

Minfulness of Body

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There are two themes or words that sometimes are used in spiritual circles, and two that I've been thinking about are remembering and forgetting. And sometimes people talk about the importance of forgetting the self, and sometimes remembering the truth or something. And one of my favorite quotes in Buddhist literature comes from the Zen master Dōgen, who said, "To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self, and to forget the self is to awaken all things." To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self.

And for me, it's significant that it's in that order, that you don't bypass the part about studying oneself. It's through the study of one's self, through being mindful of one's self, understanding one's mind, understanding one's body, understanding one's experience, that one has the experience of somehow forgetting the self, of forgetting one's self-consciousness. And when that happens, there's a certain kind of intimacy that develops with the world around us. And Dōgen says, "We then awaken with all things." In some ways, we're not so separate from all things.

And in Zen, sometimes in the old Zen stories from China, people seem to get enlightened pretty easily back then, and you and I, anyway, there'd be these great stories, and the student would go to the master and say something, and the master would say something, and then they would say, "And the student was enlightened." And if you go back and look at the Chinese of the word that's usually translated "enlightened," the word is intimacy. The student became intimate. So there's something about intimacy in becoming aware, of becoming awake.

So Dōgen talked about forgetting a self. The Pāli or Buddhist word that's usually translated as mindfulness in English is *sati*. And the word itself, by itself, means, or is very closely related

to, the word memory, to remember. And I like that quite a bit, because I think part of what mindfulness is is a kind of remembering, of bringing together all the members and parts of who we are into a kind of whole, and especially all the parts of our body. That mindfulness reintegrates the body, brings the members back together. So mindfulness is a remembering or a reminding.

And I think I've said sometimes that perhaps mindfulness is not the best English translation of the word *sati*, partly because it puts so much stress usually on the word mind. And I think we could probably just as validly translate it as a bodyfulness, and sometimes I like to think of it even as heartfulness. And as many of you know, in Asian languages, the word for heart and mind is the same word.

And I think Jack and James and Carol all devoted part of their talks to talking about what the purpose of this practice was, what we're doing here, and I wholeheartedly agree with everything they said, and have no doubts. But now that we've heard what the purpose is, I'll come along on the fourth day and say, I don't know, I'm not quite so sure, but I love it, and that's it. I think once I had to explain to my father what I was doing. Actually, quite often he couldn't get it. And in one of my attempts, I explained, and I was quite sincere, that is what I felt, and I know actually it's a love affair that I have. It's a love affair. And that shut him up, and he actually hasn't asked since. It's a heartfulness, I think.

So I feel often that way about the practice. And then, you know, you can ask what the purpose is. When you're in love, you ask the purpose? Mindfulness, bodyfulness, heartfulness. Oh, and it's also possible to put the stress on the last part of those words, and the fullness. And I think that's very valid also. Mindfulness is about experiencing the fullness of our life, allowing ourselves, giving ourselves permission to feel the fullness of our life in all its different aspects. And the word fullness, or experiencing fully, being fully present, has been a very important kind of way of explaining the practice for me to myself.

And I'll tell a story about a way that I practiced when I was in the monastery that taught me a lot about how to do a meditation practice and about this fullness. Just before I went to the monastery, I was at some bookstore, and I pulled down from the bookshelves some book, and it was by Da Free John, I guess, then he was called that. And I don't really know who that was, but I just opened it, and I read a paragraph, and he said something like, "The basic problem, the basic human problem that we have is that we're always avoiding relationship, and you should investigate or find out how it is you're avoiding being in relationship," so avoiding being intimate, avoiding being fully present. So then that made some sense. I kind of liked that. I put the book back on the shelf, and went to the monastery.

