

## Guided Instructions: Mindfulness of Body

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Oh, no. So let's see, is this loud enough? Let's see. So let's see, is this loud enough now?

So, one of the common ways of experiencing the natural world in a place like this is to go out into the woods and maybe see the parts of this mountainside we're on that haven't been touched by human hands. We have both here: the trails, different things, but also that which is not. Seeing a tree growing, a plant, generally, we don't look at the tree and say, "That's not a perfect tree."

"That tree is a little bit too bent, a little bit too twisted. Those branches are growing too low or too high, and they're crooked. And, you know, this is not nice. This is not harmonious. You know, we should really get a gardener here to fix all this. We want to have perfect trees here."

There's so much variation in the trees and the plants and the rocks and the natural world. Generally, there's a way of appreciating it for what it is. Maybe just seeing it as perfect the way it is, and not saying, "Good tree, bad tree, right tree, wrong tree."

And the opportunity here is to kind of get a sense of what that's like: to not add the overlays of judgments and comparisons. "Look at that tree. That's a better tree than that tree." It's just a tree. It's just doing what trees do, and that's the particular manifestation of that kind of perfect tree.

But it doesn't even make sense to call it perfect. It just is, in some wonderful, wondrous way. So it's possible to see ourselves that way. It's possible to see ourselves as nature, a product of nature, an expression of nature, a piece of nature, and that all of who we are, for the most part, is so perfect, just as we are, that we don't have to even—yeah, it's a little too extra to call it perfect. It just is. And it's kind of wondrous, allowed to be just what it is, without comparisons.

A lot of human suffering arises when we compare ourselves to other people, to other ideas of who we should be, who we were, who we will be. This comparative mind, in Buddhism, is part of the constructing mind, the mind that constructs stories, that makes things up. “That tree, you know, that really is a lousy representative of treeness. I think that, you know, that’s the wrong tree here. It should be something else.”

I mean, that’s all just stories. It’s constructs that don’t exist in nature. It doesn’t happen without human construction, human ideas. And so part of the possibility in this practice is to begin experiencing ourselves free of that constructing mind, free of the mind that compares, makes stories, stories of predictions, what will become, what will happen, what has happened.

Not that those things are wrong, necessarily, but it’s so wondrous, so wonderful, and so freeing to experience ourselves in our fullness. To experience ourselves, at least provisionally, in our perfection, until even that’s too much to do. And so mindfulness of the body is one of those vehicles, one of those means, to start experiencing the natural part of who we are.

The way that we directly experience the body is our manifestation of nature, the lived experience. To begin becoming tuned into, attuned to, our body’s experience by how the body experiences itself, we start being able to separate out the constructs we have about the body, the stories about the body, from the direct experience. And that direct experience, when we start seeing it, it’s just nature being itself. It can be very freeing. It can be almost like a homecoming.

It’s almost like taking a walk in the woods and just appreciating beauty and that wonder of the natural world, right here in ourselves. So, I’m fond of doing, when I teach mindfulness of the body, an exercise with the hand: mindfulness of the hand. But almost every time I do it, I do it a little different. So those of you who have had me do it before, don’t tune out.

And so, close your eyes so that you can kind of start noticing one of your hands, whichever you choose. And I think, from what I noticed before, you all have hands. And I have some important news for you about hands. Plastic surgery has made major advances in the last few days.

And now they’re ready, very cheaply, to make designer hands. And you have actually a lot of choices about how you design your hand and exactly how you make it perfect and perfect. Because most people’s hands are not quite right. Fingers are too long or too short, too stubby or too thin, too crooked, too wrinkled, too spotted.

Knuckles are a little bit off. Probably your palms are not as soft as they’re supposed to be.

Fingernails, after all, you know, they have to be certain ways to be right. And so it's important now, in this new world we live in with designer hands, that now you should really—can't go around with it.

It turns out these plastic surgeons have discovered everyone's hands are wrong. There are no perfect hands at all, like human life. But they have now perfected it, so you can spend the next minute or so—I'd recommend that you just kind of design your perfect hand. Because after all, your hands, now that you know, are not perfect.

What would you, you know, what would you correct? What would you make better? What would you do? And probably I shouldn't give you the whole minute in such unfortunate activity.

But that's what we do. We go into that head and we think about these things and make judgments and try to make it better, decide what's worse. And we can live in that world. And what that does is it disconnects us from our lived experience. It puts us in the world of constructions.

And luckily, that was made-up news. So in this exercise, stay out of, best you can, that constructing world of stories and ideas and judgments, and feel your hand. And if you do have ideas and stories, judgments, choose to see that for what it is, without believing it or being involved in it.

