

Dharmette: Developing Body Sensitivity

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And it's a different way of pointing to a way to do mindfulness that is really central to the way I was taught when I introduced this in Burma and how it's often taught. But we usually don't use that word sensitivity. What we often will talk about is to be mindful of the sensations. And so, sensations of, you know, whatever it might be, the movement of the chest as you're breathing, the feeling of pressure and the release of pressure, and tightness and release of tightness. And if there's pain, there's feelings of there, tightness or burning or piercing or something, just to really feel the sensations. Right.

And so the usual emphasis in our insight tradition is to really bring a careful attention to the particularity of sensations. But why I like the word sensitivity is it's all about your senses, sensitivity. Your senses have to be alive, but sensitivity is a broader, focuses at a much broader, wider field, wider kind of domain that is not necessarily so specific as a specific sensation. And sometimes what we do in mindfulness is we're really close to the specifics, and sometimes it's actually very useful to be very broad and take in kind of the wider flow. And for deeper meditation or more concentrated meditation, there actually is a shift from the specific sensations to the more suffusive field of sensations that we can sense, we have sensitivity to the pleasure in the body, sensitivity to the vitality, the aliveness in the body, that you can't actually put to a particular point in your body, but it's more of a wide field, a broader sense.

As we get concentrated in meditation, there's a pleasure that begins to well up, a kind of a sense of well-being. And that sense of well-being sometimes is very specific, but generally it's more of a broad, wider field. And so to learn how to be sensitive to something wider that's not so specific. And a sensitivity that opens up to it is to allow it to spread, to allow it to grow, to allow it to kind of affect you and influence you. Because some of the really good things that

happen in meditation, the sense of inner health, inner wholesomeness or inner well-being, can be very healing, very supportive for us. If we let it to register in deeply, let it sink in, take it in.

And that's something we often don't do in daily life because we have a lot to think about. There's a lot to figure out. A lot of, you know, the list of things to do are immense. And, you know, and so some minds will go have a thought and you finish that thought, well, you might as well go on to the next one and the next one. Why stop? You're on a roll.

And sometimes the mind's a little bit crazy how much it's spinning out and thinking and doing. And I think for me it's represented by how crazy making it can be for a few individuals to be on a screen and be searching and going to the next, the next, and like what's there, what's there, what's in the news, what's, you know, whatever it might be. And we're kind of engaged in something specific. And we lose touch with the wider field of who we are. We might be living from the neck up. But we're not really there to take in the whole of the information that's here.

And this wider capacity to sense, to feel, to be aware more widely is partly, I believe, how human beings were evolved when we first became human beings, homo sapiens, on the plains of Africa, I guess, or, you know, that they apparently didn't have... It's hard to believe, but they apparently didn't have phones back then. I don't know how they managed. But somehow they managed. But they managed because what they had was a technology that was much more sophisticated than any smartphone that you have. They had their body.

And the body is an amazing collection of nerve and nerve endings and movement of electricity through them that is taking in a tremendous amount of sense data from the world and processing it. And to be safe in the wild back then, you had to be attuned to the natural world, deeply attuned. If you're on your laptop or on your phone following, you know, the Olympics, you know, non-stop or cat videos or war stories or whatever it might be that captivates you. Chances are the wider field of receptivity, the wider field of sensitivity is offline. It's all pouring into the device, into what you're doing.

But living outdoors all the time back in Africa days, we had to be attuned to the environment, and we were evolved to have all this rich array of sense stores. We took in all kinds of things, and so much so that I kind of think of the mind as being not up in the head. The mind is wherever there's nerve endings in the head. So the mind is throughout the body. Because all those nerve endings, all the signals that are coming are being gathered together, processed together, and create something that can make us very environmentally wise, very present moment wise, because we take in all this data around us, but also inside of us.

We have all these nerve endings that teaches us what's happening within us, all the different shifts and emotions and hormones and tensions and muscles. It's phenomenal what we can learn. And so what we learn in this mindfulness practice is to be receptive, to be available, to have a sensitivity to all of it working together. And if you do that, you don't have to be the one who figures it out. There's more intelligence in our system than you could ever figure out. But a good percentage of us are trying to figure out our life, trying to engineer it, trying to hack it, trying to connect the dots and figure out why or how we do something.

It's something necessarily wrong with that. It's an important part of the whole, but it's lost touch with the whole. And that's what we can do with this mindfulness practice. It's a body-fulness practice where we're bringing into the picture of the whole again so that all the pieces can be operating and working together and informing us and helping us in a way that the mind, the so-called mind up in the head, the thinking mind, can't really do so well. We're much smarter if we don't only rely on our thoughts and our minds to figure things out.

So this idea of developing our sensitivity, to me, is a very supportive idea that not just sense particular things, but there's a certain attunement, a certain receptivity, openness, a certain kind of opening a field of awareness that's wider than any one place. So even if you're focusing on the breathing, primarily in meditation, to not be in the control tower watching the breath, and not be trying to too much like be very specific, but rather have a little bit of a broad attention and be sensitive to the fullness, the full experience of breathing, including the kind of way that the movements of the body breathing, the breathing, the rhythm of breathing, casts an influence beyond the edges of breathing. Not a few people will find that if they're really tense or really afraid, if they breathe, it helps things calm down. Breathing has a wonderful kind of influence that spreads out from where breathing specifically is, that has a very beneficial effect on our whole system. But it helps if you open your awareness, they're sensitive to that influence, sensitive to the wider field within which breathing is happening.

So sensitivity, how sensitive are you? Can you become not mindful, but can you become senseful, full of senses, full of sensations, sensationful? Can you become sensitivity full? And what has to shift for that to happen? What kind of reorientation about how you live your life if you live a sensitive life rather than a thoughtful life.

So that's my invitation to you, to consider this other way of living that I think is not so common in our kind of modern society. So that's my thoughts, and now we'll do some time for cleaning.