

Body (5 of 5) Liberation with the Body

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The last talk this week on mindfulness of the body focuses on release. “Release” is one of my favorite words for liberation or freedom, because release contains the idea of setting something free when it is released. Freedom might mean you can do whatever you want. Letting go carries the weight of whatever has been let go of. But for me, release is between those two. Clearly, something has become free, but release also has a sense of opening up to a kind of freedom.

At each step along the way this week, we have five different areas of mindfulness: relaxation, recognition, respect, restoration, and release. Each of the first four has within them something that we release. This is maybe most obvious with relaxation, where we release tension, holding, and maybe stress. Something lets go when we relax.

Sometimes people don't focus so much on what is let go of, but rather, on the goodness – the nice feeling of relaxation, the comfort of it.

Recognition involves a kind of release and letting go as well. Recognition is very simple. It means recognizing how things are in the moment, without the complications of history and the projections into the future, without all the complications of a complicated world, and the complications of me, myself, and mine. Instead, we allow something to be itself: we allow an itch to be an itch. We just recognize the itch. It can be hard to let go of all the reactivity to it, but that's the goal. An itch is just an itch; warmth is just warmth; twisting is just twisting; heat is just heat.

When I was in Japan studying Zen, one of the teachings I got there was something like this: when the weather is hot, just be hot. When it's cold, just be cold. I'm not saying that is exactly how we should live our lives, but the idea is that in the recognition, we let go of a lot of the complications. We let things be in their simplicity, in the pristine simplicity of each moment.

There is a lot of letting go in the practice. With respect, we are letting go of disrespect. Disrespect

here might mean having an agenda around things, such as being in charge, bossing our life around as if it has to be this way or that way: “I have to get rid of this; I have to get this to happen; it shouldn’t be this experience; it should be some other way.” But respect means to give permission for each thing just to be itself. Respect means “to see again.” There is a letting go that allows us to just see again, allowing us to really be here in the simplicity of things.

Restoration allows things to be restored. We let go of the ways in which we restrict ourselves, the ways in which we limit ourselves, hold back, resist ourselves, box things in, or contain things. For things to be restored, there has to be space. For example, if you have too many plants growing in a flower bed, then the seedling that you want to grow will not grow in a healthy way. To allow it to grow well, you have to make a clearing so it gets some light.

Today the topic is release. I think it is a profound topic. It’s easy to talk about it simplistically or as if it’s an easy thing to do. But generally, in almost any circumstance we find ourselves, there is something we can let go of, something we can release. Maybe it is not what we want to release, but maybe we can let go of wanting to release. Maybe that is where the beginning of freedom can happen. Then we practice

relaxation, recognition, respect, and maybe restoration, instead of letting go of what is difficult to let go of.

One of the things we release is the body from our ideas of the body. There is a tremendous amount of suffering in our culture around the ideas of body or body image. Being body-conscious sometimes means being frozen and caught up with how we're supposed to look or how we don't look. Our societies around us support us in this very painful way in which the body gets a whole agenda about what it should and shouldn't be. So one of the great gifts for our body is to do something like meditation and let go of all the ideas we have about the body, and let it be itself.

The other day we did the exercise on mindfulness of the hand where we just feel the sensations of the hand. When people do that exercise, some will see the difference between the experience of the hand, and the ideas the mind has about their hand – the fingers are too much this or too little that; their hand is too this, or too that; the fingernails are not quite right, and so on. The mind's ideas can be kind of debilitating and preoccupying.

But if we let go of all those ideas, and just feel the hand as itself, the hand itself doesn't have a problem being whatever it is. It is just a hand. We can free the hand to feel itself without the burden of all those ideas. We can learn to release the body from the ideas we add on top of it.

Part of release of the body is releasing the tension that's in the body. Generally, most tension, tightness, and stress that we feel in the body is a byproduct of tension and stress in the mind. The poor body has to deal with all the stress and tension, and sometimes it becomes chronic and can be quite debilitating. We release the body from the hold of the mind so that we can allow the body to restore itself or heal itself.

We begin to appreciate how much we can release the body – we let go, not *of* the body, but *with* the body. We let the body participate in the deep process of letting go of all the unnecessary pain-producing, suffering-producing activities of the mind. Meditation is one of the great laboratories for discovering how this works – how to discover greater and greater release, relaxation, and depth.

In Buddhism, there was a debate down through the centuries about whether enlightenment happens in the mind or the body. That is probably not a

tremendously wise debate because enlightenment probably happens in both places simultaneously. But I find the fact that some people would identify the body as a locus for liberation quite inspiring. It is also inspiring that they found it in the mind. Wherever the doorway to liberation is found, it is great.

But many people don't consider that the body is the location where freedom occurs. Maybe this debate arises partly because in the ancient teachings of the Buddha, he emphasized repeatedly that there is no liberation without mindfulness of the body. He gave many synonyms for liberation. Some of them are quite lofty, for example: "There is no attainment of the deathless without mindfulness of the body," and "There is no experience of the unconditioned without mindfulness of the body." Mindfulness of the body – navigating through the body and discovering freedom through the body – is such a huge part of this tradition.

I think I want to end with the idea that maybe sometimes we should think of *sati*, usually translated as "mindfulness," as "bodyfulness": how to live in a full body, in the fullness of our body, and take time to do that. When I teach meditation retreats, I sometimes give instructions to walk around and do

the activities of the retreat at the speed of mindfulness. Often we do things at the speed of the mind, and we get caught up in the activity of the mind.

Sometimes people zip around kind of fast and do things quickly. But the speed of bodyfulness is the speed at which we can stay present for our body, and present in our experience. It is the speed of staying connected to your body. Know what's happening in your body. Don't get disconnected from your body. This is a great exercise.

Next week, we're going to do mindfulness of emotions. It turns out that the more you are mindful of your body, the easier it is to be mindful of emotions. So you might want to spend this weekend reviewing or practicing bodyfulness. Whenever it's appropriate in your weekend, see what it's like to operate at the speed of bodyfulness, of mindfulness of the body. Thank you very much.