Actually, I spent a year in a monastery, but I spent a practice period, five months, in a Zen monastery in Japan. And I had this image of the Zen monks being really a samurai kind of spirit, and tough, and there was an element of that in the monastery. But one of the things that surprised me was I asked some of the younger monks why they came to the monastery, why they became Zen monks, what inspired them. And they said, “Oh, I read the books by Rajneesh when he came to California.” And I hadn't actually read any books by Rajneesh. And I said, “You'd have to read a book of his?” And I had to kind of get this black-market book, because you weren't supposed to read these books in the monastery. The abbot wasn't supposed to know.

And I went to the monastery after reading this little passage, and the way it was worded in the book was a kind of negative frame of what we know. The problem is avoiding relationship. So I turned it around and stated it more positively for myself, and made it my question as I went about my day: How could I be more fully involved with whatever I'm doing?

And one of the first things that happened when I was in the monastery was they put me in the kitchen to work. And at first this was a great disappointment, because I'd gone to the monastery to do a lot of meditation. And if you're working in the kitchen, you can't meditate a lot. And Zen monasteries are great for that. You have an expectation, and then monastic life is made up in order to just not let any of your expectations fall through. So I had this expectation. Where I was at was to sit. They put me in the kitchen, and I learned a lot in the kitchen. It was a very rich experience for me, one of the richest practice experiences of my life.

And I had there in the kitchen this question, you know, how could I participate more fully? And it was a great place to have this question, because I had this repetitive work chopping vegetables, onions and carrots, and that's a lot of what I did. The first three months I was at Eiheiji, I chopped. And I would stand there by the table, and I had this question: How could I be more fully with this carrot? And I would pay attention to my body and how I stood, and I was surprised how much I tended to kind of try to avoid the carrot, pull back with the left part of my body, my left foot being back. And so I learned to kind of pay attention to that, and I could bring myself more fully right in front of a carrot.

And then the same thing happened over a carrot as happens over a *zafu*, and the mind wanders away, and there's judgment, and carrots aren't big enough, I didn't cut it small enough. There's a lot going on in the kitchen. When I was kitchen manager, I told someone that the cucumbers were cut too small, and they cried. Things are very intense in a monastery. So I learned a lot about my body. I learned a lot about my mind.

And because it was always my question, you know, how could I do this more fully? How can there be more fullness with my experience? And that carried over into my meditation practice. I didn't really keep that question going in meditation, but somehow I got the physical feeling. It was kind of an embodied question, or embodied kind of practice, until I'd come to sit and it'd be the same thing: How can I be more fully sitting here? How can I more fully participate with my experience?

So this Zen master, Dōgen, also made the claim that when we become awakened, we awaken and become enlightened through the body, and not through the mind. And I think that's often different than what most of us maybe would think if we were asked. And probably, as many of you know, there's a tremendous emphasis on mindfulness of the body in Buddhism. The Buddha in the early *sūtras* repeatedly stresses mindfulness of the body, I think much more than any other practice. It's mindfulness of the body that he goes back to over and over again.

And he makes statements like, “O monks, if there was only one practice that you were going to practice, you should practice mindfulness of the body.” And another quote, which I came across recently, the Buddha said, “There is no friend that can compare with mindfulness of the body.” Your best friend: mindfulness of the body.

And one day I looked through the books on my bookshelf. I have a lot of Buddhist books, and I kind of looked through them and looked through the index. And I was surprised how many of the books on Buddhism in English, especially studies on Buddhism, but even Dharma books, contain no mention of the body at all. And I think that's a great pity. Maybe it's a symptom of the imbalance of our culture that puts so much weight on the intellect and ideas.

In one of my first retreats, *vipassanā* retreats, one early *vipassanā* retreat in Thailand, I was sitting at Wat Suan Mokkh, a place where Ajahn Buddhādāsa is the abbot and one of the venerable old monks of Thailand. And he wasn't teaching too much when I was there. But he gave the introductory talk of the retreat, and he gave a nice talk, and I don't remember what he said during the talk. It inspired us, and then it was over, and he kind of dismissed us, and we all got up and kind of started to walk away. And I was standing close to him, or walking away kind of close to him. And then, kind of as an afterthought, he said to us as we were leaving, “Don't do anything that takes you out of your body.”

