

Mindfulness of the Body (4 of 5) Physically Calming the Mind

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Mindfulness of the body is a foundation for understanding, relaxing, and freeing the mind. “Relaxed” might not be the best word. The Buddhist words are “calm” or “tranquil.” There can be clarity and crispness in tranquility. The more relaxed and tranquil the body is, the more we notice when we tighten up and the body gets tense. This can be the result of external events, for example, suddenly a car comes barreling down the road in a frightening way and we tense up. That’s reasonable because we’re getting ready to jump out of the way.

But there are all kinds of ways in which we tense up the body. There are hundreds of little muscles in the body and they’re all connected to our emotions, thoughts, and reactions, and they’re all part of the working of the whole. As we get more and more settled, and the muscles relax, those muscles can tighten up. If they’re already tight, then that becomes the status quo and we don’t really see the changing nature of what’s happening inside. If we’re completely tense all the time, we might not even notice we’re tense.

Still, to this day, sometimes it is only when I sit down to meditate that I notice that my shoulders are tight, or there’s a little bit of holding in the breathing – I can feel that the top of the inhale is a little bit held back and there’s resistance there. This is because I’ve been living my life busily doing things. In meditation, I feel that, and then I can relax it because I have something to compare it to: I know what it’s like to have an easeful, relaxed breath or relaxed shoulders.

The more relaxed the body gets, the more sensitive we become to movements in the mind of clinging, tightening, and resisting. We’re more sensitive to how we pick up our thoughts and get involved in thoughts. And that is really the name of the game and the heart of it.

It’s not really about what we’re thinking about, but *how* we think – how much we’re invested in our thoughts, reacting to our thoughts, resisting them, grabbing hold of them, or pushing them away. If the body has become relaxed and soft, we can feel the way we are in relation to thoughts in the body. Then we can see the difference. If the body is tense, we might not see the difference because it’s all the same.

One benefit of getting calm, concentrated, still, and quiet is having a whole different relationship with the mind. We see, we have access, and we have a toehold on how to work with the mind, not necessarily by changing what we’re thinking about or how we’re feeling. We do this by noticing the tensions associated with the mind and then relaxing them.

Even if we can’t relax them, there’s something valuable in holding the tensions of the mind in awareness in a relaxed way – maybe not trying at all to relax, but simply holding them in awareness.

Things begin to release themselves when they are held. This is kind of like when someone has a tight fist all the time because they are afraid or angry. They're holding the fist tightly and they don't even know they're doing it. Then someone comes along and says "Here, my friend," and they take the person's fist and rest it in their hand. They say, "Relax your hand and let my hand support you." Generally, that fist will tend to open and relax. The person is not doing the relaxing or forcing the hand open, but just holding it and supporting it. Simply knowing that it's accompanied allows the hand to relax.

It is the same way with the contraction, the vise grip, that can sometimes be felt in the mind – the smallness and narrowness of the mind. Just holding it in awareness and accompanying it can help it to feel safe. Something begins to release and relax. Some of the deepest forms of mental relaxation, calming, and letting go are so subtle that being the agent doing the relaxing and letting go is a coarser activity than is needed at that time. Being the agent goes in the opposite direction from relaxing.

What's really needed is not any doing on our part, but just that holding, being, and feeling. At some point, something begins to release itself. So we don't want to overdo being the agent of relaxation and making ourselves calm. If we are pursuing that all the time, we're missing the opportunity to cultivate mindfulness and concentration in a deeper way. But relaxing is allowed.

To feel the activities of the mind physically is not easy. To some people, this is a very foreign idea. But this ability starts becoming available when the whole system is more relaxed, mindfulness has become stronger, and there is a heightened sensitivity to feel and sense what's going on.

The slightest little movement in the mind to begin thinking can be felt as a very slight beginning of pressure somewhere in the mind, very soft, very relaxed. It is not necessarily uncomfortable, but you can feel the beginning of pressure. If you relax that pressure and notice it carefully in mindfulness, that pressure can release. The fun thing about this is that you'll never know what that thought was going to be. In other words, if you're really quiet, still, and very sensitive, you can notice the physical changes associated with the beginning of thought before a thought has really formed. The physicality associated with the mind is that subtle.

It is easy to think of the mind as disembodied and abstract, or as a formless thing that has no connection to the body. But in fact, the mind is very closely and intimately connected with the body. The workings of the body influence the mind. I think we should be very careful not to decide exactly which has priority and which has the major role. I think we should be particularly careful not to decide our minds have the major role in how we live our lives. The mind and body are closely related.

Mindfulness of the body is a way of taking care of the mind and a way of taking care of the good heart. Developing mindfulness of the body, both by relaxing and by seeing, sensing, and feeling the body fully, is a very significant way of caring for, healing, supporting, and ultimately freeing the mind.

In all these talks about mindfulness of the body, I hope that you value your body, become a friend to your body, and trust the inner body (how the body feels from the inside). Especially in meditation, don't give so much attention to what the body is from the outside (what it looks like or what you think about it). Just feel it. Mindfulness of the body opens a powerful doorway to all kinds of benefits Thank you.

