

Mindfulness of the Body (1 of 4) Posture

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Gil Fronsda

The theme of the talks this week is mindfulness of the body. Maybe it can be your theme as you go through the week.

Mindfulness of the body is the first foundation in the discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*"Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta"*). The discourse is the most basic teachings from the Buddha on mindfulness practice. There are six exercises in the discourse associated with mindfulness of the body. The first exercise is mindfulness of breathing. Since I covered that in January – when I talked about the first tetrad of *ānāpānasati* – I will not repeat it this week. I will talk about the other five exercises of mindfulness of the body.

Mindfulness of the body is a wonderful practice. It provides so much. One important thing that it provides – which I will emphasize today – is protection. It is a way of being protected as you go through life. When you are grounded in your body, you can pick up a wide range of what is happening around you.

The body is like an antenna picking up different forms of perception. There is the inward perception of our emotional reactions and responses. We can pick up on what is happening and how we are responding. We can perceive when we feel danger or something to be concerned about.

We can perceive danger not only externally but internally as well. We can pick up on when we are in danger of losing our ethics or peace. We can pick up on when we are in danger of acting upon something – such as greed, hatred, or delusion – that we will later regret.

The body is a repository of evidence of what shifts and changes in us. It gives us an early warning sign. Sometimes the body indicates what is going on before the mind knows. The body is more attuned to our subconscious. The mind is not as attuned because we are preoccupied with other things or rushing ahead.

Because I have a habit of checking in with my body, I notice when I am rushing, tense, pulling back, or holding myself back from a situation. I do not notice that in the mind because I am thinking about things or wanting things to be a certain way. I am reacting and living in the reactivity. By connecting to my body, I can better feel and sense what is going on in the subconscious or in the early beginnings of things. That keeps me safe and from getting lost in the world of things. So, if we stay connected, mindfulness of the body is a great protector for us.

The second exercise of mindfulness of the body, in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, is mindfulness of posture. It does not take refined attention to the body to be aware of posture. Many people are not so connected to their bodies. There are a lot of reasons for that. Maybe we will talk more about that as we go along. We can at least recognize our posture.

The bar for posture mindfulness is pretty low. The Buddha says:

When walking, a practitioner knows, "I am walking." When standing, one knows, "I am standing." When sitting, one knows, "I am sitting." When lying down, one knows, "I am lying down."

That seems like a pretty low bar. I hope it is pretty obvious that when you are standing, walking, sitting, or lying down, you know you are doing that.

Do not underestimate the tremendous value of knowing this – really knowing it. It is not just knowing your posture casually, in passing. We really recognize it. We have clear recognition: "I am standing now. I am sitting now. I am walking or lying down." That begins to create space in the mind for more present moment awareness.

Knowing our posture interrupts the mind stream when we are on automatic pilot – thinking or wanting. It interrupts the preoccupation with our emotions, the rumination that we get lost in. It is like taking a sacred pause, “Oh, this is what I’m doing.”

Then, take time to feel this. “I’m standing. Here I am.” It is a chance for the body to regroup, reorganize, connect, and get grounded. Or: “Here, I’m sitting. Before I start speaking, let me get grounded in my seat.”

If you are about to speak at a meeting or someplace, take a moment to feel yourself – “here, sitting” – so you are not caught up completely in what has to be said. You will be more receptive to your environment as well. The more we are grounded here in our body, the more body awareness is available for what is going on around us.

Certainly, our mindfulness of posture can become more refined. When we are standing, are we leaning forward? Are we pulled back? Are we collapsed in some way? When we are sitting, are those same postures happening? Are we sagging into the back of the couch, removing ourselves from the conversation we are having? Or are we sitting upright, so we are available and present for speaking or whatever we are doing?

To be collapsed in a chair might feel relaxing, but there could be a loss of attentiveness, presence, and involvement with what we are doing. When we sit or stand in a balanced, upright posture, we have access to more information on what is happening to us. A greater range of body awareness is available – we notice if we are leaning forward, pulling back, or collapsing. When we are collapsed, less variation is possible.

It is like being at the midpoint of a pendulum. We feel the pendulum moving this way and that way. If we are stuck at one end of the pendulum, we do not have a refined sensitivity to what is going on.

When we are walking, how are we walking? What does that say about our mood, our emotional state? With all the different postures – what is happening? When we are sitting, walking, or standing – are we doing it in a way that is physically healthy for us? Is it a way that puts the body most at ease? Is this the least amount of tension to hold the posture?

Mindfulness of posture, which the Buddha emphasized, is a fascinating world. You can keep mindfulness of posture at a very low bar – just know your posture as you go through the day. You can be more refined and notice the details of your posture. Maybe you lost a balanced posture. What does that tell you about yourself? How does coming back into a balanced posture protect you and keep you more balanced so you can do what you need to do in a better way?

A virtue of this exercise is its incredible simplicity. When walking, know you are walking. When standing, know you are standing. When sitting, know you are sitting. And when you are lying down, know you are lying down.

This knowing is to really know it. See what space is created – what clarity arises – what information becomes available to you. Do not know it just in passing. In a sense, stop and really know it – over and over again through the day.

If you are inclined, try to practice mindfulness of posture for the next 24 hours. Study yourself through your posture. Study the mindfulness that arises with posture and how different postures support greater presence and mindfulness – or less of it.

You might talk to other people about their experiences with mindful awareness of posture. You might have some fascinating conversations. There are certain professions in which posture is a key to how they manage well.

May today be a wonderful day of discovery and appreciation of this body of ours. Thank you.