And that kind of just penetrated, and I was really taken by why did he say that? That seemed like a strange thing to say, I thought at the time. And I took it on for the ten-day retreat to try to stay in my body as much as I could. And as I paid attention, I was surprised how much I wasn't in my body. I was having out-of-body experiences much too much of the time. I think

that's not our problem.

And I found it often in the way my thoughts worked, the kind of way I was caught up in my thinking, I was actually ahead of my body. Somehow my center of mental gravity, of my sense of identity or something, was often a foot in front of me, kind of reaching forward or projecting forward. And I just learned to pay attention to that and feel that, and try to see if I could come back and bring my center of gravity back in the body, where it belongs.

Perhaps one of the basic teachings of Buddhism is that the mind and the body are a unity, that they're a whole, and that they can't really be separated at all. The whole debate in the West about the mind-body debate kind of doesn't really exist in Buddhism, because really Buddhist psychology doesn't really allow for a sharp distinction between the two of them. They're really a whole together.

However, I think maybe because many parts of our mental and emotional life are painful to us, and we don't really want to pay attention to them, or we repress them or ignore them, to the degree in which our emotional or mental life is repressed, to that degree I think we also repress or ignore our body. As we suppress or ignore or avoid our emotions, the physical side, the physical aspect of those emotions, is also repressed or ignored. And often a reawakening of body involves a reawakening of our mental life, our emotional life. As we shut out our emotions, we shut out our body.

There was a *Utne Reader* issue some time ago where the main article was titled *The Body: Friend, Foe, or Total Stranger*. And those three attitudes are often held. I'm somewhat surprised how many people in our culture actually consider their body to be a foe, a problem, an enemy, and they really try to keep away from the body. Sometimes it's because of their religious upbringing. They don't feel they have permission to feel their body or to feel pleasure in their own body.

It's been a great pleasure to me as a teacher a couple of times during interviews to be able to give someone permission to feel pleasure. I mean, such a basic thing, and I would never have thought that I needed to do that. But so, as we practice mindfulness of the body, we awaken our capacity to feel our sentience, our senses. We are sentient beings.

And I thought I'd mention a little bit about how we often avoid being in our body. And one way, a very common way, is simply through avoidance, just simply not paying attention, avoiding it. And sometimes thinking a lot, being obsessed with one's thoughts, thinking about all kinds of things, is a distraction, a way of actually distracting ourselves from the body.

Another way that I thought I'd just mention is fairly common also, and it's also common to

people who are kind of older yogis, people who are practicing for a long time. And I think every person who has any experience in sitting and develops some ability to be calm and concentrated succumbs to the temptation of using their ability to get concentrated to avoid the body in some way. Probably everybody has, because it's so tempting. Some pain comes up in the body, and then you use it to concentrate on your breath really sharply. I know if I do that, I'll just shut out what's going on in my body. I've done that, and I didn't even realize what I was doing. It's so insidious, so subtle a seduction.

And sometimes people who have a lot of experience in sitting will use certain possible experiences of emptiness as a way, as a hiding place, to hide from experience in the body, using the calm concentration or emptiness of sitting. And we have a tremendous capacity for avoiding pain and a tendency to avoid pain and difficulties in our body, or joys in our body. Pleasure and aversion to pain in our body is a kind of attachment.

Oh, in my first *vipassanā* retreat in Thailand, my first *vipassanā* retreat at all, I sat for ten weeks, not ten days, ten weeks, not because I exactly wanted to, but I was waiting for a visa to go back to Japan, and it didn't come. It didn't come, so I sat. And in the process, I fell in love with *vipassanā*, thanks to the Japanese embassy in Thailand, thank God. But I had all this physical pain in my legs. My legs were just on fire.