So, feel the hand that you chose, and not feeling it from the control tower, but feel the hand how the hand experiences itself. The nerve endings are in the hand, the palm of the hand, the fingers, the back of the hand. Maybe the way that your hand is touching some part of your body, if it is: the contact, the pressure, the weight.

If you're touching something, maybe there's a texture, smoothness or roughness that's felt in the hand. Or the part of the hand that's not touching anything, just in the air. Is there coolness? Is there a little breeze, tingling? Are there parts of the hand that are warmer, parts of which are cooler?

Let your attention roam around the hand to feel the variety of different sensations that are present in the hand: tingling, vibration, pulsing. And notice your relationship to the hand and to the exercise. Are you straining to do it right? Are you resisting and have judgments about this?

Do you have emotional feelings and ideas about the experience of your hand? Are you easily distracted into stories and thoughts, with no loving commitment to spend time getting to

know the hand? Maybe in intimacy with something that's been part of you your whole life. Maybe you haven't given this kind of care to.

And there's a big difference between the lived experience of the hand, the sensations that are there, which is nature. Nature expressing itself, being itself. There might be aches, maybe even pains. Maybe there's pleasure. Maybe there's tension. Maybe the release of tension.

And to see and be with this as nature, almost as if it's perfect, the hand this way, a relief from the constructs, the stories, a kind of act of generosity to allow the hand to be itself in the fullness of awareness and in the way that you are experiencing your hand.

Now switch your attention to the area of your body where you mostly experience your breathing, without necessarily focusing on breathing itself. Sense and feel the natural sensations arising and passing in the general area where you're aware of breathing. Awareness that includes sensations of breathing, but doesn't fixate on that, is aware of what's around it, what comes along with it in that area.

Perhaps relax the control tower, the story-making mind, because when there are stories and distractions, that fills the awareness. So awareness is not available so much for other things. Quiet the mind so there's more room to be aware of the area of your body where you breathe.

And in the way that we switch from the hand to the area of breathing, now switch your attention to some other place in your body where there are some sensations which are compelling, that are calling your attention there. If you're not with the breathing, what is most predominant aside from the breathing? And let attention roam around in that particular area, gently, calmly, as if you have all the time in the world, to sense and feel the sensations that are there.

Not just the strong sensations, but also the subtle sensations in that area. Maybe, to help you stay mindful of it, you can gently breathe with or through that area, even if it's an act of imagination. Just gently, with the rhythm of breathing in and breathing out, connect to a part of your body where the sensations are predominant.

If the sensations there fade away, go find another place in the body. Notice if you're living more in the reaction to the sensations, the thoughts, ideas, emotions about it, or more and more in the naturalness of those sensations. And then return to the location in your body where you're most tracking your breathing.

Practice mindfulness of sensations as if you have all the time in the world. Let those sensations of breathing fill your awareness with the fullness of experience. Stay with the breathing

unless there's something more compelling that's pulling on your attention. And if so, whatever it is, feel how it's expressed in sensations in your body.

So if it's emotions or even a lot of thinking, if you're very quiet, maybe you can have room to feel the physicality of it, the sensations of it. Stay close to the naturalness, maybe even the perfection of just this. It doesn't have to be any different than staying close to the naturalness of the sensations. Spend time being mindful, aware of it, whatever is more compelling than breathing, but not too long.

Be present and long enough to have it fully acknowledged, fully enter the fullness of the sensations, and then return to the breathing. Maybe it's all nature, and you're freed from making it anything else.

It's the custom in the retreats that I teach, and many other insight teachers, to offer the instructions progressively through the retreats, often starting and beginning with breathing in the body, and then moving on to mindfulness of emotions and thinking. Maybe emotions on that third day, and thinking on the fourth day. Part of the reason for that is that, well, it's very different than the way we were taught in Asia.

In Asia, we were just taught to be mindful of everything from the beginning. And so it was just kind of like, well, where in the middle of everything do we get grounded? And so the idea is to get grounded, get embodied, and connected to yourself here, so that you're in a better position to be mindful of emotions and mindful of thoughts.

Now, I imagine that some of you are not putting off having emotions and thoughts until later in the retreat. So one approach is, of course you have those things, but for this beginning of the retreat, let that be in a certain way. If you can let go of it easily, please do. And if it's easy to come back to breathing in the body, please do.

But if not, it's okay. Become aware of them not as emotions or not as thoughts, but the part of them that are sensations. I mean, it's very hard to have this emotion without there being some physical expression of it in the form of sensations. If you're really sensitive, you can feel that all thoughts have sensations that come along with them, but you have to be very sensitive and quiet sometimes for some of them.

But to be aware of them from a sensation level does a few things. It might free you a little bit from being overly preoccupied with the stories, the ideas, the content that come along with emotions and thoughts. And it might actually maybe allow you more to be able to get grounded in your body, grounded in your direct experience, which is the domain that we want to really open up to here in insight practice.

