

Body Instruction

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When Aeneas gave the instructions, she highlighted the possibility of a foreground and background attention awareness.

It's kind of happening all the time anyway, to some degree. It's kind of, we can have central vision, looking at something carefully, and without even intending it, there is a little bit of peripheral vision that is available to, on its own, to know what's happening to some degree, more widely. Or if you're listening to music, you might be involved with the lyrics or the tune, but something in you may be a background listening, background body listening, is tracking the beat.

So the custom here at IMC is to begin the first day of the retreat with emphasizing mindfulness or breathing. But it's good to highlight that breathing is part of the body. It's the body's experience of breathing. We're not tracking the air going in and out. We're tracking the sensations that come alive, that appear while we breathe. And there's a long history of using breathing as a place both for mindfulness and to develop a steadiness, a continuity of awareness that we can live in.

But breathing can also be, okay, it can be the foreground and things can be around in the background and the periphery. But breathing can also become the background like the beat that keeps us in the present moment. While in the foreground we might be mindful of other things that are more compelling, predominant. So other body sensations, it is possible to let go of the breathing entirely and just enter into the strong body sensations, be very intimate and be aware of it. Or to be aware of it kind of from a distance. We can adjust awareness in all kinds of interesting ways.

Sometimes you can get very close and intimate with right in the middle of the sensations. And sometimes with the mind's eye, kind of gaze upon it from a distance. Calm gazing, calm knowing. Using whichever one of those is most supportive for the task of being here, awake. Supports a continuity of presence. So sometimes we let go of the breath entirely to attend to something else.

And sometimes we switch this central focus. Central attention goes to something besides the breathing. But the background awareness stays close to the breath, being like the touchstone to the present moment. The regularity of connecting to the in-breath and out-breath is a touchstone to our direct experience, so we don't get lost in thought.

So I'd like to do an exercise with you, which I commonly do, the hand exercise. Many of you have done it before and maybe don't care for it. But I'll do it in a different way. So maybe listen for the newness.

So bring your attention here into one of your hands and begin standing close, accompanied the hand having its own experience. How does the hand itself feel itself? What are the sensations on the back of the hand? The palm of the hand? The fingers. There might be sensations of temperature. Some places cool, some places warm. There might be sensations of contact, the hands contacting each other or some other surface.

There might be tingling, the hum of sensations. Some sensations are more on the pleasant side, maybe some are more on the unpleasant side. Maybe at different moments, different parts of the hand have the loudest sensations, have the ones that your mind somehow registers. So somehow awareness, sensations, sensitivity maybe slowly travels around the hand.

And maybe you can notice a difference between the hand experiencing itself and the thoughts and thinking you have about it, or the attitude you might have about it. Maybe it's possible to put all that aside in favor of entering and abiding in the sensations of the hand. So the hand rests in itself.

And then in the background there's the beat of breathing, not fixating or focusing on breathing or making it an exercise. But in the background a supportive touchstone, a supportive touchstone. Reminder here, now, the gentle background awareness. So the background is not liable to be filled with thoughts, but in the foreground to sense and feel the hand. And to continue this for a few moments more.

See if you can get a feel for, a sense for how the hand can sense itself, how you can be aware of the hand sensations calmly, equanimously, regardless of whether they're on the pleasant

or unpleasant side of things.

And now, we'll do the same exercise, but now with your whole torso. Begin to explore, feel around your torso. Is there some place in your torso that's a settling spot? A place where your weight, the aliveness of your torso is stable and steady, a grounding place.

And like you felt the hand, in that general area of this grounding place, the stilling place deep inside, sense and feel that part of your torso. Maybe your attention gently roams around, or maybe different parts of that show themselves, different sensations at different times. And maybe some of the sensations include sensations of breathing, maybe subtle, maybe not so subtle. And it's okay not to make breathing the central focus or the ongoing focus. But those sensations are breathing just part of the field of sensations.

And then as if awareness can grow or expand, awareness can begin filling the inside of your torso like a flow of water might fill a pool or a lake. Let your awareness of the torso fill you, like you felt a hand. Let there be a careful attending, sensing of the torso. And maybe the experience of breathing is a big part of that. Or maybe the sensations of breathing are the background beat.

Noticing the difference between being present in your torso and being pulled into thinking, or pulled into an attitude about all this. And whenever you can, come back to the beat of breathing in and out. Come back to a kind of global awareness emanating from your grounding spot through your torso. There might be pleasant and unpleasant sensations. It's okay. Can you discover where in your body, where in your mind, the awareness is calm, even if you aren't.

And if you'd like, you can have the breathing in the foreground. And if something compelling arises in the body, you might take three or four breaths to sense and feel it, to know it, to calmly recognize what it is in the way that you felt your hand, feel that place, and then return to your breathing. Not so much directing attention or doing awareness, and more remembering to be awake, to how the body senses allow awareness, more than do awareness.