And I'd go and see my teacher, and I'd say, "Oh, my legs are on fire." And he'd say, "Are you noting it?" And I'd say yes, and I'd tell him I was aware of it. And he'd say, "Look more carefully." And I'd go back and look more carefully. And I'd come the next day for interview and report on noticing it more carefully, and say, "It really hurts." And he'd tell me, "Look more carefully." And it went on for about three or four or five days. It was hurting more and more, and the teacher kept saying, "Look more carefully."

And then I was leaving, and the interpreter, the teacher didn't speak English, the American interpreter said to me as I was leaving the abbot's quarters, "Boy, you're really attached to your pain." And I thought, that's not at all true. So I went back and thought about it, and I realized how much my aversion was an attachment. I was attached to not having pain. And when I realized that, then I brought my attention to the attachment, or actually I brought my attention more closely to the aversion. So as the teacher had kept telling me to pay more attention, I paid more attention to everything but my aversion. And once I could see the aversion-attachment, it was much easier to have some equanimity, to feel it was okay to be there with the pain.

So in developing mindfulness of the body, one of the things we're doing is developing a sense of self. And not maybe in the conventional way of talking about a sense of self, a self-concept,

so much, but literally a sense of self, a sensation, feeling, or sensing who we are and what we are. Body consciousness is something which is one of the hallmarks of our culture, perhaps body consciousness in the sense of body image. Our culture puts a tremendous emphasis on body image, and I think we all know that. And that's having some consciousness of ourselves from the outside.

And one of the things we're trying to do in mindfulness practice is cultivate body consciousness from the inside. What do I feel like from the inside, the vitality and warmth and loveliness of the body from the inside? At Santa Sabina, the retreat center in San Rafael, there's a sink, and probably in all the bedrooms, and as is true of most things, it's kind of a bathroom cabinet, and the mirror is on the inside of the cabinet rather than the outside. So in order to look at yourself in the mirror, you have to open the cabinet and kind of look. You have to do some work to look at yourself. And I think that was built, it was recently built as a convent or training seminary for nuns, and I guess they thought it was more conducive for the training of the nuns not to always look at yourself.

And our body image is often tied in to how we experience both our body and our posture. And it's very valuable to begin paying attention to our posture and what's going on with our posture, and as we go about our daily life, to begin understanding better the kind of image we carry for ourselves and the kind of attitudes we carry through life.

I am still amazed to meet some people, and it's not so infrequent, where I try to have a conversation with them. We're standing, and I kind of face them more or less directly, and they turn ninety degrees to me. So I kind of turn around and kind of face them directly, and they turn, and they turn, and we kind of go around all in a circle. Somehow, for some people, it's difficult to be fully present or to meet someone.

Some people have a very strong sense of self, very rigid sense of self, and some people have a very poor or almost no sense of who they are, and there are a lot of boundary problems. It's my experience that mindfulness of the body is a great balancer. Mindfulness itself is a great balancer. It balances us.

For people who have a very poor sense of self and very poor personal boundaries, mindfulness of the body and posture is a great way of bringing a stronger sense of boundaries and stronger sense of self. And for people who have a very rigid sense of self, it works the same way, that as they develop more mindfulness of their body and their posture, some of the rigidity, some of the solid boundaries, begin to dissolve a little bit, and you come to some kind of balance. So that the body, our body boundaries, in some ways may be neither open nor closed. Maybe, I don't know how to describe it, the body in some ways is more fluid with

the environment, with some integrity also.

You know, when there's fear, when I feel fear and I feel my body, now my body posture kind of collapses, and I cave in and retreat. And if I feel it in my body and note it in my body, then that becomes part of my understanding, and it's still going on. But there isn't so much of the boundary problem, because there's awareness that is knowing it.

The body is a wonderful gift to the mind. Even body mindfulness is a worthwhile practice in its own right. You learn a lot about the mind and how the mind works from cultivating mindfulness of the body.

And one of the things I learned is that cultivating mindfulness of the body will serve you really well when you leave retreat, when you try to practice in everyday situations, in everyday life. On retreat often, especially if I'm sitting for a while, I can become very mindful of my thoughts. A thought arises, and I can become aware of it and see it be there for me. But the mind is really fast, and in daily life I simply don't have that kind of sharp concentration or presence to catch every thought as they come up.

