

Mindfulness of the Body

This year of practice we're focusing on Mindfulness, using as text: Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization, which is a clear and lovely explication of the four foundations of mindfulness.

Tonight focus on the first foundation, mindfulness of the body. Next week on 2nd, perceptions of feeling tone. We'll cycle around to all four foundations again and again throughout the year.

I had an opportunity to spend a day last week with Dan Siegel, psychiatrist at UCLA, founder of the Mindful Awareness Research Center there; he is a passionate campaigner for bringing mindfulness into psychotherapy, into the schools, into parenting. Often teaches with Jack Kornfield – Mindful Brain – Wise Heart, in San Francisco in June. Also teaching power of training our mind to change our brain to bring deeper awareness that leads to deeper happiness, resilience and well-being.

Dan brings a pro-activity to Mindfulness practice, suggesting we focus attention, certainly, all kinds of powerful shifts can happen in brain structure and functioning when we focus attention. He also suggests in our practice we can monitor and modify our attention, thus shape the impact of our attention on our brain and body. Very much in keeping with the Buddhist teachings of Wise Effort, one of the 8 steps of the 8-fold path toward full awakening. What Rick teaches as skillful means to cultivate the wholesome and let go of the unwholesome. Tonight teaching three Wise Efforts to monitor and modify our attention, our awareness, as we focus our attention and awareness on the body. First foundation of mindfulness that leads to enlightenment.

First is the sheer miraculousness of existing in a body at all. Consciousness inhabiting a body that senses and moves and feels and things and engages with other bodies, other beings. If we rest our attention on any of the mystery of how our bodies can even be. [Examples: healing cat scratches.] Brain 100 billion neurons, each capable of connecting with up to 10,000 other neurons. The number of possible connections 10 to millionth power. Number of atoms in known universe 10 to 80th power. Brain, integral part of our body, capable of contemplating the infinite.

Mindfulness of the body leads to an awe practice, and awe opens our senses and hearts and minds to sacred.

The second is the mortality of the body. Not to be morbid, but to wake up to the preciousness and the impermanence of the body, not to take our form in this moment for granted. Is practice in the tradition to practice mindfulness of body, including mindfulness of the body as a corpse in charnel grounds, the sacred sites in India where bodies are burned on funeral pyres to release the spirit from the form of the body. I've known two different friends who have done that on pilgrimages to Varanasi in India.

Both experience profound awakenings and appreciations of the preciousness, miraculousness of life through realities of death and dying.

Stephen Levine, teacher for many of us in the practice of being with death and dying, wrote *A Year To Live* – a year-long practice of pretending that you know you’re going to die with a year, and a series of meditations and exercise to use that awareness to wake up to the possibilities and choices you have in your life now, especially to love the people you love in your life fully, wholeheartedly, and to tell them, while you can.

Rick has mentioned the Buddha taught that our practice should be ardent, diligent, resolute and mindful. I learned early on from Sylvia Boorstein that the Buddha taught us to practice as though your hair is on fire. There is an urgency an intensity and aliveness to our practice when we deeply, deeply know we are not going to be alive forever. We are not going to inhabit this precious body forever.

A story from my own experience. I was driving home on the freeway one very dark, rainy evening. The left front tire must have caught the shoulder on the left side of the freeway. I skidded onto the left shoulder at 60mph. In over-correcting the skid, I skidded across four lanes of speeding freeway traffic onto the other side of the freeway, coming to a stop on the right shoulder. I remember watching cars speed by, but nothing happened! I wasn’t hit; I wasn’t hurt. I didn’t hit anybody; I didn’t hurt anybody. I was completely, thoroughly, alive. In a flash, I realized - whatever happens from now on, I’m alive to meet it. Anything. That evening puts all the aches and pains and worries in perspective - forever.

Third, often when we focus our awareness on our bodies, on our breath, we focus on sensation, our body touching the chair or cushion. The sounds we hear or the warmth and coolness of the breath in and out. Focus on sensations next week, perception. This week suggest focus on movement, movement of energy in body. [And mindfulness has been shown to strengthen the insula, the structure of the brain that allows us to sense what’s going on inside our bodies, our interoception.]

