Introduction to Mindfulness (10 of 25) Benefits of Sensory Awareness

January 19, 2024

Keyword Summary
book, breath, body, calming, thoughts, concepts, reactivity, judgment, fears, expectations, projection, lucid awareness, impermanence, change, relax, soften, clenched fist, open hand, mudra, friendliness, body scans, vipassanā, tension, clinging, holding, strain, attachment, openness, generosity, kindness, emptiness, spaciousness

Gil Fronsdal

So, my friends, this is our last talk discussing the instructions for mindfulness of the body. The next talk will be on mindfulness of emotions.

Yesterday, someone reminded me that she had asked me many years ago for some books to read on Buddhism. I told her that the only book she needed to read was the book about her own body. This made a big impact on this woman, this practitioner. The idea is that our body is a book to study. The body has information and wisdom. Everything we need to know about Buddhism can be found in our body.

The meditation practice that I did in Burma when I was learning Vipassana meditation was a sensory awareness practice more than anything. Certainly, we were mindful of the mind, mind states, and mind activity, but there was a default to always feel and sense how it was physically, the sensory level of it.

An advantage of sensory awareness practice is that sensations are not thoughts. Thoughts, ideas, stories, and concepts are often where we live. These are often the filter through which we see our experience. We see things as a bit askew because of those ideas and concepts we have. Simply having a concept of something can have an enduring quality. Platonic concepts are unchanging. There is a feeling that things can stay the same. If we see through that filter, it can feel like nothing changes.

If we always see our friend through the filter of some difficult experience we had 10 years ago, then we are not seeing how our friend is changing. We are not seeing how they are different every day, every occasion, or every minute and every hour. We are stuck in that lens, with that perspective.

We begin meditation by quieting and calming the mind. We settle in and get somewhat concentrated or still. The purpose of this is not just to become calm. Rather, it is to be able to have a more lucid awareness of the sensations of our direct experience unmediated by these concepts. Concepts and ideas might still come into play. They might be there as part of the bigger picture, but they are not the lens through which we are seeing.

We begin to perceive or feel more directly the direct sensory experience. Then we begin to see how the sensory experience is shifting and moving. We see the inconstant, impermanent, shifting, and changing nature of sensations. Seeing this has two major benefits.

The tendency to fixate on something usually has a lot to do with trying to hold things as permanent, thinking things are permanent, or trying to make them permanent. We try to make things the way they appear to us. One of the benefits of perceiving things as shifting and moving is that we are more likely to realize we can't quite grab and hold onto them, and we begin to relax our grip.

This is one of the reasons why breathing is so relaxing for some people. The rhythm of breathing in and out is constantly shifting and changing. It is settling and opening. It is a kind of focal point so the mind does not get as tight or strained as it might when we are thinking about plans, resentments, desires, or hostilities. We may not get as fixated as we might when we are thinking about things from the perspective of our conceit. We begin loosening up how we are stuck. Breathing helps things to relax.

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The same thing can occur with the sensations of the body. We can start to feel difficult sensations, pain for example, as shifting and changing sensations. The extra layer of reactivity, judgments, or fears can begin to soften. The projection into the future that it is always going to be like this can begin to relax.

So one advantage of seeing the shifting, moving nature of bodily sensations is that it is easier to just be. It is easier to relax, to let go, and to just be with the river of change within us.

The second benefit is that when we are at that sensory awareness level of our experience, the sensation level, we are not imposing our desires, expectations, concepts, or ideas. This gives more room for those sensations to be themselves.

If we are feeling tense or angry, we might make a fist. If we stay looking at or thinking about whatever is causing the anger, the fist stays clenched. But we could also begin to feel the clench, the tightness in the fist, and how tired the hand is becoming. We could feel the pain of the clenching. If we feel it closely, we can start feeling it as shifting and changing sensations. Sometimes we might feel our little finger, our thumb, or the skin stretching on the back of our hand. We might feel the palm of our hand, and the sharpness of our fingernails going into it. When we feel all those sensations, something begins to relax and soften there.

