

Body Instruction and Guided Meditation

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So let's begin with sitting in our meditation posture, and I'll give the instructions in the beginning part and then segue into the more guided meditation. Just settling in for a moment.

So if we think of ourselves as being made up of concentric circles, and we consider—we start at the center, and we put our breath there, in the center of this big circle. You know, breath here and now in this moment. It's the anchor that we can come back to. However far the mind has gone, we can always come back to the breath, to the center.

So we begin with that in the inner circle, and as we settle there, we can open up our attention to allow things that show up in the next concentric circle, which is our body sensations, our physical sensations. And as our attention becomes more stable and we're very centered in our body, our breath, then we can open up a little bit further to our emotional being, to our thinking, all the different things that arise in the mind as you get further and further away from the center.

And the idea is that as we feel the center, with enough mindfulness and connection, with awareness, we stabilize the attention so we're not easily pulled off balance because the center is, you know, solid, as opposed to being all the way over to the thoughts and being lost in them and, you know, the ball running around, you know, rolling on.

So in this sitting, we'll continue to focus our attention on the breath as our anchor, but we'll open up our field of attention to include physical sensations that arise a little more specifically. Okay.

One of the things that's very helpful for many is to think of the mind as having a foreground and a background. And we can keep the breath in the foreground and allow anything else that's just transiently going by. You know, we might be paying attention to the breath and,

you know, we hear a truck or we hear someone rustling or we remember something we forgot. But they're just transient little thoughts. You know, we can just leave them in the background. They're not a problem. You know, just stay in the center.

But if a compelling physical sensation arises, you know, gets her attention, it's strong enough to get her attention, right? We don't need to push it away. We can bring it into our meditation, to our field of awareness, and we make it the meditation object. Instead of the breath, we might be paying attention to the shoulder sensations we're experiencing because they're very strong.

And so we'll do a little exercise for a few minutes to point to this a little more carefully. So what I'd like you to do is interlace your fingers on your lap. And keeping the eyes closed, keeping the tension internally, notice where the hands touch each other, where the fingers touch each other, maybe near the knuckles. Just notice those sensations. You know, what do you feel there? Not the idea, but the actual felt sense, right there at the junction where everything touches.

It's often helpful to stay connected with your experience and to get closer to it, to label it. Now, if you haven't labeled before, the labeling is just like a quiet whisper in the mind. And so you might say, for instance, you might notice that you feel a little bit of pressure. You know, so just pressure, pressure. Maybe you feel a little tingling, tingling, warmth, vibration, pulsing. See what's there.

And don't worry about being exact. You know, you can just say, you know, pleasant feeling, you know, weird feeling. As long as you feel it, it doesn't matter if you don't know what to call it. But keep the attention on the physical sensations. There might be areas that are stronger, where the sensations are very strong, or some are just barely noticeable. Just notice what the experience is like. Can you feel each finger?

Now unclasp the hands and put them face up, palm up, on your lap. And notice how the sensations have changed. And if it's helpful, continue to gently note.

So let's go ahead and shift now to a little bit more formal. Whatever your normal meditation posture is with your hands, maybe you're already in it. And really establish a connection with your whole body, making any small adjustments if you need to. Take a few long, deep breaths, and with each exhale, relax just a little bit more deeply, letting go. And when you're ready, allow the breath to return to normal.

It can be helpful at the beginning of sitting sometimes to take time to scan the body for any obvious areas of tension or holding, and relaxing or softening anything that can be relaxed,

anything that can be softened, and allowing it to be there just as it is. Maybe beginning with the head, relaxing the face, the face muscles, letting go of the forehead, the rest of the face, the jaw, and noticing if there's any tension in the skull area and the skull muscles. Anything that we can let go of there, or just feeling it just as it is.

And then dropping down into the neck, to the back of the neck, and the sides of the neck, and the shoulders, the trapezius area, and connecting with the upper back. Just allowing it to soften, to let go. The mid-back, into the low back, allowing the spine to hold you upright and alert, but still very relaxed, allowing it to be at ease. And shifting the attention a little bit into the pelvis, just feeling the weight of the body where we're sitting, letting go of anything that we can let go of, the hip joints or sitting bones.

And shifting back to the front of the body, feeling the front of the neck, feeling the upper chest as it moves up and down as we breathe. Shifting into the solar plexus area, into the abdomen, allowing it all to let go, having a soft belly, letting go of any contraction there. Relaxing into the area of the groin, and continuing into the thighs, just feeling it, feeling the area, noticing the knee joints into the lower legs, to the soles of the feet, the ankles, the top of the feet. Just allowing the connection, the softening.