And what I've learned to do is to pay attention to my body instead, and the body somehow responds slower and is often quite honest. And by paying attention to my body, when the body responds in some strong way, like my shoulders get tense, I use that as a cue to pay attention to what's going on. I kind of stop for a moment and say, "What's going on here? What's my reaction? What's my relation to what's going on? How do I feel right now?"

I was in the UC Berkeley library a while ago, and I was looking for some obscure volumes of the Sanskrit *sūtras* and having trouble finding them. I knew there was what was being a library issue, and the librarian wasn't being very helpful, I think. Budget problems at UC, so they were all harried. And I really needed this book for my research, and so I was kind of leaning across the desk trying to get them interested in my problem, trying to get them to kind of look more carefully, and really feeling that they weren't helping, and feeling more kind of frustrated and angry.

And finally a librarian came along who wanted to help, and so she took all my information. Then she went away for a few minutes. Then I was left alone, and I had a little bit of the habit of being mindful. So as soon as she went away, I kind of said, "What's going on?" I dropped into my body, and first I found that I was leaning across the desk, and I felt all this heat and tightness in my cheeks, and I kind of stood upright. But I just paid attention to the tightness in my cheeks. I didn't do anything about it, didn't try to relax it. I just stayed there with it, just feeling.

And what I felt was that my cheeks were begging me for release. They were asking to be released. It wasn't like I had to release them so much as that they wanted to be released. And so then I didn't really do much. But then with that recognition, this simple release happened in my cheeks.

And at least I think, it's my experience, I don't know how it is for you, that if you pay very careful attention to your body, to the tightness and tensions in the body, there often is a sense that your body wants to be released. It wants its freedom. And often we don't have to do it. We don't have to do the releasing.

I think one of the seductions of practice is, if you feel tightness or tension somewhere, to relax, to actively relax, try to relax, spend some time trying to relax. And that's, in a way, a kind of avoidance, perhaps, kind of trying to do something about it. I would suggest that it's much more radical, rather than just automatically relaxing when you feel some tension, to stay there for a while and feel the tension. Explore and get to know it. Even if it's easy to relax, don't be in such a hurry. Just feel it and sense it. Get to know it. See what's going on. And sometimes when you do that, the tension releases itself, and you're not the one who's doing it.

Mindfulness of the body is also a very wonderful way of, well, through grounding ourselves in the body, in the concreteness of the body, cutting through some of the identifications we have, just identifications in general, but also the kind of compulsive thinking that we have. Sometimes one of the ancient teachings of Buddhist psychology is a description of how the mind gets caught up in complicated abstractions that have very little to do with what's actually going on. And they'll describe, starting with a very simple sense perception, we make an abstraction, we recognize it as something, and then we make associations about it, and from associations we build ideas and concepts, and it goes on from there.

So for example, sitting here, I see this on the wall back there, a triangle. So first, you know, I see the shape, color, and then I see, oh, it's a triangle, and then I think, oh, that looks like the frame that you use for ordering pool balls on a pool table. A pool table. Nice to play some pool. I haven't played pool in about twenty years. Maybe that'd be a good hobby to take up. I won't have a friend to go play pool. We'll all go out after work and go drinking and playing pool. Wouldn't that be nice?

And then, oh, but my wife, she's not going to like that at all. That wife of mine, she's always having ideas about what I should do, what I shouldn't do. Why doesn't she get off my back? Boy, you know, it's all the time. I'm so angry with her. And now I know, oh, I'm angry with my wife. That's the person I shouldn't be angry with. Oh my God, then I shouldn't be angry, and

then I get angry with myself. And what should I do about my anger, you know? Oh, maybe I should go on a retreat. You know, I am always angry. Maybe I should go on a retreat, and that will make me calm, and then I can go back and deal with my wife, and then maybe play some pool, you know? And all I was doing was looking at a triangle up there.