And one interesting way of doing insight practice this way is to have a home base. The usual thing is to do the breathing movements of the belly or the chest, or the nostril sensations. Have some place as your default where you can feel like this is a place you can come, settle, and stay, and develop continuity. Develop a fullness of experience so that those sensations there fill your awareness.

And then, if there's something else that becomes more compelling, you don't have to then struggle against those sensations and just try to stay with the breath. You can just let go of the breathing and move your attention there and be present for that. And for now, like you did with the hand, just with the sensations of it.

So if you're in the control tower, there might be tension, there might be pressure, tightness, there might be feelings of agitation, energy spinning around. Just go there and feel the sensation part of it without navigating, negotiating the content. The content may be irrelevant, believe it or not, at least for today.

And so the way we were taught this in Burma was that we would stay with the default, breathing or the body, and then if something else was compelling, we were told to go be mindful of it. But the way we were told was, you don't spend a lot of time with it. You would just know it for maybe the duration of three, four, five breaths. And then you come back to your home base.

Like, long enough to acknowledge it and really recognize it's there, but not long enough that the story-making mind has a chance to start creating stories and ideas and reactions to it. Because those can kind of enter in, kind of in the back rooms. There, it's tricky. And you don't really think you're mindful, but you're really becoming thoughtful about it.

So the idea is just to acknowledge it for three, four, five breaths, and then come back. And then a minute later, ten seconds later, you realize, "I better go back and do that again, because it's still there." Yeah. But you're not getting locked into it. You're not getting preoccupied with it.

It's also very easy to get into the fix-it mind. There's a pain. Yeah, so I'm going to be mindful of the pain, but I'm going to blast it out of existence. I used to do the bazooka approach to pain. If I just bore down with concentration, it would go away or something.

Or there might be something here I have to learn how to let go of in a deep way, and then I'm going to be okay with it. I made it a project of letting go. The idea is, don't have projects. Certainly don't bring your weaponry to it.

And just know it very simply, very simply. Know it and appreciate the simplicity of knowing,

of awareness, taking it in, feeling the sensations. And then calmly come back to your breathing, start again. And it might be a nice rhythm even, of being with your breathing and then something else, being with your breathing and something else.

But you're trying to do this in such a way that you're not getting locked into something, you're not getting caught in the stories, the beliefs, the reactivity to it. And you might have reactivity, of course, but then you feel sensations of reactivity, of tension, and feel those for three, four, or five breaths. And so you're not believing the activity, you're not caught in the story, the purpose of your activity, and you come back to your breathing.

And so for today, the recommendation, if it feels right for you, stay close to the body. Stay close so you can feel the sensations of the body. Stay so close to the body that the ideas of the body fall away. The body is an abstraction.

It's like, say you go off and walk in the woods here, and you say to yourself, "Yeah, I'm in the Sierras. It's so good I'm in the Sierras. Yes, I have an image of the Sierras that comes from the map that I have, and the contour lines, and this is 5,000 feet, and the northern Sierras, and this is so great to be in the—"

I mean, yes, you're in the Sierras. But that's an abstraction that pulls you out of this tree, this crunch of gravel against your foot, this, you know, flowing sound of water, this little detail. This, like I looked out the window now, the shimmering of the light against the boulder there, that I wouldn't see or be a part of if I'm staying in the Sierras and all that that means.

So, same thing with your body, same thing with you. "I'm going to be really present for me." That's being present for the Sierras. That's an abstraction. You want to see how close can you get to the shimmering light, the shimmering sensations, the closeness, the intimacy, where you know that you're in the beautiful natural preserve that you are.

Maybe you're a nature refuge to yourself. Wouldn't that be nice? Because after all, we're 99.95% nature, but we often live in the 0.05% that we're synthetic, a forever chemical, these forever thoughts, constructs of mind, of things that don't actually exist in the natural world.

Can we shift out of the constructs, the stories, into what we mostly are, which are nature preserves? And it's your refuge for you. I hope that makes sense. Stay close.

So, today we have to begin the first round of practice discussion. Today is Monday, and it's easy to forget the day is here. And so you might want to look on the sheet and make sure which day you signed up for. The practice discussion starts in about 20 minutes, and it should be enough time for you to take care of what you need to do and hopefully be there on time so we can start on time.

And so almost certainly we'll keep the first two this morning down there on the deck around the house where the lawn is and the pond. And it's a small chance that we might want to move the afternoon ones, depending on how much the sun comes in. But it should be either somewhere else on the deck or somewhere around the house. So you should be able to see us and find it.

So thank you all very much. May you learn to love being a nature refuge.