

Mindfulness of the Body (5 of 5)

Concluding Instructions

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

welfare, contraction, relaxing, breathing, thinking, analyzing, planning, fantasizing, emotions, holding, care, anchor, stabilizing, compelling, letting go, separation, divide, coterminous, Dharma knows, coagulation, congestion, layers, resistance, acceptance, willing, open, receptive, trust

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Today concludes the teaching on mindfulness of the body. It also concludes the instructions from the last four weeks on the four foundational areas I often use to teach mindfulness practice: mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of thinking, mindfulness of emotions, and mindfulness of the body. I usually teach them in a different order: breath, body emotions, and thinking.

The idea is to have a sense of how to be mindful of all these different areas. The way I teach vipassana is mostly focused on breathing. Breathing is the home, the default, the center of gravity, and the anchor to the present moment. Breathing is deeply connected to all the other aspects of our life. It's a wonderful place to practice because of the influence it has on everything else.

But if anything else arises that's more compelling than breathing, we either let go of the breathing and focus mindfulness on that area (what's happening in the body, emotionally, or in the mind). Or we don't let go of the breathing but let the breathing help us to accompany this other thing that's more compelling. Breathe through it, breathe with it, so that the stabilizing force of breathing continues, but you're also attending to whatever else is compelling or predominant in experience.

As practice deepens, and as the mindfulness gets calmer and more settled, the places that predominate that are not the breathing tend to slowly work through some of the kinks and wrinkles – the places of holding or contraction in our psychophysical system. When we bring our attention to them (unless it's just pure, straight physical pain – we can work with mild pain) we smooth out the wrinkles and settle the agitation. We are letting go of any clinging, holding, and contraction around this place of holding. Slowly the contracted place frees and loosens up, and opens into more clarity and spaciousness in experience.

One place where this holding pattern or contraction becomes evident is the separation between the mind and the body that some people have. Some people live their lives above the neck. In English, we say they are "in their head," which usually means they spend a lot of time thinking, analyzing, planning, and fantasizing. They are swirling around in the two-dimensional world of thoughts, ideas, and stories.

The three-dimensional world is to open up to the whole body and allow the field of relaxation, letting go, and ease to spread outward in all directions. We bring the attention to that place of separation –

the coagulation around thinking – and allow that to begin to loosen, soften, and relax. At some point, there's no real divide between the mind and the body. We can identify them as somewhat separate, but they're not really. They're coterminous; they're all encompassed in the same field of clarity, ease, and peace.

This is a process of letting go, relaxing, opening up, and being receptive that expands to include everything. We start with the breathing and then move to what's predominant. Different predominant things will then appear at random, seemingly. But as practice deepens, I don't think the process is particularly random.

We're going through layers of our being, layers of coagulation and congestion. These are layers where we're stuck, where there's resistance and holding patterns. We're going through whatever layer is predominant. One day this might be in the chest, on another day it might be the head, the shoulders. Certain emotions might come up or cognitive things – ideas, stories, or memories.

I like to think that the Dharma knows best what's next for us. As we sit and focus and settle, whatever arises next, the Dharma knows, or the inner life knows – “Okay, now it's time to be present for that, and learn to find our freedom with that, and not be caught by this, and learn to settle with this as well.”

Sometimes as we relax, there's a big letting go, a deepening of letting go, relaxing, settling, and concentrating that can feel quite nice. Sometimes we find that is followed by a period of a little more difficulty, or sometimes a lot of difficulty. We're not going backward, but rather, as we go down, we take care of one floor in the building, in a sense, and then we're ready to go down to the next one. And it turns out that the next floor hasn't been cleaned for decades, so now we have to deal with all the mess that's there. Once that's done, we might feel more settled and we can go deeper. Maybe the next layer is a feeling of great love or compassion. Or maybe it's a layer of fear. Who knows what's there?

I like to think that if the practice is sincere, then the Dharma knows what to bring you next. The attitude that the Dharma knows, or the inner life, the heart knows what's next is a nice way of relaxing our resistance – being bothered or troubled by what comes up for us, what surfaces, what's next in our lives. There's kind of an acceptance that “This too. I get to practice with this too,” instead of, “Not this, please.” Or, “I'm doing it wrong.” “No, I'm doing it right because now this is coming up, and now I get to be with this.”

The ability to just be with things as they are, and accept them as the domain of practice that we practice with is not a generic or naive acceptance of things. It is an acceptance where we are not in conflict. We don't resist anything as the appropriate domain for practice.

It's a powerful thing to learn how to be willing, open, and receptive, and to practice with anything that comes our way. Rather than resisting, being upset, or collapsing, we develop confidence and trust in the power of mindfulness, the power of practice. “I can step or turn toward this too. I can be mindful of and present for and experience this too.”

Then we can go through these four different areas and ask: in this particular thing that's happening now, what's happening with the breathing? How is the breathing? What's happening in the body? What are the physical experiences and sensations that come along? Where am I tight, holding,

resisting, pulling back, or leaning forward? And what's happening emotionally? What emotions are predominant? What emotions are moving through me? And what emotions are motivating me and prompting me to do something – attack, run away, soothe, comfort – what's going on?

To know what's happening with the mind – in our thoughts, our beliefs, our cognitions – the movements and contractions of the mind. We have these tools to be with what is and practice with it so that we can find freedom in the middle of it. When we have our freedom, then hopefully we have more wisdom about how to act, what to say and do, what to feel, what to intend, and how to be with the situation so we can take care of ourselves and the world.

I feel that the culmination of this practice is to have in one's heart no resistance, no divide between the welfare of others and the welfare of oneself. So that we're caring for ourselves, helping ourselves to be safe and healthy, and allowing ourselves to thrive. We're important. *And* – we're not holding on to self or holding ourselves separate from people, or being conceited or attached to our own welfare only.

We're also equally concerned for the welfare of others. There's freedom and ease in that care. It's not obligatory, it's not as if we have to push against great odds. It's just the simplicity of a heart that is free and relaxed. Of course, it wants to care for the welfare of others. Others are very much like us in some of the deep ways and in the possibility of peace, love, and respect.

To really understand that this practice is leading us to live in the world concerned, not effortlessly, but naturally, for the welfare and happiness of all beings everywhere. It's almost as if the welfare of others is our own welfare, and our welfare is the welfare of others. We live in the world of caring for each other.

I hope these weeks of basic mindfulness teachings have given you a different take on how it is usually taught. I hope to have added to, supplemented, or deepened the teaching in some way. I hope it has supported you. Thank you very much for being part of this. I appreciate it very much.