised me was a second posture, which people can relax the most deeply and was the cross legged meditation posture. And that kind of is counterintuitive, because doesn't mean that you're, you're, you know, you're not being supported. You're holding yourself up. When you're laying down the corpse posture, you know, you're not doing any work holding yourself up. But what it speaks to is that there's something about finding yourself aligned and balanced on the spine and then here that allows so much of the musculature to relax deeply and it's stem. There's certainly muscles and tendons and bones, but that hold us up, right? But there's all the surface muscles, many of them at least, seems like a deep relaxation gone. And this is my experience that but it's not automatic. And so what's nice about taking an intentional careful posture, posture which expresses attention to take up what's it what you know, you think about it for yourself. What if you sit down and you are going to manifest attention in your body? What would it look like? An example that people give for this is seeing little babies when they're really attentive. You know, you know, they'd be all I have honest, a diaper. See, it's beautiful to see their spine and how upright they are. Sometimes you're like, wow, they're like, wow, you know, it's like, you can feel almost their attention in their spine. That's there because of, so take a posture which feels like you're expressing you know, really going to be attentive here. And then have some intention to stay with that to be with that to be in your body to be rooted and grounded in it. But if you take about a posture, which is, you know, relatively well aligned for meditation posture, then slowly over time, a number of things happen. One is it begins to reveal the places where you have a lot of holding, it reveals some of the emotions which are lodged in our body. And that revelation, that discovery of what's actually going on is very important. One of the reasons to important is that, then we can make more, give more space for them to be there and allow them to unfold the way they do. Generally, it's helpful to think that meditation is not a time in place to fix things, to solve things, but it's a time and place to let things dissolve. And so I've said many times with Ted In my body, and I just sit and meditate and I'm a very aware of the tension. Sometimes I hold the tension with awareness, but I hold it also, it feels very important I hold it also, in this, you know, you know, some semblance of a yogic posture sitting upright aligned the best I can. And in that posture, feeling the discomfort, I know I can not feel it, if I go to the couch, you know, and just slumped a little bit and turn on the TV. You know, but, but to feel the discomfort. It's such a great thing because it slowly begins to work itself out. If it's just kind of tension of a day, maybe it works out in that particular meditation session, it just kind of relaxes. But if it's tension that comes from months or years of holding, then it takes a while in meditation. Slowly, slowly, incrementally, the body begins to release and let go.

And people who do meditation regularly for a long time start developing what some people call the yogic body, a body that somehow adapt, adopted itself or to align balanced posture, that places of excessive holding begin to release many of them. And the plate the muscles are weak, because of you know imbalances of how we live our lives get stronger. And so to take a posture that's intentional, aligned upright, and allow the certain muscles to get strong, and allow certain tensions to let go, is a slow process to do that unfolds over months and years of your practice. One of the generally it's that unwinding of tension that we hold is faster than how quickly it got lodged in there. And so as we do this,

one of the great things that happens is that This intentional clear, upright posture that we begin to unwind, dissolve, work out some of the tensions in holdings is it becomes a more and more sensitive instrument becomes more and more its capacity to perceive or to sense or to feel what's going on comes up more and more heightened. And to have the your body, be an antenna to have your body be part of the perceptual apparatus that takes in the sense data from the world around you and from within you. increases the amount of self understanding and social understanding we have. We get a tremendous amount of information through our body. If we're only trying to understand things through our minds through our thoughts. We only get a kind of you know, as a percentage of what is really going on. But it's particularly true for ourselves, you know we pick up is the body becomes more and more sensitive we become aware of our emotions or feelings or attitudes. And we also start becoming aware of the subtleties of how our thoughts operate and how they impact our thoughts have on us. Thoughts are not disembodied thoughts. However, just thinking as his tentacles that spread out into our body, it's amazing. It's quite interesting to watch how the tentacles of thinking affects the rest of our body. And so to start, meditation practice with a posture which unintentional intentionally expresses attention the best we can to have to receive some instructions in meditation posture, perhaps, so you know what the non aligned upright posture might look like for you and then begin opening and allowing for the unfolding and the changing that that does for you the discoveries of what that does to what shows you what you learn about yourself from it. And then to take that in in meditation and translate that into your daily life, to start using that information, that ability to notice your posture and what goes on, to have a heightened awareness of all the little attitudes and assumptions and moods that go on in your daily life as well. And to notice things like for example, notice what your hands are doing. You know, your hand some sometimes some hands express a lot. And, you know, you're talking with someone and you start, you know, tapping your fingers on the table, you know, are you impatient, they ask you, are you are you bored? You know, or you start wringing your fingers, you know, like, maybe that's a sign of anxiety that your hands often can express a lot or how you hold your torch so what's happening with your shoulders, your face. None of this means that you're discovering anything that says that you're bad as a person. But it's all because you're wonderful that you want to start becoming, noticing what's actually going on here. what is actually happening with you inside? And how can you hold and be with what's here. So to allow for yourself to be to benefit from it to be enlivened by it to be freed by what's going on. And so, posture is a great support. posture is a great entryway for mindfulness. So much so that I think of our posture is the frame that holds the practice. So pay attention to posture and give it your let it Let it be a support for you in your life. So thank you all for coming today. Connection