

Dharmette: Physically Aware

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 8, 2017

For me, one of the great pleasures of my Buddhist practice has been being more and more connected to my body – making it a habit. More and more, the place where I live is in the feeling and the experience of being embodied, connected to the body. I used to be very much in my head, my thoughts, and ideas. And I certainly still am, a fair amount. But I'm never far away from the physical feeling of being embodied – being here, being connected. It's like where I live is in my body. From the body, there is a sense of presence, a radiance of awareness. How I'm aware is that I'm physically aware.

I used to think mindfulness was to be mentally aware – to know and be in the control tower. But the ability to know and to recognize what's happening still operates. If I'm going to be present with my breathing – or someone tells me, “Concentrate on your breathing” – I do almost nothing with my head, my brain. I focus on the breathing in my chest, or my torso. It's more like a whole place here in my belly and my chest becomes alive and filled with sensations. Sensing the experience happens within the body itself. Then as I sense it more

fully, there's knowing: "This is an in-breath. This is an out-breath." The mental part of it is almost like a sideshow to this sense of presence – this stability, composed of the physical and embodied experience of breathing – this radiance of awareness, established and settled, right here.

Part of the value of mindfulness of the body and being connected to the body is that it helps us to not be so lost in our thoughts. It's possible to spend decades lost in our thoughts – spinning ideas, reflecting, thinking, wondering, regretting. The intention is to cut through that – to find a simpler way of being, to not be so caught in these endless whirlpools. The Buddha used the word 'whirlpools' – whirlpools of thoughts and preoccupations. There is no way out of the whirlpool itself. But you can step away from it and into the body. The body is the alternative.

One way this works is that the body is always in the present moment, whereas the mind might not be. The mind may be in the past, thinking about something that happened before. Or it's thinking about the future. Maybe it's thinking about something in the present moment, but it's not here; it's somewhere else. Or it's thinking about fantasy, which is neither past, present, or future – neither here nor there. Who knows where fantasy is? The mind goes to these other places. You can say that the mind is always here; it doesn't go

anywhere. But the preoccupations of the mind are elsewhere. However, the body is always here. It's always in the present moment. If you're connected to the body, you are connected to the present moment.

A wonderful way this works is when my mind spins a lot. There are a lot of thoughts and concerns about something, and I can't easily just let go of my thoughts. One of the things I love doing then is to be mindful of the body thinking. What are the physical sensations? What is the physical experience of the mind being so energized, spinning, caught, or contracted around certain kinds of thoughts? I'll explore the physicality of it, and I find this delightful. It's not always pleasant exactly – tension might be there – but I find it delightful to just explore, and to be with what's going on in this world of the present moment, feeling and sensing.

Part of the delight is because I see how valuable it is to not be lost in the world of preoccupation – to step out of it and experience things from a different point of view. I like to think of this as experiencing from the point of view of the body. What is the impact on the body? How does the body experience this experience? How is the body with it? What can the body contribute to the experience, if the body brings its awareness to that experience? When the body brings its awareness to the experience, it's often – I don't want to anthropomorphize too much – but it's almost as if the body brings

compassion, openness, or acceptance to whatever is happening. My mind might not have much compassion or acceptance of the situation, but the body can hold everything. The body has space.

Another thing I like about being connected with my body, especially in meditation, is that the more I'm connected to my body, and the more I feel the physicality and the sensations of my body as they flow and move – the more space there is inside my body. And it turns out there is infinite space in there!

Physically, really, there is no space in there, or very little. If you look at the inside of the human body, which I did last week when I went to the anatomy lab, it was packed. There was nothing extra in there. Every little nook and cranny has some organ or something tucked away. It is quite full in there. But with my eyes closed, when I'm just feeling my body, I feel space. Maybe there are a lot of nerves in some places. If there are no nerves in my spleen, I may think it is just empty. And around the spaciousness in the body, there are sensations that flow and move.

This combination of peaceful open space in the body, the flow of sensations, and the settledness of the whole experience – I just find it a delight. It's such a nice place to be, and to rest. It's like a refuge, a place of safety, a place of pleasure and well-being. It is a place of safety

from being caught up in thoughts, or judgments, with the mind jumping around from place to place. The mind might still jump around, but I'm not so identified with the mind. I'm not so concerned with what goes on in the mind.

When the practice is going well and I'm in my body – practicing and centered here – that's the center of gravity. The fullness of life is here in the body. It seems that my thinking recedes into the background. Rather than my thinking disappearing, I just see that it's not very important anymore. That is very different than how it used to be for me many years ago when everything I thought was really important. Maybe none of you have succumbed to that temptation. But it used to be that everything I thought was a big drama: "This is so important! How could I be thinking about this? I should be thinking about something different. I should stop having those thoughts." It was a whole complicated world. You go into a maze, and you never find your way out. But as practice has settled for me, and I'm more in my body, this poor little mind thinks, "It's okay." It recedes into the background. It's less powerful, has less authority, and less impact on me. It doesn't run the show. I'm not concerned about it so much. I have more freedom in relationship to it.

Being in the body is one of the ways to shift the relationship we have with our whole world of thinking.

For some people, that is a radical shift. For some, the only world they know is the world of thoughts. I have found it to be phenomenally helpful to keep coming back into the body, to feel and to be in the body.

In fact, the Buddha himself made very powerful statements about how useful mindfulness of the body is, for example, “There is no freedom, there is no *nibbāna*, there is no experience of the deathless, without an experience of the body.” We want to be centered, resting, present for our experience in the body.

I hope those words are useful for you. I share them because, somehow, I feel more connected with my body today, with the rain, the quiet, the simplicity. It feels kind of cozy and nice. So, I just wanted to share how I was feeling. Thank you.