Introduction to Mindfulness (7 of 25) Aware of the Body as Body

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Hello and welcome to the seventh talk introducing mindfulness meditation. This week the focus is on mindfulness of the body.

As I said yesterday, mindfulness of the body is one of the central teachings of the Buddha. The foundation of this meditation practice is a deep, stable connection to the body. Part of the reason for this is that we are trying to become free of the hegemony of our thinking, judgments, bias, stereotyping, and preconceived ideas. We are trying to be free of our fixed agendas, opinions, and stories of what is and what isn't.

This is not because these are wrong to have, but because they interfere with our ability for a deep connection to the present moment. This might be like being with a friend who cares for you a lot and is challenged in some way, but with some effort, they overcome these challenges to make you a nice meal. They take a lot of care in the preparation of the food, the flavors, and the layout of the table. But when you sit at the table you don't notice what the person has done. You hardly taste the food because you are caught up in judgments about worldly affairs and who is right and wrong. You are spinning out opinions and ready to argue your case. You are so preoccupied that you don't even notice what your friend has done for you.

In the same way, we don't even notice what our body, our inner life, or the world is doing for us in the present moment. Whether we are suffering or happy, or whether the body is in pain or comfortable, there is something special happening. Something very profound is possible when we respect this body. We respect it with our careful attention to the body.

The body is not just a hunk of flesh. There is a lot of wisdom that arises in the body. A lot of information and guidance on how to live our lives arises from being connected to our bodies.

For people who do meditation, focusing on the body is one of the ways that we begin getting out of our heads and our preoccupations. We start finding a very different way of being here in this body. The body is like a door that you open. Many dimensions and depths of connection to ourselves and to the world can happen through the doorway of the body.

Here at IMC, breathing is the foundational teaching of mindfulness. We use breathing as the home base. We rest with our breath. We ride the breath. For some people, breathing is a wonderful antidote to wandering off in thought. The breath can show us when we are wandering off in thought, and then we can be wise about that. We can see that clearly and relax.

For some people, the breath is a nice place to rest the mind. It provides some continuity over time. The continuity with the breath – whether it is three or five breaths – helps the mind to slowly relax. The energy of attention is going into breathing, a relaxing, opening experience, instead of thinking. When the energy of attention goes into thinking and other preoccupations, the thinking and preoccupations are fueled, stirred up, and continue.

By attending to the breath, we are redirecting the food of the mind from what is not so helpful to something more helpful. We are redirecting the awareness from preoccupations and distracted thoughts to be present here and now with our experience, in this case with the breathing.
In the practice of Zen meditation, breathing is a primary focus. One is instructed to return to one’s breath over and over again. It is like a concentration practice.

Here at IMC, we are teaching mindfulness more than concentration. We use the breath as a default when it works for people. When some other sensation in the body becomes more compelling and more pronounced, we happily, contentedly shift the focus of attention from breathing to this other sensation. It could be discomfort or pleasure. It could be sensations of warmth or coolness. Any sensation at all is an equally valid place to cultivate present-moment attention. We are developing present-moment attention with that sensation.

It is possible that it is enough to acknowledge this sensation for a while. We feel it and sense it, and then we return to the breathing. Sometimes it is nice to stay with the sensation. It might be very compelling and strong. We enter into the world of that part of the body like we did in the exercise with the hand (from the guided meditation).

We are not necessarily focusing on discomfort, because that is an abstraction. Discomfort is an idea. Underneath the idea – the global sense of what is going on – we pay attention to the details of the individual sensations that are at play in that area of discomfort or comfort. The idea is to stay with that area and feel it. Let that be a place where we are training ourselves to notice the distracted mind, or the straining, demanding, expecting, or resisting mind. Then we relax, so we can begin to find a way to be present in a relaxed, non-reactive way.

That is the basic idea. We stay with the breathing until something else becomes compelling. We let go of the breathing and attend to the other sensation for a while. Then we return to our breathing.

For some people, the breath doesn't work very well as a focus of attention. Being open more generally and globally in the body without a particular focus on breathing works better for some people. We then allow the awareness to float, drift, or move around the body to whatever is compelling. We allow the awareness to move toward whatever appears, shows itself, or is asking for attention.

As we pay attention to the different parts of the body, be careful not to fixate on them, or to get stuck there. Keep the attention soft and light so that when something else occurs that is more compelling or calls to us, the mind can gently float there. It is the present-moment experiences of the body that ground us in the present moment. They offer an alternative to our distracted thinking.

Rather than the breathing being the primary home for attention, the whole body is its home. By allowing the attention to rest in the body, there is not the zeroing in, preoccupation, concern, or reactivity around breathing that make it difficult for some people to be with the breathing. Both ways of practicing are quite wonderful.

Interestingly, whichever focus we start with, at some point we are ready to open to the other. Eventually, people who are more focused on breathing get stable and settled, and their attention begins to open to the sensations in their bodies. Then what feels best is this open awareness of whatever is happening in the body. We begin letting the awareness show itself and we stay open to the different places.

People who start with a more open awareness of the body find at some point that things get simpler and more relaxed. The breath, which is the biggest movement of the body, becomes their primary subject of attention. They come to the breathing in a much more relaxed, easy-going way. They do not experience so many complications with the breathing. It can be quite nice to just lightly flow with the breathing.

Our focus can change. If all things are equal, I recommend the foundational way used here at IMC – using breathing as the home base. Be content to stay with the breath as much as possible. When something else in the body becomes predominant, shift your attention to the predominant thing. That might be for three or four seconds. Just feeling and acknowledging it might be enough, then it can recede to the background. Or we might discover that we need to make this sensation the primary focus of attention. We might attend to it for five minutes, just exploring, feeling, and breathing with that sensation.

Maybe that is enough for today. As you go about your day today, I very much encourage you to continue with mindfulness of your body. Periodically check in with yourself. Try setting a timer like some did yesterday, or
maybe there are other ways of periodically checking in. Check in first to feel how you are in your body. Then take the three-breath journey. After doing the three-breath journey, feel what shifted in your body.

I think doing this just once an hour throughout the day could have a profound and helpful impact on you. If nothing else, it will be very educational to discover what is going on more deeply. So, stop and just notice what is happening in your body. Take time to feel it. Breathe with it. Take the three-breath journey. Just center yourself on three breaths, as if that is the only thing you need to do in the world. Then open to the body and see what shifted. That whole process shouldn’t take more than a minute. If it is enjoyable, you can do it more.

So, thank you very much. I look forward to continuing this series tomorrow.