And now bringing the attention to the upper arms, into the elbow, into the forearms. Allowing the attention to rest in the hands for a little.

Now begin to notice how you experience the breath. Noticing the movement of air, the movement of your muscles. What happens when you breathe? What moves? What changes?

You may feel the belly going up and down, the chest rising and falling, the rib cage expanding and contracting, the air coming in and out of the nostrils. However you feel it, allow yourself to feel it any way that you may feel it. Maybe you feel the breath more globally, the full length of the breath, throughout the whole body. However it is for you, and in whatever way is easiest for you to connect with the breath, allow your attention to rest there. There's no correct way, just how we connect.

And allowing yourself to gently connect with the full length of the inhale and showing up for the gap, if there's a gap before the exhale begins. Staying connected then, and then staying connected for the full length of the exhale. And again, there's the gap, being present with any gap, feeling into the gap as the inhale arises all by itself. Just allowing the attention to rest in the breath. This is our anchor, our home base.

As long as other experiences, such as body sensations or sounds, are in the background, allow them to remain there. But if any strong physical sensations become compelling, shift your

attention to it, just like we did with the hands, and you can explore the different sensations that make it up. Maybe hardness or softness, warmth or coolness, tingling, pressure, burning, throbbing, lightness, heaviness, vibration. Drop any commentary or judgment in favor of experiencing it directly.

Be aware of the difference between sensations and any mental comments, any judgments we have about it, any stories we have about them. Just keep returning to the physical sensations of the. Without a rush, return to the breath, to the center.

Being mindful of hearing is part of being mindful of the body. And just as we pay attention to any other compelling physical sensation, we can do so with compelling sounds. So when I ring the bell, turn your attention to the sound and listen to it with a receptive attitude. Try to listen to the vibrations of the sound until they completely disappear.

So, let's just say a few words about pain. A little bit more, we started talking a little bit about it last night. You know, at every moment, we have our experience, and the sensations that make it up, the objects that make it up, the thoughts, emotions, and what we feel and experience, and our relationship to it, is how we experience it.

You know, we can experience a breeze and, you know, we might say, "Oh, it's annoying. It's, you know, messing my hair, and I have to go do a presentation," you know. Or we can be, "Oh, that feels so good," you know. So it completely colors our experience.

And with pain, it's very common for us to reject it, to brace against it. There's a lot of mind habits that we have. Sometimes when we think that pain is good for us, you know, like getting a deep massage, you're going, "Oh, they're really helping me," you know. Then the attitude is, like, kind of positive, you know. We know it hurts, but it's like, "Oh, this is good," you know, good pain, like we call it.

Um, you know, or, you know, we might think, uh, you know, "This should be gone. You know, I should be having, um, you know, a completely pain-free experience right now." Um, so the idea is to keep dropping any resistance to what's happening in the moment.

And when we notice that our relationship to pain is one that's conflicted, afflicted, we know we can allow the resistance to soften a little bit and maybe bring in a little bit of kindness and compassion. You know how a parent might say, "Let me kiss it and make it better." You know, it's the softness, the sweetness. Can we bring just a little bit of that quality into that time of pain?

Talking about pain, I'm having a problem with my leg right now, so I'm taking care of it kindly. Yeah.

So, you know, noting the way we've been talking about physical sensations can be particularly helpful with strong pain because it allows us to really begin to notice the very—like, for instance, if you take a knee pain, it's not just one big knee pain. You know, we tend to go, “Oh, my knee aches, my knee hurts.” But if you actually look deeply into it, you'll notice all the different sensations that make it up. You know, you can even go to the area, you know, well, where's the point of most intensity?

And what's surprising often, you go to that and you hang with it a little bit. You feel the edges of the intensity. And then somehow it changes, it shifts, you know. And so there's a lot of different sensations in that knee that we might lump together as pain. And in that process, we can get interested in it and we can relax into it, soften into it.

And the noting can help, you know, even if you don't note at other times. Often with pain, it's particularly helpful. But, you know, pain is a signal to respect. You know, often some pain is, as Matthew was mentioning, what we call *karmic* pain, is that somehow it arises out of something in us. We may not know what it is, but it's not like—it feels physical, but it's not something that's wrong with the body. Yeah.