The natural tendency for the clenched hand to release has room now to relax. It doesn't have that room to relax if we continue to see the situation with anger.

There is something about awareness of sensation that allows things to be. It gives room for things to move towards health. Things begin flowing and moving in the way they should. The amazing thing is that the things that are a byproduct of tension, clinging, holding, strain, or attachment begin to dissolve. The things that are a byproduct of openness, generosity, kindness, emptiness, or spaciousness begin to grow.

There is a wonderful movement where things that cause suffering or attachment begin to dissolve if we make space and room for experiences. The clenched hand begins to relax. In Buddhism, the mudra, or gesture of the open hand with its sensitivity means the gesture of friendliness. The gesture of the open hand pointing down is a gesture of offering safety to people. Something happens with the open hand; something releases.

This process of feeling, sensing, and discovering our bodily sensations more deeply allows something to begin shifting. Not being stuck on anything and being open and receptive brings a shift in our bodies, hearts, and minds. Because the body is so closely connected to the mind and the heart, as the body changes, the mind changes. As the body relaxes and softens, the heart does the same.

In this sense, reading the book of your body is profound and significant. The way we experience the body is influenced to a great degree by our thoughts, minds, judgments, and priorities. How we experience our body is a selection process. We select what to pay attention to based on our desires, fears, and conceits. It is great to stop these selection processes and simply allow the body to open.

There are some schools of vipassanā (insight) meditation where they practice with systematic body scans. They go through different parts of the body over and over again. Steadily over time, the whole body is visited with this generous attention. This way of seeing and feeling the body can make room for that part of the body to show itself, to be seen, and maybe relax or unfold in a good way.

In the tradition that I teach in, we generally do not do systematic body scans. We have the idea that the body knows what needs attention. The basic instruction is to let the breathing be the default if that works for you. Develop mindfulness on the breathing. Develop attention and concentration on breathing.

Breathing is a shifting, changing, flowing series of sensations, so many of the benefits of just doing sensory awareness practice can be experienced right there with the breathing. If some other bodily sensation becomes more predominant, then the idea is to switch your attention from the breathing to that predominant sensation in your body. Be with that sensation as long as it seems to need attention. Be present for it and feel it. When it has been acknowledged enough, or it has shifted, changed, faded away, or become less strong, then go back to the breathing.
It is a little random where the mind might go and what part of the body might speak. Over a long period, much of
the body will get our attention, but it's not done systematically. The body knows what we need to attend to. I
don't know whether this idea that the wisdom of the body operates all the time is always true. But it is a
wonderful attitude that the body knows what needs attention now.

Rather than saying, “Oh no, this shouldn't be happening. Oh no, I shouldn't have this pain. I shouldn't have
these sensations.” The idea when we do this practice is, “Oh yes, the body is speaking to me now.” The body is
saying this needs attention, here, now. Don't make it any more complicated than that. It is just a very different
attitude. The body knows. Feel and be with it, and then come back to your breathing.

If there are a lot of strong sensations in the body, it might be a long time before you come back to your
breathing. You could just go from one sensation to another. Tap into one sensation for a while, and then another.
When in doubt, come back to your breathing. Be with your breathing.

If breathing is not a good object or home base for you, then some people's home base is just body sensations.
Gently let the attention flow over the body. Let it move between the different parts of the body as the body
speaks and shows you what needs your attention.

Talking about breathing and the body these past two weeks is very important in many ways for what's coming. It
is extremely important as a reference point, a basis, or a foundation for practicing mindfulness of emotions and
mindfulness of thinking, which are also coming. We can be more wisely present for emotions if we are grounded
in the body.

If you'd like some homework, I encourage you to review what we did this week on mindfulness of the body. Look
at the homework on different days. Try to deepen your appreciation and deepen your connection to your body.
See if you can become a better, well-connected friend with your body.

Thank you.