

Consciousness (2 of 5) Sensing Through the Whole Body

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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The overall concept tying this week together is consciousness. Coming down to teach this morning, I marveled that I had somehow managed to choose consciousness as a topic. I kind of walked into it. It was not the plan on Sunday evening. Somehow, by the time yesterday morning came around and we were beginning the week, I found myself coming up with the theme of consciousness. Maybe in more cautious moments, I wouldn't have chosen such a potentially complicated concept – one which has a lot of different ideas of what consciousness is. But here we are.

The premise that I'm operating under here is that consciousness, at least in how I'm teaching within the early Buddhist framework, is not a singular thing. It doesn't exist by itself. There is not a pure consciousness we can find somewhere deep in our psyche or our hearts. There isn't some kind of impersonal consciousness that continues after death. There isn't some kind of transpersonal consciousness existing beyond us that we share in or are a part of.

In the early Buddhist framework, all ideas that make consciousness into some *thing* are recipes contributing further to being attached – to clinging. Instead, in this early tradition, the word “consciousness” maybe is not even used in the texts. There's an argument to be made that the word we translate as “consciousness” shouldn't be translated that way.

We're then left with modern ideas of what, in the English language, the word “consciousness” refers to. The premise I'm working under is that consciousness is not a thing. In terms of its gestalt, the whole of consciousness is more than the sum of the parts.

Consciousness is made up of many parts which contribute to the creation of something that is more than its individual parts. In a sense, the parts are all the different mental and perceptual processes that work together. They work together, and the mind can create a sense – an image – of the whole. That is, partly, what we can call consciousness.

But consciousness doesn't exist apart from the image – the sense or idea – we construct of the whole, which can seem like a field or bubble of consciousness, or like a kind of continuous consciousness. Somehow, it can seem as if the self, we, are the consciousness. All of these things can happen once the idea of consciousness has been constructed.

When, perhaps for neurological reasons, something doesn't work properly, what we call the sense of consciousness – of awareness – can get very disoriented, fragmented, and confused. But when it all works together, it's a bit like an old clock with hands and gears operating to keep it going. All of those gears, when they work properly, move the hands of the clock. But the movement of the hands does not exist apart from all of the movements of the whole clock. So, what we call consciousness is more like this overall movement than it is like any particular part of this movement.

Some of what I want to talk about this week involves the component parts of consciousness. Yesterday, I talked about our capacity to recognize things. This is important because, without recognition, we have no recognition of consciousness or anything. But recognition is itself a complicated mental process that involves memory and other things.

Today, the topic is another one of our attentional capacities or faculties much emphasized by the Buddha: our capacity to sense the sensations of the body. We can use the words “feel the body” as long as we don’t think of it as the second foundation of mindfulness – feeling tones. Feeling the body is the act of feeling – or experiencing – the body from the body’s point of view itself – the senses of touch, all of the nerve endings throughout the body that provide data of what the body is feeling – experiencing – and how those nerve endings are being stimulated.

There may or may not be acts of recognition when we’re sensing. It could be sensing without recognizing what we’re sensing. Or, sometimes, the recognition might be faulty. Sitting next to a bush or a little tree, a leaf brushed my neck. I thought a person was touching me, but it was a leaf. The recognition of what was actually touching me wasn’t accurate. But the perception of touch was accurate.

This ability to feel and sense the whole body can be developed. And it’s also something that can be lost. There are people who, for many reasons, do not feel much of their body. They don’t feel much of the body below their neck, below their waist, or other parts of the body. Part of what mindfulness meditation can do is reawaken the body so that the whole body is participating in being present for our experience.

Some people specialize in being more sensory, more somatically in the world. They mediate the world through sensing and feeling in their bodies. Other people mediate the world more through their cognition – their mind and their thinking. For them, recognition – their cognitive faculty – is a stronger factor. It’s kind of like left and right-handed people. There are different kinds of perceptual people.

People who are somatic and sense predominantly with their body can easily live an imbalanced life because there’s not enough knowledge, recognition, and wisdom about what they’re sensing. People who live primarily in their recognition – the cognitive parts of the mind – do well in dropping into their body. There is a tremendous amount of information there that can augment and support whatever we can think about or cognize.

One of the things we support, one of the things that body sensations – body awareness – allows for is recognizing all the little and big ways we tense up, how we are tight in the body. For the Buddha, becoming aware of that is extremely important because when we are aware of that, we can relax it. Seeing how we carry unnecessary tension in the body is one of the functions of beginning meditation practice – learning to relax and settle the body so its tensions don’t create tensions in the mind. Many of the tensions in the body are there because of tensions in the mind. Then, as we relax the body, the mind begins to relax as well.

Our psychophysical system works much better as an instrument of attention when it’s relaxed. The movement in Buddhism toward heightened attention – heightened awareness – is dependent on a combination of alertness and relaxation – mental alertness, deep relaxation, and deep settling and tranquility of the body. As the body becomes more relaxed, more information can arise out of it.

Nowadays we know that the body contains a lot more perceptual abilities than were known in the time of the Buddha. There is a whole sense of perception that has to do with balance. There is a sense of perception which recognizes the locations in space of different parts of the body. There are elements of body sensation that feel gravity and weight. All of these are included in a heightened sensitivity to the body. This does a few different things. Each of these perceptual abilities contributes something to the overall gestalt of what consciousness is.

As the body relaxes, it contributes to a sense of consciousness or awareness as soft, spacious, even expansive. As the body gets more and more relaxed and tension isn’t there, the hard and fast boundaries and solidity of the body begin to dissolve. Any sense of solidity in the field of consciousness and awareness does as well.

Part of what mindfulness of the body contributes is other data points for constructing the idea of consciousness. One of them is location. Part of this is feeling and knowing different locations of the body, giving a three-dimensional quality to the scope of attention. This can contribute to the idea that consciousness can be broad and wide. Some people have a sense of it as a field of consciousness. It can feel very real, existing in some wonderful ways. It’s the mind’s way of taking in data about location and space, where it creates a spatial image that goes into the construction of our idea of consciousness, the idea of the totality of all our perceptual abilities.

Two things about our ability to feel – to sense our body: one is to do it. Awaken, and make dropping into the body a common part of the day. Doing that, you’ll learn a lot about yourself. It’s like the early warning system for

tension, fear, joy, or delight. It's a way of experiencing life more fully, including having much more information about what's happening with us, our responses, and reactions.

Also, a deeper feeling of the body really makes it a home for us. Then, we can have more ability to relax the body and to let go of the unnecessary tension we hold. That, in turn, supports a calming of the mind. Tranquility of the body leads to tranquility of mind, which leads to a more harmonious running of the clockwork of all our perceptions working together.

We'll continue with this topic tomorrow. I hope you find it interesting. Thank you all.