And that kind of pain is the pain that we learn to be with, and we learn to grow with it, and we can hang out with it. And a lot of pain is just discomfort. You know, like I mentioned an itch yesterday, we know for sure that itch is not going to hurt us. We don't have to scratch it to be safe, right? So can we learn to be with it, to get interested in it and hang with it until it goes away?

You know, I don't think any of you still have an itch you had a week ago, right? They're all gone. You know, so you just hang with it until it goes away. So we practice with things that are an easier gradient than others. So we either know it's safe or we know, uh-oh, I better—like I needed to move my leg. I know that's not okay for my knee, you know, so I need to move it.

You know, it's a wise thing to do. I did it out of care for my body. But there's times when we don't know. And Matthew pointed to this yesterday. He talked about, you know, if the mind's uncertain, you know, what we do is like, “Well, should I? Shouldn't I?” You know, “Is this okay?” And we go back and forth, back and forth.

Maybe there's something I can do to get rid of it. And we're totally lost in our story and thinking about it and in doubt, and that's all time we're not really applying ourselves to the moment. We're not really being mindful. We're just caught in uncertainty.

And when uncertainty shows up, you know, and if we're hanging with that, you know, see if

we can notice that. Notice, “Oh, this is doubt.” Doubt isn't useful. You know, is there any way for me—“Is this safe, what I'm doing?” You know, and, you know, I'm not sure. Maybe this will actually injure me. Move. Do something about it. Respect the body.

It's better to err on the side of safety, of taking care of ourselves. But when you move, move with kindness and move mindfully. For instance, if you move your leg, you know, you move it in position, you stay aware of it, stay connected with the sensations of moving. Just as if you're doing walking meditation, staying connected.

You know, and lastly, you know, it's important with pain to stay interested. If the mind gets grim, where we're just, “Okay, I'm going to pay attention to it,” with our teeth gritted, you know, that's not helpful. So make sure your attitude—excuse me—make sure your attitude, when you're paying attention to pain, is a wholesome attitude. If the mind gets grim, that isn't practice. That's just counting the minutes until it's over.

So really allow the mind to find interest in it, even if it's not fun. It can still have an interest and a kindness. Some things are really hard to show up in practice, and learning to increase your capacity for them is a huge part of our spiritual growth.

And so just the rest of the day, you know, the rest of the retreat, you know, remember that mindfulness is an embodied practice. Your body is always here. It's always here now. You know, so really stay close to your body as you go through this day and go through the rest of the retreat. Just stay very close and intimate with this human body.

So thank you. And I'll pass it on to Matthew.

Just a word about walking continuity. Something in psychology known as the introspective illusion, um, which states that essentially because all we have access to is conscious experience, we overweight conscious factors in how we understand how we're doing and what's happening in the world. The stories that we tell about progress and regress overweight what we have conscious access to, right, because that's all we have access to. So we kind of compose our stories from those factors.

But, um, so much of the goodness of the path accrues beneath the radar of awareness. We can't see it. We want to see it. We look for it. We check, you know. And, um, we sort of are, like, pinging to our, like, *dharma* bank account most moments. Like, we just take one good mindful breath, and it's like, “What's my balance now?”

And when you're doing walking meditation, a lot of times you will check your balance, and your balance will be zero. And you're like, “What am I doing?” But the goodness of the path accrues beneath the radar of awareness. And a lot is happening regardless of the surface

layer of your mind and the conclusions and stories you might reach on the basis of what's happening.

The level of my mind, I'm not as quiet. It's different. I'm bored. It's all these things. And there's just some willingness, and we don't consciously detect what's happening, you know, maybe in that walking. But maybe we do at the end of the walking or the next sit or at the end of the day or at the end of our life.

And so the encouragement is just not to take all of your dictates from the kind of surface layer of your mind. And you have to find ways of practicing where there's continuity, but some measure of restfulness, some measure of restfulness after sitting. And paying attention is a very precise way. Sometimes there's a kind of backlash of unconsciousness. Something needs to rest in us.

And here we're practicing resting without devolving into total unconsciousness. Can we actually rest without cocooning in the kind of discursive thinking and the self-story and the kind of columns of pros and cons of this moment, pros and cons of me, where this is going, how it's going? We just, yeah, we find ways of, like, looking. What in me needs to rest? Can that rest? Yeah.

And can there be some measure of awakeness amidst rest? We have to look for that, you know. So...