Introduction to Mindfulness (6 of 25) Listening to the Body

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Gil Fronsdal

Good morning on this Martin Luther King holiday. It's my favorite holiday. I love that Martin Luther King's expression "soul power" was his translation of Satyagraha. This is Mahatma Gandhi's term, which means "holding to the truth." It is sometimes translated as "power of truth."

Today we will continue this five-week introduction to mindfulness meditation. Last week we explored the foundation of mindfulness. I usually teach breathing as the foundation.

This week's topic is mindfulness of the body. Mindfulness of the body works better for some people than mindfulness of breathing. There is something about narrowing the attention or focusing on breathing that evokes challenging feelings and emotions for some people. If this is the case, it is not necessarily useful to center on the breathing.

It is sometimes useful to feel the body more broadly without focusing on any particular part. We let awareness be gentle, drifting, and open. We open and receive the different parts and sensations of the body as they appear. This frees up the mind, which can become fixated and reactive to what is happening.

This ability to be grounded in the body, to become more embodied, is a central feature of the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness. His classic instruction in meditation always begins with mindfulness of the body. Feeling the whole body and relaxing the body are his two explicit instructions around the body. He teaches us to feel the whole body and relax. Calming the body prepares the ground for further practice and the unfolding of meditation.

The Buddha also made very strong statements that there is no awakening without mindfulness of the body. There is one passage where he says in many ways that there is no experience of the deathless, there is no freedom without mindfulness of the body.

Becoming more sensitive to your body is a fascinating topic. For many of us in modern society, there is a lot of momentum and many forces that disconnect us from our bodies. In some ways, excessive screen time takes us away from being present here in our bodies. In sedentary lives, we sometimes don't benefit from all the different ways the body can move and awaken itself. When all the different parts of the body can't interact, play, and come alive, the body is not able to inform the rest of us.

For many of us, some of our sense doors are underdeveloped. In some societies, they put more emphasis on certain sense doors. The people there are more attuned to the environment and their sense doors are much more acute. Similarly, many of us in the modern world use a very small part of our capacity to remember or to memorize. In the ancient world, there were no books to store things and no Internet to look things up. The only way to store information, knowledge, stories, and songs was to memorize them. So people had a much better capacity for memorization and sensing the environment around them than we have today.

Meditation practice is partly about developing and cultivating a greater capacity for attention through all our senses. This is not just sensing through the mind's eye, or the cognitive knowing about what is happening. Meditation heightens the capacity to feel and awaken the whole body. For people who have had very difficult

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experiences – traumas, or emotional challenges – it can become too difficult to feel the intensity of their emotions, so they shut down their bodies. They shut down the sensing and feeling parts of the body. Because of their professions, the way they were raised, or because it was prioritized in society, some people live from their neck up. They live in their thoughts, ideas, and eyes.

Much of our emotional life lives in our full body, especially in our torso, chest, and belly. By not cultivating and developing a heightened sensitivity in our torso, we receive much less information about what is happening to us. We receive less information about the impact the world has on us and the kinds of responses we have.

Many years ago, a Zen teacher, Katagiri Roshi said that our body is an antenna. I love that idea. A body is just primed to take in information and sensations from the environment and process them. It is primed to take in and express what is going on with us emotionally, reactively, and in the mind. There is an intimate relationship between the state of our mind and the state of our body.

As the state of the mind changes in meditation, the experience of the body will change as well. Sometimes when the mind is peaceful, calm, and spacious, the body will feel the same way. If the mind suddenly remembers some slight or offense that someone did a long time ago and suddenly things contract, we can feel how the body contracts too. When we have a thought or a memory, the body will tighten up in response or get hot or tense. As the body relaxes and softens, so does the mind.

The advantage of mindfulness of the body is that it provides so many subtle clues to what is happening in the mind. Those subtle clues are not just clues. As we open to feeling, receiving, and allowing these clues, things tend to relax and soften. Giving breathing room to our experience allows something to soften and relax.

Imagine we are really tense in the shoulders and a friend who cares for us – that we trust – gently comes over and puts their hand on our shoulders. Only then do we realize how tense we are and then something relaxes. It is almost like you don't have to think about relaxing.

Bringing a kind, available, receptive awareness to what is happening in our bodies moves tension to relax. It allows the feelings that are emerging – those that don't come with tension but with a feeling of suffusion, flow, and radiance – to grow and spread out.

When gases get warm, they expand. When ice warms, it melts. As the warmth of attention opens us up, the places where we are frozen begin to thaw. The places that are already soft and open expand outwards. So, anger, greed, and hatred all tend to be frozen, tight, or constricted. As we bring attention to them, they tend to relax. Anything that involves clinging can relax. Anything that involves suffusion – a gentle, warm radiance like love, kindness, or generosity – can grow in that space of awareness.

The more we can be in our body in this receptive, open way, the easier it is. Some people find that it is easier to be with the sensations of the body if the rhythm or the beat of breathing keeps us centered in the body. We are just breathing in and breathing out. Breathing through whatever is happening, and breathing with whatever is happening in the body keeps us grounded and centered.

Other people find that it is not useful to be so attentive to the breathing. It is easier for them to be relaxed and not focused on or inclusive of breathing. The breathing may just be sensations in the background. For the time being, the sensations of breathing are not useful to feel. Feeling the rest of the body more globally is what is helpful.

Eventually, for the people who find it best to avoid being with the breathing because it triggers fear or something, there is a shift. At some point, they are ready to take in the breathing. I have sometimes been that way. I would ignore the breathing, and then at some point, the breathing would come in through the back door. Then I was able to be with it and it was nice to be with.

The breathing itself is a very rich ecosystem. It is a kind of aggregate of all the different reactions, feelings, and sensations that are happening in the rest of the body. It is almost like a meeting point of everything. Breathing itself is an invaluable part of the exploration of the body.
This talk was meant to provide reasons why it is so valuable to be connected to the body. Of course, it is not always easy to do. The body can be a difficult place for many reasons. We begin by opening up to the body and being interested in it. Listening to the body in a deeper way like we might listen to a friend is an invaluable and very important part of mindfulness practice. Connecting with the body is so valuable that I feel it is unfortunate that we translated sati as “mindfulness.” Sometimes I wish we had translated it as “body-fullness.”

If the meditation we did today was interesting, try to practice it one more time today. As you go through your day today, you might try a very simple thing. Periodically, maybe with some reminder, check in with your body and ask, “What is happening here?”

If you are alone – so you don’t bother others – try setting a timer for once an hour, once every 30 minutes, or every 10 minutes. You can decide how often. When you get a little ping, you check in. It doesn’t have to be more than a five-second check-in. “What’s happening here in the body? Oh, that is what is happening.” This regular check-in to the body will slowly, over time, provide you with a greater literacy in your body. It will provide a greater ability to listen and recognize what is happening. I am confident that listening to your body will provide a lot of wisdom. Much wisdom in Buddhism comes from this grounding in the body.

So, thank you very much. I appreciate this chance and look forward to tomorrow. Thank you.