

Mindfulness of the Body (3 of 5) Embodied Joy

September 16, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS protection, safety, ethical, harm, complete, stable, happiness, clinging, well-being, concentrated, relaxed, non-sensual pleasure, meditative, wellspring, Buddha, flowing, satisfaction, service, caring, compassion, freedom, conceit, narcissism, preoccupation, self-identity, receptivity, life force, control tower, pleasantness, lightness, satisfaction, contentment.

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On the topic this week of mindfulness of the body, I pointed out yesterday that one of the benefits of mindfulness of the body is a sense of protection and safety. It's a wellspring for ethical behavior. If we are really centered in our body, it's hard to intentionally harm other people because we have the experience that we are also harming ourselves and there is another way to take care of ourselves and the world that doesn't require us to harm anyone.

Today, the emphasis is that mindfulness of the body also provides a way to experience some of the greatest joy and happiness a human being can experience. It is through being embodied that we release and open up to the wellspring, the capacity to experience an embodied joy and happiness that is really spectacular. Because of how embodied it is, it feels full and complete. It can feel very stable and satisfying because there's satisfaction in all our muscles and the marrows of our bones.

This is opposed to mental excitement, joy, and happiness. That might come from evaluation, getting what we want, getting praise, or something exciting or interesting to us. There is nothing necessarily wrong with that. But discovering the capacity for joy within is what is so radical in the Buddha's teaching in ancient India.

There were plenty of religious traditions in his time that mistrusted any kind of embodied physical sense of joy and happiness. They associated this with sensual pleasure, which was kind of a trap for attachment. The Buddha, who understood the trap and the problems of clinging to sensual pleasure, discovered a non-sensual, embodied sense of happiness and well-being that can well up from sitting quietly and meditating.

In the modern world, we might say that as we get concentrated, settled, and peaceful, as stress falls away entirely and the body is very relaxed, when we stay concentrated on just the breathing in the present, this releases endorphins or some kind of chemicals in our body. These can sometimes bring a quite intense sense of joy and happiness.

To me that seems very reductionistic, as if it misses the point of the deep embodied sense of well-

being, contentment, and satisfaction that can well up in meditative happiness and joy. That really comes into its own when we have the capacity for embodied mindfulness and the body is receptive to this welling up.

In our modern world, I think it's fairly revolutionary that the happiness the Buddha advocated doesn't harm anyone. It doesn't require using a lot of resources or money to get pleasant experiences or do exciting things. It doesn't require receiving praise or adulation from anyone or becoming famous. It doesn't require you to have power. Some people are addicted to the pleasure of power. Many of the normal places people look for happiness and well-being often cause more suffering than happiness, if not in the short term, sometimes in the long term.

Not to be critical of them, but we can also have access to a deeply embodied internal sense of well-being and happiness. Some of the greatest kinds of joy and even ecstasy that are possible in meditation don't require anything outside to be different. They don't require money and all the other things. This happiness is considered harmless to the world around us.

To have this joy as a wellspring of meaning, to understand how deeply satisfying and meaningful it is gives a life a sense of purpose. It leads to a life of service, caring, compassion, and to freedom. So it's not a selfish happiness. It can't be selfish, because selfishness actually squashes this free-flowing wellspring of joy and delight that comes from the inside.

And that's why embodied joy is such a revolutionary act. For some people, to begin experiencing this wellspring of meditative joy requires a reorientation away from conceit, narcissism, and preoccupation with self and self-identity. It requires instead willingness and receptivity to allow the life force to well up and move through us. Rather than being in the control tower, trying to control it, be it, prove it, apologize for oneself, show off, define oneself, or justify oneself, we put all those kinds of selfing aside and trust the welling-up of goodness and peacefulness that's possible here.

As I talk about this, I am very aware that this is not really for someone who's brand new to meditation. I offer it here partly as a continuation of all the months of 7am sittings, with the hope that the background of all that we've done so far creates a foundation that makes this topic more accessible. What I'm talking about here doesn't have to be ecstatic or dramatic. We can learn to turn our attention inward and begin to be receptive, allowing, and attuned to the feelings of pleasantness, lightness, satisfaction, and contentment.

That contentment might begin with little hints. But as we breathe, open, and settle more, the happiness becomes bigger and stronger. It does require a mind that is undistracted. Happiness requires a mind that doesn't fill the space of attention with its preoccupations. There has to be room in our attentional field for these embodied experiences to surface and show themselves.

It may be useful to see this as our attention having only a certain amount of bandwidth. If we fill it with thoughts, memories, stories, and conversations, there is very little bandwidth left over for the body. In fact, probably it's like Zoom, where if too much bandwidth is being used, something begins to freeze and you can't keep going.

We quiet the mind enough to allow this lived experience. Some of you may have had the experience

of exercising, maybe going for a really nice walk someplace outside on a nice cool day, and just feeling the vitality and the blood flowing in the body. It feels so good to feel all the energies of the body flowing.

A deep satisfaction in those flowing energies can be released when there's a lot of relaxation and alertness, when we begin the revolution of re-centering ourselves on the lived experience from the inside out as it flows and moves through us. There are different degrees and different characteristics of this pleasure and well-being that can well up from the inside.

The reason to talk about it here in mindfulness of the body week, is that the more we can be embodied in practice – the more we can be attuned to our body, making it a habit, and becoming familiar with the experience of the body – the more benefits come from it. Certainly, if there is pain, and often there can be pain and discomfort in the body, mindfulness of the body can be phenomenally supportive for that. It can allow us to respect the pain, find a way through it, and make our peace with it. But mindfulness of the body also allows and makes room for inner joy and happiness to well up and come forward.

I didn't know about this many years ago when I first started doing Zen practice. In Zen meditation, having meditative joy and happiness in practice were actually discouraged or seen as distractions. Maybe there's an orientation in that tradition to see leaning into or opening to happiness as a kind of attachment or as a departure from the ultimate connection to truth that Zen is supposed to emphasize.

But when I was introduced to vipassana practice, I began to appreciate that not only is the meditative joy and happiness that can well up allowable, but it actually begins to open the door for greater and greater letting go. As you open up more and more and get more settled in the present moment, wonderfully, the joy fades away. When the joy fades away, a deeper sublime, satisfying form of embodied happiness wells up. With time, that happiness fades away.

Rather than being a loss, this is really a fantastic gain, because a deeper, more satisfying feeling of peace, tranquility, and equanimity replaces it. We feel at home, not in conflict, not challenged by anything. At some point, this beautiful flowing feeling of peace also fades away into a deep letting go, deep release. That deep release allows us to touch freedom or liberation.

The joy and happiness that the Buddha emphasized is not meant to be an end in itself. We are not meant to be attached to it, but certainly, to allow it and be receptive to it. We allow it to grow and develop so that, as the practice deepens, it can keep transforming into happiness, peace, and freedom.

May your body be your friend, and may you feel that your body is here to support you and has these treasures inside. If you take the time and give some of your attentional bandwidth to your body, you can allow the deep healing and freeing of these positive emotions deep within. Thank you very much, and we'll continue tomorrow.