Dharmette: Wisdom of the Body

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 13, 2010

I'd like to talk about mindfulness of the body, which is such a fundamental aspect of mindfulness overall – and of Buddhist spirituality. It was a surprise to me to discover how important the body is in Buddhism. I think when I was first introduced to Buddhism, I was reading books and the body didn't seem to be included – only these wonderful abstract ideas. But in all the different places I've trained in Buddhism – monasteries, meditation centers – you had to bring your body along [laughs]. And not just that, but a lot of the training was bodily.

Sometimes with mindfulness of the body, you pay attention to your body, and sometimes it's through using your body. When I was at the monastery in Japan, we didn't meditate that much, oddly enough. I was a little bit – actually very much – surprised. We meditated some every day. After I was there for about three months, I was disappointed, and I thought I should leave. But I stayed through the five-month period I had committed to. And after I had been away from the monastery for a while, only then did I realize how much the monastic experience had affected me, especially through my

body. When I was there, I was just doing the bodily things you do, moving through the monastery. It was very choreographed: a lot of bowing, and activities with the body you had to do. After I left, I could feel how my body had been changed by all the ritual, all the activity, all the meditation we did with our bodies. The body had been included as part of the training.

Part of the beauty of that was that in Zen, you don't have to teach as much if you use your body a lot, as part of the practice field, as part of the monastery. Whereas in our tradition, Vipassana, we put a lot of emphasis on mindfulness of the body, but it's not by using the body. It's by paying attention to it. So we have to teach a lot more. I will give you a little example. In Vipassana, we teach the importance of balancing effort and calm, effort and concentration. We talk about how to recognize when there's too much effort, how to recognize when there's not enough effort, and also how to recognize when there's too much calm, and when there's not enough, and how to bring them into balance. And you pay attention to that.

In Zen, you have to sit up straight; you can't slump. And you place your hands together with one hand over the other, and with your thumbs lightly touching. An oval is formed between your index finger and your thumb. What happens if there's too much energy, or if you're tense, is that your thumbs together. And if you're too

slack, your thumbs fall apart. You're told: "Just keep your thumbs together, lightly touching." They don't have to teach you so much about making too much or too little effort [laughs] because the thumbs tell you. Or your body being upright and straight will tell you. In Zen, a lot of the teaching happens through the body: how you hold your body, how you move your body through space, and the rituals involving the body.

In our tradition, a lot of the teaching is done, perhaps conceptually, but it's meant to be translated into an inner knowing through the body. I'll share with you as example of the difference between Zen training and Vipassana from when I did one of my early Vipassana retreats in Nepal. Another student on the retreat was one of the most senior Western Vipassana teachers at the time. We shared a room, and we did all our meditation in this little room where we slept. So the four of us in that room were quite intimate. I could see him meditating, and I would meditate there too. We would go to interviews with the teacher together, and I would hear his interview with the teacher, so it was intimate to find out what was happening with him on the inside. After a week or so into the retreat, he started talking about his back pain, and he gave a beautiful, very precise description of his pain. He never complained. It was obvious that it was excruciating for him, but he was very present, very mindful of it. At some point he told the teacher, "Back in the States I would probably go to

the chiropractor.” Being in Nepal, that probably wasn’t easy. As I was listening to this, I felt this compassion for him. You weren’t supposed to talk during the retreat, but I snuck over to him in the room and whispered, “If you just sat up straighter, it would probably be better for you back” [laughs]. He was all slumped over; his posture was horrible. I was there as a Zen priest and had Zen garb on, so he knew I was a Zen practitioner, and he was this Vipassana teacher. He turned to me and looked at me with great, soft compassion, and he said “Oh, in Zen, you do it from the outside in. In Vipassana we do it from the inside out,” meaning that in Zen, you take this upright, good posture, and you work from the outside in. In Vipassana, you have this attention that goes from the inside out. I don’t know if I actually did it, but I felt like I shrugged my shoulders, saying “Okay, if you want to suffer [laughs], let it be.”

Ideally, I think it’s a combination of both. It’s both inside out and outside in. You take some care for your posture and for what you do, but the strength of mindfulness in our tradition is not the outside in, but is really from the inside out. You need both, I think.

This idea of knowing your body from the inside out is a different kind of knowing, than knowing through our thinking or conceptualizing. It’s closer to knowing through sensing or feeling. What’s beautiful about sensing and feeling the body, is that it is not dualistic

with what's being sensed or felt.

If you put your finger on your thigh and push, you can sense or feel, the sense of pressure on your thigh and the pressure that you feel happen in the place where the pushing is. And the sensations of pressure happen where the sensing is happening. The sensation and the sensing are non-dual – you can't separate them out. You can't have sensations without sensing. You don't have sensing with a sensation, and you can't really separate out the sensing from the sensation.