Sensations arise, breathing sensations arise and go, and a very simple knowing of what's happening. It may arise and pass, so that sensing and knowing helps you to remember, to allow your whole system to be awake, maybe for now, in awareness which is global, through your torso, your body. Sensing, sensations of breathing. Sensing, sensations of the body, does not inherently need thinking and thought. Many of the sensations that occur for us are not accompanied with thinking and thought.

There is a profound silence associated with thinking, but associated with sensing by itself. A

contemplative silence, a silence that's there in the awareness that we abide in. Oh, we can be aware. How we can be present changes a lot, but maybe now coming to the end of the sitting, can you make less conscious effort to be aware in favor of a deeper, profound willingness to be available to awareness. The natural sensing, knowing, awaring of your whole system, entering and resting, abiding in awareness, maybe with the background beat of breathing, keeping you there.

And if you are abiding in an awareness, abiding in a global awareness of the body, how does your body, how does this wider field hear the bell that ends the sitting?

So, as I mentioned during this sitting, the ways, the many ways in which we can be aware or not aware, or everything in between varies and changes a lot. With the intensity with which we're concerned about things and intensity of our emotional life and feelings. It's hard to know all the reasons why sometimes it's relatively easy to stay present, sometimes it's way too easy to wander off in thought and be caught in the whirlwind of thinking.

The core idea in doing mindfulness practice is to discover how to notice that, to know what's happening calmly, instead of preferring some other way and being in conflict with what's happening. So in that regard, it's often good to understand, to be ready to be a beginner. Even the most experienced practitioners need to be beginners regularly. Start with the beginning exercises, practice instruction. Something very simple.

This many of you know that a simple mental note I do when my mind is quite active. As I say the word here, I say it gently without anything needing to be different. I'm not trying to stop my thinking. But I use the word here to open my senses and my awareness, to feel and sense what it's like to be here with an active thinking mind. Kind of a curiosity.

And then I get pulled into that world again. It's a wonderful practice for half a second. But then I do it again, and again, and again. And that repetition begins to take the juice, the energy away from the thinking, the interest away from it. At some point things quiet down and think mind, and I'll stop doing that. So that for me is an example of going back to being a beginner.

But at some point we're not just in a beginner, we're an experienced beginner. There's no other options than those two. And as an experienced beginner, you maybe have greater familiarity. You're familiar with your inner experience, familiar with what it's like to be aware and what it's like to know, what it's like to sense and feel. And so maybe it's easier to get back on track.

But more importantly, based on the talk last night, it might be easier to begin recognizing

that you're aware rather than mustering up awareness. It might be easier to kind of notice the ways that you are aware already. Our psychophysical system is always aware in some degree. It's always taking in sense data. And even if your thinking mind has gone to the races, they say, even there, there's very quiet, subtle, simple, recognizing thoughts that are going on. Recognizing thoughts, sometimes they don't feel like thoughts, kind of non-verbal knowing.

Sometimes it's nice to just settle back and notice the non-verbal, kind of spontaneous knowing doesn't require you to do it. So whether you have to be pedaling the bike up the hill, or whether you're gliding down the hill, just allowing gravity and momentum to carry you, for the purposes of this practice, it doesn't matter whether you're a beginner or an experienced beginner, whether you have to make the effort to keep coming back, and it feels like manual labor, or that it feels like all you have to do is allow and get out of the way.

We don't have to prioritize one over the other. What we prioritize is what's easy, what's appropriate, with what's actually possible in the moment. How it is an experienced beginner just can see that more clearly. Oh, this is how it is now. This is how to practice now.

But in that everything is practice, if there's strong body sensations that arise, one of the options you have is to enter into that area of your body, to feel it the way you felt your hand. Maybe allow sensations to be there and feel and sense how that place in your body experiences it. So you're kind of getting out of your own agenda, what's supposed to happen, in favor of really feeling and sensing what's there on its own terms.

And at first, what might be interesting to do, this is kind of an important instruction, is to, if you're staying with the breath normally, and there's a strong sensation, go and be mindful of it for maybe three or four or five breaths. Don't go there to be there forever. Just tap into it, and then come back to your breathing. If it's still there after a while, you do it again.

But the reason for that short period of time is that sometimes if we have an extended period of time with some strong body sensation or strong emotion, our attitudes, our reactivity, our thinking about it can begin to predominate, can kind of creep in, strong more and more. Sometimes you've been reinforcing it. But if we kind of have this simple idea that we're just touching in for a few seconds and then kind of pulling back to the breathing, that then there's maybe a less tendency for the mind to be reactive, the sense of the mind to kind of get into the story. And it's, oh, just for these few seconds I can do this, I can just be with it simply.

If you do that, so you tap in, you touch in for a few breaths and come back to just the breathing, maybe you do go back and forth a few times. And at some point it might seem, because

it persists, it might seem appropriate to then stay longer with the strong sensation in your body. Linger there, explore it. Practice mindfulness of that, mindfulness of your attitude, mindfulness of your beliefs. Aiming to always see if you can recognize the simplest way of being present. The simplest way. If it's not simple, it's *vipassanā*.