

Body (2 of 5) Recognition of the Body

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This week we're talking about mindfulness of the body. I think one of the wonderful results of doing mindfulness practice is to become more embodied. Many years ago, I read an ancient Mahayana Buddhist text that insisted we don't become enlightened through the mind, we become enlightened through the body. Whether that's literally true or not, it's an inspiring idea. Certainly, as we practice mindfulness – slowly, slowly perhaps for some of us (certainly for me) – the body wakes up. There is an awakening of the body. Then we have more and more access to sensing and feeling the body.

There are people who for all kinds of reasons – significant things happened to them, difficult things – find it very hard to be in their body – it's not a safe place to be. To drop in and feel the body sometimes feels like tapping into fear or even terror. So to emphasize the wonder of being in the body is a careful thing to do because of how difficult it is. Some people live from the neck up, or from their waist up, and feel really disconnected from parts of their body.

This week, the aspects of mindfulness practice we are addressing are relaxation, recognition, respect, restoration, and release. Today, the topic is recognition. The “re” part of “recognition” is to reconnect to the body – to spend time getting to know it. To learn to do it in a way that is not frightening or distressing. To do it with a kind of gentleness and care.

Some people go within for short periods, spend a little bit of time touching in, and then pull out – staying just as long as it's safe. When there have been really difficult things in the body, I've given some people the instructions to imagine awareness to be like a soft cotton ball that we gently reach down and touch the place that's difficult. Touch it with the softness of the cotton ball, and let it be just so it's known and felt a little. And then pull back.

Slowly over time, the body reveals itself to us in different ways. Sometimes it can be through discomfort. As the mind gets quieter, as the body settles down, we go through the layers of where the body is held and where there's tension. There are layers of tension we have that we're not aware of because the coarser tension holds it in place, or hides or covers it. So when the coarser tension relaxes, then we're aware of deeper tension, and slowly there's a greater connection to the body.

It's not just the connection to the body as if the body is something separate from you – the body has its own awareness. Often we call it sensing. Sensing and sensations belong to the body. For example, if I touch my hand, I have sensations of warmth and pressure upon my hand. Those sensations of warmth and pressure occur in the location where the other hand is pushing against.

The raw, immediate sensing occurs in the body in the place where the sensations occur. I'd like to say that sensing and sensations are non-dual. They're not really two different things. And separate from that, I know that the body knows the warmth and pressure when I touch it. And separate from that, I can have the cognitive thought in English “warmth, pressure”. If I spoke a different language, I would use different sounds or words to represent that. But the body has already sensed it; the body feels it.

The sensing body starts to wake up as we practice mindfulness, and the parts that are numb or disconnected get reconnected. This recognition is also a re-remembering by putting the parts of the body back together again that were disconnected. So slowly over time, there starts to be a flow of harmony, a flow of the body – the whole body hums in a very nice way. But the path to that is to appreciate this deeper recognition.

So the recognition part of mindfulness practice is extremely significant. It works in different ways, but it's always simple. It's not a story; it's not an explanation of why it's there; it's not a review of everything. It's almost like what

we recognize doesn't have history, it is just recognizing in the moment what's here. For example, if I recognize my chest expanding as I breathe in, there is just feeling and sensing the expansion, feeling the movement.

In addition, we can have the mental aspect of mindfulness practice, which is to sometimes use a mental note. A mental note is using a word or label that recognizes what it is we are experiencing. For example, the expansion of the chest, the movement that I feel – “breathing in.”

Two different forms of recognition are happening there. There is the immediacy of what's happening in the chest. And there is the very quiet – almost in the background – mental recognition “movement,” “expansion” that's happening. Or if there's pain in the knee, the mental note “pain” is happening. These mental notes represent perhaps 5% of what the mind is doing. It's not like we're pounding the mental note into the experience – it is more like a gentle brushing of it.

This recognition, both the mental noting and the feeling of it, is an alternative to discursive thought. It's an alternative to wandering off and flowing along with a story, commentary, explanation, or prediction of what's going to happen – all the ways we can get involved in discursive thought. Recognition can begin to cut through that.

I sometimes think of recognition as the sword that cuts through the Gordian knot. The mental world of discursive thoughts can be so complicated – the many ideas, complicated histories, and stories that we live in. We cut through it by: “oh, breathing, that's an in-breath,” “that's an out-breath,” “there's a sound – listening,” “there's an itch,” “I'm back with the breathing,” “the stomach is tight,” “relaxing the belly.” It's coming back to that simplicity.

Using the simple act of recognition can help us be engaged nicely in the present moment, without being hijacked or pulled into the world of thinking. We don't have to struggle against thoughts. In a few weeks, I'll talk about mindfulness of thinking. But for now, the idea is to cut through it – keep the meditation really simple. Mindfulness of thinking and the role of thinking comes later.

For now, use the simplest kind of thinking to help you stay present. This is the very simple, one-word cognition of things: “pressure,” “warmth,” “expansion.” If it's more than a word, it's probably not simple recognition. Use very gentle and soft mental noting. Or use something close to it if your mind is able to really stay close to that simple recognition without a mental note – you don't have to use mental noting. But mental noting is a way of staying honest, really knowing that you're not wandering off in thought. – just a steady pace, “breathe in,” “out,” “expansion,” “hearing,” “discomfort,” “pleasure” – whatever it might be that you're feeling and sensing.

So whether it's the cognition of a mental note, or the cognition of the body's own knowing – the knowing that's much more silent – these help to cut through the thinking mind and connect you to something that's living and alive. It's a miracle to be conscious. Human awareness is an amazing thing.

To stay close to the living moment where cognition, consciousness, awareness, mindfulness keeps us in our animated, living body – the lived experience. The more we can recognize and open up and be present for this, eventually we start feeling and allowing for the potential healing power of this body that we have – healing not necessarily from physical illness and injury. But it's a deeper kind of healing, spiritual healing, healing of awareness that this hum that moves through the whole body becomes whole.

I hope that made sense. To really get to know the body well is such a blessing. So I'd encourage you throughout the day today to get to know your body better – listen to it. Maybe even have a timer that goes off every 10 minutes or so, and then check in with your body.

Check in with your body every time you go through a doorway, every time that you change your posture, for example, from sitting to walking, or to standing. Whenever you pick up a new utensil when cooking or eating. Find different things to check in with what's happening in the body. What is the body showing? If I listen to my body now, what do I learn? Recognize the body. Thank you