

Mindfulness of the Body (3 of 4) Daily Activities

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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I'm continuing with the topic of how mindfulness of the body can support us in challenges. The third exercise the Buddha gives in his famous teachings on mindfulness is to be mindful, aware, and to know the activities we're doing with the body as we do them.

As we're moving – certainly as we're walking, talking, putting on our clothes, going to the bathroom, showering, or bathing – each of these everyday activities is a meditation center in itself. Each is a monastery in itself, a sacred dimension, a sacred place for the practice of mindfulness.

To see it as a meditation center, as a sacred location, is to put a lot of value on the presence, attention, and care we give in being with each of our everyday activities. The Buddha mentions eating, drinking, stretching out your hand to grab something, opening a door, turning the doorknob to close the door, putting on your shoes, cooking in the kitchen, or cleaning. There are innumerable daily activities. The third exercise in developing mindfulness is to bring mindful attention to these activities as we do them.

This has a lot of benefits in the ordinary way of thinking about mindfulness. It's a way of being mindful in the present moment. It's a way of building up the muscle of mindfulness – the muscle of attention to the present – so that we can begin to abide, living more and more in the present moment, thereby receiving the benefits of doing so.

But also, doing this reveals what's going on otherwise. If we stop and pay attention – not really stopping, but doing our activities while attending to them and really being present for them, we might notice how the mind has other ideas. It drifts off, thinking about tomorrow, yesterday, or a fantasy of some kind. Our emotional life can follow our thoughts. Our emotions can be very much about something not present here and now, something which is being reinforced by thoughts or stories about this other time or place.

There are traces of – a residue left over from – other things in which there are preoccupations, concerns, attachments, resistances, and fears operating that sometimes have a life or momentum of their own. It isn't necessarily wrong to have them, but it's really helpful to see it.

When we're present for our daily activities – standing over the stove stirring a pot of soup – if we're really there for that stirring, we notice: "Well, I'm not really here. I'm still thinking about the traffic ticket I got and how it's unfair and this and that." There's something that happened to us early in the day that's sticky and we're stuck with it, glued to it, or preoccupied with it. We see that as we stir the soup: "Oh, look at that. Now I can see the power this has over me."

If we just go about our life unconsciously letting the mind think about its preoccupations and thoughts, it might seem like business as usual. We might not even notice how much the mind is caught, how much the mind is preoccupied, and the influence that preoccupation has on our bodies, emotions, and hearts. But if we're stirring the soup and see that we're thinking about the traffic ticket then, "Wow, that's really strong!"

"Oh. Is this really the right thing to be thinking about? Or do I need to attend to this in some way? Do I need to settle something deeper? Maybe I should turn the stove off, go sit down for five minutes, and let the leftover agitation of the traffic ticket wash through me. Let it drain out of me by just sitting and breathing with it. That's what's needed. Otherwise, the residue of that tension and agitation is going to be driving my thoughts."

The simple way of saying this is: as we bring our attention to the present moment and try to be with what's happening as we do it, we start noticing how much we're not there. And that reveals something really important about ourselves, some important information. Then, what we do next is up to us, but at least we know something we didn't know before.

In terms of the challenges we have in life, we can get stuck in some of them. With stronger challenges, sometimes there's a stuck-ness. Some people freeze and go numb. Some people hunker down. Some people collapse. Some people do the opposite, getting agitated and really spinning out.

To go about our daily activities – simply brushing our teeth, washing our face – should really be done in a simple, relaxed way. It is the middle way between collapsing, being numb or frozen, and being agitated. It's using the movements and activities of the body to channel energy, give space for energy, get movement and fluidity, and lubricate our system without it being too much or too little.

It's very freeing and helpful to go about our daily activities as a way of loosening up, settling, grounding, and as a way of not being glued to our challenges and concerns about them. It lubricates and massages. It can be grounding so that we can be wiser about how we consider our challenges and how we address them.

But if we're engaged with and caught up in our challenges – the more they've really grabbed us – the more useful it is to do something, some activity that frees us, loosens us up, or settles us a little bit. Sometimes it could be going for a walk. A walk allows the emotional energy of the challenge to start becoming more fluid and not so stuck. Or if we're collapsing into it or going numb, it can wake us up a little bit. If we go in the opposite direction and get too agitated, a walk can actually be settling. I like to think of these daily activities as the middle way that brings things into balance.

You might try that. The next time you have some kind of challenge that's hard for you to be with – maybe not the most challenging thing, but some moderately difficult challenge – don't just sit and do nothing. Don't just fret. Don't go numb and do things on automatic pilot. Enter into the activity of what you're doing in the moment with mindfulness and presence. Maybe even with an embodied presence so that you're really there.

Imagine you're a dancer or an actor who is embodying a part – the whole being – stirring the soup, brushing your teeth. See if that creates a little bit more space and lubrication for the challenges you have. More balance. By the time you finish that, maybe you're a little bit more centered and a little bit more able to think clearly.

It's not that easy. Just brushing your teeth isn't all it's going to take. But we have lots of different activities throughout daily life. In being really mindful of them, we have lots of little opportunities to reset, to ground, and to discover, what is really going on? What is the residue? What's left over? What's the strength of that residue? What's the strength of the way we're glued to our preoccupations and challenges?

The challenge doesn't go away. But one of the things practice can do is dissolve the glue that keeps us glued to it. Or the stickiness can be washed away so that, unstuck, we can address the challenge, be with it, or figure out what's best to do.

We have many opportunities throughout the day – daily life practice – to be mindful of the activities of daily life. Maybe it's useful to think of the ordinary, regularly repeated activities you do as your meditation center, your monastery, your sacred grove, your sacred spot. Not the place, but the activity is so significant.

If you take a dozen, or two dozen, of the regular activities you do throughout the day and really make them places to lubricate, massage, ground, be present, and discover more clearly how there's so much residue and so many ways of spinning out. I think it could be invaluable for helping you work with a challenge you have in everyday life.

To *not* do that, for some of us, might mean that we're actually feeding the preoccupation, feeding the caught-ness, feeding our emotional reactivity to the challenge. It's so easy to give into it or live in that all the time. But to have some kind of way to cut through the reactivity – the stuck-ness we have around challenges – is an invaluable part of our ability to address them more wisely.

And if you have no challenges, then it's a delight to fully give yourself over to the physical activity of the daily activities you do. Really enter into them in an embodied, absorbed way. "Just this. Just washing the dishes. Just

stirring the soup. Just brushing my teeth.” Maybe that “just” is a source of rejuvenation. May the activities of your daily life become a sacred dimension of your life. Thank you.