And one of the ways that mindfulness works, one of the very important ways it works, is by trying always to reconnect us with the actual experience of what's going on, with the actual seeing of the shape there, a triangle, or the sensations of our breath, or sensations in our body. Just connecting, reconnecting with the basic ground of our experience. Not so much that we can stop abstracting. It's okay to abstract. But so we're not caught and lost in abstractions, and they go on and on and build and build, and have no more basis in reality. And reconnecting and coming back over and over again to the breath, coming back over and over again to the body, helps cut through all that in a very powerful way.

I wanted to spend a little time talking about thoughts and practicing with thoughts, some of my ideas about it, some of my thoughts. And thoughts, I think I said much to my group today, I have kind of a friendly relationship to my thoughts, which surprised someone once. Someone came and kind of interviewed me after a long retreat. He wanted to know how it went, and what do you do about thoughts? That's kind of a classic question, right? A lot of people are concerned about it. And I said, "Oh, I have a friendly relationship to my thoughts," and he was usually surprised, because he was struggling and struggling with his thoughts and had for years.

Thoughts aren't really a problem. Often the thoughts in the background you just leave in the background. If the foreground of your experience is your breath or something else is predominant, your body, it's fine to have thoughts just kind of in the background. Sometimes our thoughts kind of enter the foreground, and just noting them, just softly thinking, being aware of your thinking, removes some of the energy in thoughts, and then you can return to what's predominant.

However, sometimes the thinking is obsessive, just goes on and on, and there doesn't seem to be any stopping it. And one of the things I found very useful to do then is to be mindful of the physicality of the thoughts, the physicality of the thinking. That often almost every experience we have has a physical aspect to it, and thoughts are quite subtle, and there's not much to them. Maybe they're more difficult to see the physical side of, but there is a lot of energy in the thoughts. If there's compulsive thinking going on, there's often a physical component of the experience. And by becoming mindful of the physicality of that experience, there's a way of getting a handle on the thoughts and cutting through some identification

that somehow lessens the compulsiveness, lessens the pull and grab that thoughts have for us.

And for me, I often experience it as kind of a tightness in the center of my head, or a band around my forehead. And I just stay there and explore and be present for the band or the tightness or hardness in the center of my head. And again, I don't try especially to relax it, but I just try to stay there and feel it and sense it, and that cuts the identification with the thoughts.

Often I thought I wasn't going to have enough things to say, and I left all this stuff out, and it's about time to end. And I thought I'd end by going back to Zen Master Dōgen. And now Dōgen, this monk's Dōgen, he talked about mindfulness also, and he said, "Mindfulness of the body is the body's mindfulness." Mindfulness of the body is the body's mindfulness. You might think about that a little bit.

What is this mindfulness of the body? And who is it? Who is it? And where is it? Where is your awareness? Ask yourself, where is awareness? Before I started practicing, if somebody asked me that, I would have pointed here. If I point here, it's my torso. If I had to point someplace, you know, put on the spot, I'd say, it's my torso. That's where awareness is. And where is it for you? Where do you find it? It's different for different people at different times.

But Dōgen says mindfulness of the body is the body's mindfulness. It's not that you, or you, it's not that maybe we are mindful, an act of mindfulness that we do, but we are allowing the body to be mindful. The body has its own mindfulness, and we are awakening the capacity of the body to be mindful. And maybe the body and mindfulness of the body are not two separate things. They're synonymous. There's not even a duality between them.

Anyway, thank you. And I love mindfulness, as you probably can imagine. And I love mindfulness of the body. And I guess I hope that you will too. Thank you all.

Let's sit just for maybe a minute together in bad weather. So I hope that you all fall in love with mindfulness. But also, you should realize that mindfulness is a very difficult lover. And mindfulness and I haven't always gotten along so well. It goes up and down, a really tumultuous relationship. But over the years we have a pretty good relationship.