When we focus on breath we are bringing our awareness to the movement of life energy, the chi, life energy that sustains our body, the energy that is our body. The energy of the universe that sustains our body, that is our body. Some of you may have taken classes at Spirit Rock offered by qigong master Mingtong Gu – deep practice of working with chi, life energy, to awaken to larger Consciousness that is us.

There is vitality to our body. And when Rick and I suggest settling into a posture that feels comfortable, relaxed and alert, there’s an invitation to focus awareness on the vitality of the body. Relaxed and alert implies settling into the calm engagement of what is known in psychological circles as the window of tolerance. What’s known in Buddhist circles as equanimity. And in neuroscience vocabulary, there is a state of energized calm that is optimal for awareness, optimal condition of learning, change and growth. If our bodies are too agitated, in a state of alarm or arousal, we can’t concentrate on being present in the moment except to focus on the alarm. What Buddhism calls one of the 5

hindrances – restlessness. And if the energy in our bodies is too flattened, too numbed out, too checked out, we're not present in the moment either. The hindrance of sloth and torpor.

So it's wise practice to tune in to the energy level in our bodies, the inner movement of energy in our body; are we too revved up or are we too slumped or inert. Jon Kabat-Zinn, when he teaches Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, besides teaching mindfulness – open, spacious, non-judgmental awareness, he teaches yoga and body scan. The body scan focusing awareness on the energy in the body, slowly moving the awareness of energy in the body from one part of the body to another, the energy level in our toes, in the ball of the foot, on the arch of the foot, the heel, the ankle, the lower shin, slowly scanning the body for any changes in energy from the calm relaxed state of equanimous presence.

Especially noting any changes in the visceral experience, in the belly, in the heart center, in the throat because our bodies hold tension or contraction in these areas, or we avoid noticing the contraction in those areas. This is where monitoring and modifying is a useful practice of Mindfulness. We're going to do a body scan here tonight as one of the two experiential exercise to practice mindfulness of the body with an intention to bring more calm, relaxed alertness to every part of our body through the awareness and gentle breathing into any parts of the body that seem contracted or asleep at the wheel.

As Rick has taught here many times and in his book Buddha's Brain, the in breath slightly activates the body's nervous system, bringing more energy to the body tissues, breathing out activates the calming side of the nervous system, bringing rest to the movement and energy in the system. We'll do the body scan in silence so I won't be guiding you through moving from feet to legs to pelvis to belly and heart center to shoulders to arms to hands and fingers, to chest and throat and neck and mouth and face and ears and eyes and head, but you can guide yourself in the 5 minutes well take for body scan. And as you do, bring awareness to the energy level, the sense of vitality to each part, whether there's agitation or tension/contraction whether there's a numbness, an absence of energy, and then breathing in and out, sending the breath to that area of your body as you need to, and bring that part of your body into a sense of calm, relaxed aliveness. Questions about body scan?

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Debrief

Another exercise we can experience. Buddha taught can be mindfulness of body in four postures; sitting, standing, walking, lying down. This one we'll do standing. Stand up, simply to ground energy of body in calm steady aliveness. Plant feet hip width apart. Tadasana. Feel your feet feel connection of feet with ground. Rock back and forth, find center of body planted firmly, toe, heels, inner and outer foot, feeling the ground. Bringing awareness up your legs to pelvic bowl. Feel stability and grounding there. Pelvic bowl supports entire spine. Feel energy and strength in spine even as feel softness

and flexibility in belly, lungs, heart center, throats. Hand on heart if you like. Lift spine and torso straight up over hips and pelvis, lift neck and head up off spine. Focus awareness on breath, into heat center, into whole body. We'll stay here one minute.

Debrief

Closing. Sit quietly. Bring attention back into body, into breath. Notice energy in body, be aware of miracle and mystery of body, preciousness of being alive, being embodied in this moment.