

# Mindfulness of the Body (1 of 5) The Conscious Body

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The theme for this week is mindfulness of the body. Over the last three weeks, we have discussed three important areas of mindfulness: mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of thinking, and mindfulness of emotion. Now we come to mindfulness of the body. Perhaps one of the rationales for using that sequence is that everything we learn about mindfulness of breathing, thinking, and emotions sets the stage for us to be able to enter into mindfulness of the body.

For the Buddha, mindfulness of the body was one of the most important practices. He emphasized it tremendously. He talked about how much goodness, and how many benefits come from mindfulness of the body. He said it's a protection from all kinds of unsavory forces that come our way or arise within us. It's an incubator for some of the best, most wholesome qualities we have. It's where we can discover the deepening and opening of the path of Dharma that unfolds. The Buddha even talked about awakening itself. He said that there is no awakening without there being mindfulness of the body. There is no experience of the deathless without mindfulness of the body.

Some people find it perplexing that the body is emphasized so much. For some people, the body is just a hunk of meat that's useful for carrying us around. For them, the body is kind of pointless and senseless. But as meditation practice deepens, the body makes more and more sense, in the sense that it becomes more sensitive. The heightened sensitivity of the body and our heightened attunement to the body provide a tremendous amount of information. Energy and vitality are freed. We get a deeper sensitivity to where freedom can be found, where clinging and contraction exist, and how to release them.

What's very interesting about the Buddha's teachings on the body is that when he talks about the body, he's not talking about the physical body, but rather how the physical body is experienced. It's the experienced body that we're practicing with in meditation, not strictly speaking the physical body. So it's the sensate body, the somatic body, the conscious body, or the animated body.

In one set of teachings, the contrast the Buddha seems to give is between our living physical experience and that of a corpse that has no sensations or thoughts, is not impacted by anything, and has no consciousness. All the sensations and subjective experiences of our bodies are there because we're alive. They're part of our animated system – the vitality of our nervous system.

So, from the Buddhist point of view, the mind and body are not so separate. Perhaps the mind spreads out throughout the whole body because the body we're conscious and aware of is the body that we can actually know. Maybe a researcher, a scientist, or a doctor might know something about our physical body, but from the inside out, how we experience, feel, and sense our body is a deeply subjective experience.

Of course, we can live in our heads, in our thoughts and ideas. Because of that, we can treat the body as an object. We can think about parts of our body almost as if they're external to us. When the body is some thing out there, we can think about it from the control tower and have all kinds of ideas about the body. We don't like parts of it, we like parts of it, we have concerns about it, and we treat it like an object, a thing that we can think about.

The body is now back in the world of aboutness. Some weeks ago, we talked about how thinking is often about aboutness. When we're thinking about the body, we are a little bit removed from the body itself, from the

subjective experience of the body. Meditation is a way to drop more and more deeply into the subjective experience of the body – how the mind is aware of the body – the conscious body.

It turns out there's a world of difference between the body that we're aware of from the inside out and the body that we're not aware of. The breathing that we're mindful of is very different than the breathing that we're not mindful of. It's almost like we have two bodies. There is the body without much conscious attention, where we are not centered in the subjective experience of it, and the body suffused with conscious awareness, where we're centered in and aware of what goes on in the body. These two modes are so radically different that it is almost as if we have two separate bodies.

I believe that, to some degree, they operate differently. The more conscious and relaxed we are, the more our whole system works in a healthy, harmonious way. For the purpose of meditation, the deep subjective experience of the body that's possible gives us feedback and understanding about how we're changing and developing as meditation deepens. The experience of the body is not a fixed thing. The subjective experience of our body is intimately connected to the state of our mind. As we get more concentrated, the experience of the body changes.

People who don't meditate might sense their body is a solid hunk of hardness with clear boundaries. But as the mind gets concentrated, still, and more mindful and sensitive, the body becomes more fluid, receptive, softer, more spacious, and more open in a fantastic way. It stops being hard or fixed. One thing that was interesting for me in my early years of meditation was that my body would get very relaxed and soft during meditation. But there would be some little place, some little lump of hardness or tension somewhere in my body. When I brought attention to that, with time, it would begin to dissolve as well. It was as if I was going through layers in the body where tensions were held.

When I first started meditating, I had a lot of tension in my body. My stomach was always tense, my jaws were tense, my eyes were tense, and my shoulders were much higher than they are now. As that began softening, I started seeing more and more subtle places of holding, and then they would dissolve. As they dissolved, the sense of the body as hard and lumpy receded, and the body started feeling like a dynamic, fluid, open field of energy with lots of space.

Is that experience of the body more or less accurate than the experience of the body with hard boundaries that we have when we're walking around tense and upset? They're all just products of the state of the mind, to a great degree. Neither experience is right or wrong, but one is conducive to greater freedom, compassion, and love. The ability of the body not to be tight and armored opens up so much potential that's needed to awaken, so this path of practice can unfold.

In the last guided meditation, one of the primary points I was trying to make is that the more relaxed the body can be, the more receptive it is. Receptivity is a very important quality for meditation. If we meditate with assertiveness, like, "I'm going to make something happen; I'm going to get something to happen and it's all about me controlling and directing my meditation," this tends to create more tension or limitation. It doesn't create room for receptivity. Rather than focusing assertively, focus on being receptive and relaxed.

Then when we get concentrated, for example, on the breathing, it's a receptive concentration. The mind settles on the breathing. In the teachings of the Buddha, the word that is often translated as "concentration" is (*samādhāṭi*?). This is different than *samādhi*, but often they're very closely connected so the translators will translate it as concentration.) It literally means "to settle." A settling that can happen. We can be receptive to relaxation, receptive to settling, receptive to take in and experience what goes on.

In relation to breathing, we're receptive to the influence the breathing has on us. Breathing is not a neutral thing; it's not just a mechanical thing. It's at the nexus of so much of our whole life. Sit and be receptive. Allow yourself to be receptive to the influence breathing has on you. Allow the breathing to condition your body and open your body. Let breathing begin to show you how wonderful the conscious body is – the somatic body, the body that's suffused with awareness from the inside out. It is a place to rest, a place to trust, and a place where greater and greater freedom can arise. Thank you for this. That's the theme for this week – mindfulness of the body.