You can think about the pressure. I can say to myself, "Oh that's a finger pushing against my thigh. That pressure feels like it's ten pounds per square inch." I can think about it in various ways, but that's different from the actual sensing experience. There's something very interesting about the non-dual, non-separate aspect of sensing and sensations. If your awareness resides not in your thinking, but in your body, in the sensing itself, then your awareness is all over your body. It's everywhere.

You can relax, soften, and be mindful by sensing and experiencing, where the body becomes alive and awake through sensations, through experience. You don't feel like you're separate from sensations. You don't feel like knowing is only happening from a distance. The knowing is intimate and connected. It allows for relaxing

because the sense of being tense, held, or braced from life often happens because we have a mental reaction to our experience. But to be able to have the awareness reside in the body, and to be felt like global, 360-degree awareness that emanates from the body, this allows for a much more intimate, relaxed, and easier softening into the body. It's easier for the body to soften if the awareness is broad and wide.

For some people, what often happens is they're cut off from the body, or parts of the body go numb. I've known people who know they have a body below their neck, but they'll tell me, "You know, I don't really feel anything from the neck down," or "from the waist down." They've disconnected. Sometimes when people have very strong and difficult emotions, and they can't bear experiencing those emotions, they'll numb, or cut off the connection to certain parts of the body, because it's only by feeling those emotions in certain parts of the body, that they can feel those emotions. If you don't feel below your neck, you're not going to feel a lot of your emotional life, and so people think it's safer.

Some people have occupations that keep them always in their heads. It becomes a habit, a conditioning, to always be thinking about things, rather than feeling or sensing them. Or they have teachings they've received from their religious tradition that somehow the body is bad. Or you shouldn't be connected to the body. You

shouldn’t sense and feel it. You certainly shouldn’t feel any joy in your body – that’s really bad. I remember once on retreat, I had the privilege of telling this woman that it was okay to experience joy in her body when she meditated. She had gotten this very strong teaching from her other religious tradition that somehow that was sinful. You could see her relax: “Wow. I can feel. I can enjoy my body?”

There are a variety of reasons why people feel they are disconnected from their bodies. Some people have an aversive relationship to their body, partly because their body is not always a perfect instrument. Have you noticed that? [laughs] The body is not living up to what we want it to be. We can’t do all the things we wanted to do. So then people are angry with the body, or they feel that the body is getting in the way. We’re stumbling along, and who we are is a brain on top of a stick [laughs]. But unfortunately, we have to negotiate this body as well.

There are all kinds of attitudes people have to their bodies that make it difficult or less likely, that they’re going to really relax, or settle into the body, and let awareness radiate through the pores, throughout the body everywhere. One of the beautiful things that can happen with mindfulness practice is that as we develop greater mindfulness of the body, and slowly, slowly, the body begins to wake up. We become more aware of the

body, more alert through the body, and there is more of a sense that we're in this world, living in the body. We're part of the world; we're resting in it; we're grounded; we're centered in it, as opposed to being in the head, which is telling us that we're somehow separate, distinct, or isolated. The mind can often have these ideas of separation, which are not that healthy or helpful.

It's not necessarily a beautiful or pleasant process to wake up in the body, because the body can hold a lot of tension. But one of the great, worthwhile things to do is to drop into the body, to feel it, feel the tension, and feel the emotions that are locked up in the body. Even if these emotions are difficult, trusting the body means trusting the inner unfolding that happens within. It's as if the body has its own wisdom that knows what needs to unfold, what needs to relax, what needs to show itself and come up, in a way that we can't access if we're just thinking about our life and trying to negotiate our life through our thoughts.

The analogy I like to give for the wisdom of the body, is when you cut your finger. You can intentionally cut your finger with a knife, but you can't in the same intentional way heal your finger. You can't orchestrate the healing of your finger. The healing is such a complex, neurophysiological event, with all the chemicals the body pours into the wound and everything that goes on.

My guess is that you'd need a really complicated computer to direct all the things that have to happen. What you do is keep the wound clean and covered – that's your job. And then something that's much wiser than you in the body knows how to do the healing.

I think it's the same thing with psychological wounds that we carry in our body. The body knows how to heal them, if we get out of the way. But getting out of the way means we don't turn on the TV and ignore it. It means to be really present for it. Be awake to it. Feel it in your body. Feel what's going on in your body. Come back to your body. Be with it in the body. Trust the body. Trust the way the body experiences it. The chances are that something will unfold, unravel, and reveal itself, and become clear.

Trust your body. A big part of mindfulness of the body is learning that inner trust, that the body is really your best friend – it's your monastery.