

Body (3 of 5) Respecting the Body

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Gil Fronsdal

We're continuing to discuss mindfulness of the body as part of the overall practice of mindfulness. Today, the topic is respecting the body.

Many years ago, I saw an article in Mother Jones magazine. The title struck me. It was "The Body: Friend, Foe, or Total Stranger?" We have complicated relationships with our bodies. Some of it's been acculturated by the way our culture relates to the body. And some of it has to do with our life experiences and what individuals have told us about our bodies and our features.

There's a tremendous amount of suffering in our society that's related to our bodies. Many cultures have certain attitudes about skin color, body size, and height. Many of us live under the weight of thoughts and preoccupations about our bodies such as, "My nose is too big or too little."

When I was in seventh or eighth grade, I was very concerned about having too high a forehead. I was worried that I was going to lose my hair. I would spend an inordinate amount of time in class measuring the distance from my nose to my scalp. I would take my finger like this, and feel the distance to make sure that I wasn't losing hair.

I could probably write a somewhat interesting autobiography, all from the perspective of what I've done with my hair over these decades of my life – my hair length, from crew cuts when I was a little kid, to long hair – halfway down to my belly button – later in my life. Then, a shaved head when I was a monk, and on and on. What was going on? What were the associations, beliefs, and attitudes going on? The idea of our bodies. There's often an overlay of our judgments, ideas, and preoccupations on top of our bodies.

One of the things that's possible to discover in the hand exercise I gave in the last guided meditation is to experience the difference between the hand's experience of itself and our ideas of the hand. The idea that my fingers are too long, too short, my fingernails are this or that, or my hand is chubby, or whatever it might be. Some of these ideas and thoughts can be debilitating and depressing even.

But the hand itself doesn't have those thoughts and ideas. The hand just feels itself for what it is. It has no judgments about what it is. It's tremendously respectful for the hand to leave it alone, to free it from our judgments, ideas, and associations. And to experience the hand – or whatever part of the body – independent of acculturation, independent of life experiences even, independent of judgments, ideas, and how we've been treated.

Part of mindfulness practice is to give yourself – give your body – the gift of allowing it to experience itself independent of all these other comparisons you make, including comparisons with other kinds of hands.

For example, I might feel bad about myself for being too short because I'm hanging out with a certain group of people: "Oh. I'm too short, and this is unfortunate. People are looking down at me all the time, and I have to look up high." It just so happens that I'm hanging out with players from the National Basketball Association. So, in comparison, I'm short. But in comparison to many people in our society, I'm a little bit tall. But I make up a story and get caught up in it.

These differences and comparisons cause a lot of suffering. I don't want to dismiss the suffering and the challenges that all of this makes. We need to address it wisely. But in meditation, we can give ourselves the gift of experiencing the body in and of itself, free of all that.

If we really want to respect the body, we want to somehow be able to distinguish between the judgments, stories, commentary, and associations we pile on top of the body's experience of itself, which is often very simple.

That can also be relevant when there's pain – discomfort – in the body. We have predictions, "If my knee pain continues, I'll have to amputate my leg, and it'll be the end somehow." Certainly, there are dangers with the body being uncomfortable or in pain. But sometimes there are not.

One of the great things that can happen through heightened sensitivity and respect for the body – really paying attention to the body in meditation – is we can tell the difference between pain that's a danger signal and pain that's not.

If it's a danger signal, then change your posture. By all means, don't live with the danger. If you're in doubt about what it is, change your posture. Don't stay with pain that way. But if there's no danger signal, I like to think of the pain as a message. Part of that message is not that something needs to be changed – that you have to do something – but rather, the message is to offer it the medicine of awareness – to hold it in awareness.

Part of the respecting of awareness we did in the last meditation is that the awareness in which we hold discomfort and pain needs to be simple. It doesn't need to be piled on with judgments, associations, fears, and ideas of self that make it so much more complicated. Very simple awareness.

For example, if someone goes around with a clenched hand because they're afraid or angry, you could try to open their fingers with a crowbar. You'd get one finger open, and then when you start on the next one, the first one would close up again. You're directly trying to fight the "clenchedness."

Another way to do it is with a loving, soft, caring hand. Hold the person's hand, support it, and tell them: "Here, rest in my hand. Feel the weight, and let it rest and settle into my hand." Then their hand will slowly begin to open because the person feels supported and cared for.

In the same way, we can do this for ourselves. As we bring our awareness to the area of tension or pain, perhaps we're allowing something to thaw, something to relax and open. We're making space for the body's ability to heal itself.

If the tightly clenched fist is a metaphor for illness, then the medicine is holding it so it can release and relax itself. Perhaps, it's not always relaxation. Maybe it's simply that bringing a lot of attention to an area brings more blood to it. Or the micro-tensions around it relax. Or we begin seeing that the experience of discomfort, in and of itself, is a very different experience if we just feel it, in and of itself, than if we see it through the filter of our ideas.

Even the idea that it is pain is kind of an abstraction, oddly enough. When we really feel it directly, we realize that pain is an abstraction. What's really happening is there are sensations of heat, stabbing, pulling, tightness, pressure, or strong contraction. All of these particular sensations are intense, but they are all different kinds of sensations. When we start feeling the particularity of it, then we're not overlaying it with an idea like pain, which comes along with a lot of ideas about what pain means.

Some people associate pain with failure. "I'm doing something wrong." It's a bit debilitating to have that idea. So just feel it and be with it. Then, as we feel more deeply into discomfort, for example, there might be a message there. The message might be that there's some embodied emotion stored up there from a long time ago that may need to be released. Maybe it gets released with tears. Maybe it gets released with heat.

But I think it's nice, in respecting the body, to think that there's a huge difference between our corporal body when we're a corpse, and our animated body – the body that has sensations. I like to think of the sensate body as a messenger system. It's always there to inform us about something. To inform us about something as simple as it's hot or cold outside: "Take off your sweater. Put on your sweater." Everything is a message. How do we read that message?

With mindfulness meditation, it isn't so much that we're actively reading it, but we're allowing a respectful, careful, simple awareness to hold and be with the experience so that we get to know it better and something begins to happen. The self-healing functions of the body can operate. The message system of the body can reveal something to us more deeply.

Maybe what we're learning is not necessarily about the discomfort or the pleasure we might feel. But rather, we're learning the message that we're not free in relationship to it. We're caught up in it. We're somehow attached to it or averse to it. Our awareness is not free. Our awareness is not in a place of freedom and simplicity. *That's* where the work is. That's the message that comes back to us.

So, respect the body. The instruction we have here at IMC is to stay with your breathing. That's the default. That's where we develop some concentration.

But at a moment's notice, if some experience of the body is more predominant, more compelling, which means that there's a tension set up between trying to stay with the breathing and this other sensation of the body calling attention to itself, you can let go of the breathing. Then, see if you can calmly and deliberately bring a clear, simple awareness to this compelling sensation, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. To hang out with it for a while, to hold it for a while.

And when it's no longer compelling, you can either continue to be aware of it – if it feels like the right thing – or you can come back to your breathing.

Respecting your body. It's definitely worth it. And "Friend, Foe, or Total Stranger," a wonderful thing that can happen as we do this practice is that our body becomes our friend. And we become its friend.

May that friendship last for a long time. Thank you.