

Challenge Check-In (1 of 5) Mindfulness of Body

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Four Foundations of Mindfulness, Jataka tale, Chicken Little, rabbit, mango, lion, sky, investigate, tense, connected, disconnected

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We continue with this ongoing series of practicing with challenges, from minor ones to extreme ones. Extreme challenges might need extra special care and attention. Maybe we'll get to that later. For now, we're laying down a foundation that will help address whatever challenges we have.

This week, I want to focus on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, which I've taught before. I think most of you know what they are: the body, feelings, mind states, and mental processes. They can be a tremendous support and foundation, a grounding, for working with challenges.

To introduce this idea, I want to tell you a Buddhist fable. It is similar to the tale of Chicken Little. There once was a rabbit in the ancient world who was taking a nap under a mango tree. A big mango, high up in the tree, fell to the ground with a big bang right next to the head of the sleeping rabbit, and the rabbit woke up. The rabbit immediately assumed that the sky was falling.

The rabbit jumped up and started running away yelling, "The sky is falling, the sky is falling." It came across a group of rabbits. When they heard that the sky is falling, they also started running and screaming, "The sky is falling, the sky is falling." The rabbits ran further and came across a herd of deer. When the deer heard about the sky falling, they also started running and yelling, "The sky is falling." The animals ran further and saw some water buffaloes and elephants, and they all started running, thinking that they better run fast because the sky is falling.

High up on a mountain overlooking all this was a lion. The lion could see that a huge mass of animals was running right toward a cliff, and if they kept running, they would fall right off. So the lion quickly jumped in front of them and roared, "Stop." He asked the elephants, "Why are you running?" They replied, "Oh, because the water buffaloes said the sky is falling." The lion asked the water buffaloes why they were running, and they said, "Oh, it's because of the deer." The deer said, "Oh, it's because of the rabbits." The lion then asked the rabbits why they were running. All the rabbits looked at the first rabbit and said, "Well, we heard him say that the sky is falling." The lion said: "Well, let's go investigate. Where were you sleeping?"

All the animals went back to the mango tree, and right next to where the rabbit was sleeping was a big mango. Everyone realized that the sky was not falling. It was just a mango that had fallen. So that is a Jataka tale, a birth story – the Buddha was a lion in a previous lifetime.

An important idea in the story is knowing to investigate. If we don't have the capability to investigate what's happening with a challenge, then we sometimes get caught up in the swirl of it all – the agitation, preoccupations, and more importantly, the assumptions we have about what's happening. Also, the concepts, abstractions, planning, predictions – all kinds of fixed ideas about who we are and what's happening to us. The ability to stop before we go over the cliff, to investigate, and take a good look at what's happening there requires knowing where to look. Where is the grounding? Where are the useful places to bring attention?

The Buddha offered four areas – four foundations, four establishments, for mindfulness. When we are in the midst of a challenge, we can check in with ourselves. How are those particular areas being experienced? How is the challenge being felt in the body? Is this pleasant or unpleasant? What kind of mind state is operating when we're caught up and involved in the challenge? What are the mental processes that are reacting to the challenge? What are the mental states that support being with the challenge in a better way?

Those four areas are an alternative to the abstractions we live in: the big stories, predictions, and ideas that are generated by fear, anger, confusion. It's a particular subset of the whole gestalt of it all – a gestalt that is often infused with imagination, assumptions, predictions, and thoughts, beliefs, and ideas about self.

Some of the ways that we enter into challenges actually limit our ability to navigate them wisely. Part of what makes a challenge so much more difficult are the ways in which our inner life responds to it, lives with it, is confused by it, and is caught up in it.

The challenge is not really the challenge out there or what we call “the challenge,” but rather, how we are in relation to it. It's so powerful to do a mindfulness check-in. Check in with yourself. Go through a checklist if you like such things: “Okay, this is challenging. Now, how is this being felt in the body? What is activated in the body? Where am I tense in the body? Where am I contracted in the body? Am I even connected to my body or am I disconnected from my body with all this?” So what's happening here with the body?

What's happening with the feeling tone? Is this really unpleasant? Is it really pleasant? More than a physical experience, the predominant experience is the unpleasantness of it all.

What's happening with the mind states? Is the mind contracted? Is the mind filled with desire, greed, wanting something or needing something desperately? Or is the mind angry, blaming, upset, guilty (all forms of aversion)? Is the mind confused, perplexed, lost? Is the mind narrow and tight? Is it expansive and open? How is the mind state?

And the mental processes – are the hindrances operating? Is there ill will? Is there sensual desire or covetousness? Is there sloth and torpor? Is there agitation, restlessness, remorse? Is there doubt? Or is there calm? Can there be calm here? Is there mindfulness? Can there be mindfulness here? Is there curiosity and investigation? Is there joy? Is there tranquility? Is there some ability to stay focused here, centered, concentrated? What about equanimity?

So as we go through that check-in, we can discover which of the four areas predominates or needs the most attention. We're gathering together information about how we are so that we can know how to respond wisely to the situation. This presupposes we do the check-in not in the middle of a challenge (e.g., traffic accident), when we have to take care of things. We can check in during meditation, when we're not right in the middle of the fire of a challenge we have to put out.

To do the mindfulness check-in, notice which of those four areas predominate. Know how they operate. Then you're in a better position to respond and know what to do after the check-in. The check-in can go quite quickly. The response might be to go for a walk, call a friend, or do something nice. It might be to go to bed and pull the sheets over your head. It might be to meditate. There might be all kinds of things that you can do. But you gathered the information to see what's happening there, and you're breaking the trance of the mind's overall picture, fear, and concern about what it is. You're beginning to break up that caught-up-ness in the assumptions and attitudes that the sky is falling.

It's very respectful to do this kind of check-in – to get underneath the surface of the assumptions and beliefs that are operating in order to find out what's happening there, and based on that, decide what to do. With mindfulness, like mindfulness meditation, we can see which area is most predominant or most in need of being really present for.

One of the defaults that many times is useful, but not always, is to stay close to how it is in your body. Feel the embodied nature of it. What's happening in your body? Trust the body. Don't treat the body as a static victim or just a receiver of experiences. It's a participant in experiences. It has its own wisdom. The body brings its own goodness to what's happening if we allow and make room for it, if we're willing to drop into the body, get centered and grounded in the body, and then let the body process what's happening.

When we're challenged, there can be a lot of reactivity, tension, tightness, and contraction in the body. And so by feeling the body, the body wants to relax. As we allow ourselves to feel it, it's like we get out of the way. The mind is letting up so the body has a chance to relax.

So the mindfulness check-in – it's a way of changing the perspective of what's happening for us. It's useful to do at the right time – when we're not right in the middle of having to deal with something, but rather, at a quiet time.

Maybe there's a time and place to do the mindfulness check-in: the four foundations. See what you learn from that.

This week, we'll go through the checklist. We'll see how to use the four foundations as a way of bringing a useful perspective to our lives when we're challenged. Perhaps, it's an alternative perspective to the perspective that you usually bring. By doing the checklist approach, it might highlight for you the perspective that you were bringing. You might then see it more clearly, maybe see that some of the perspective, some of the assumptions and beliefs that go into how you respond and see a challenge may be optional, provisional, not needed, which actually interfere with your ability to be wise in taking care of challenges.

For the next few days, we'll go through the four foundations and emphasize the value of each one. Tomorrow we'll do a very important topic: mindfulness of the pleasant and the unpleasant, where the pleasant actually has a very important role.

May you go through the checklist today periodically and see what it does for you in different circumstances.
Thank you