

Body (4 of 5) Restoring Wholeness in the Body

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Yesterday's topic for mindfulness of the body was respecting the body. Respecting the body partly means respecting the uniqueness of our own body and its needs. There are all kinds of physical conditions in the body that are challenging to be with. We gaze upon the challenges kindly, with compassion, respecting the body for what it is, and learning how to care for this wonderful challenging body.

In Buddhist practice, the care that we want to live from extends to ourselves as well. As we get more attuned to our body, one thing mindfulness of the body can do is help us to better feel what supports the body and what debilitates it – what is healing and helpful for it. We can

feel what is the best posture, and the best way of being with whatever is going on in our body.

I think the first time I encountered someone doing this was when I was a new Zen student a long time ago. There was a woman who had serious knee issues – she had been a runner. She used the attention to detail in her body, which she was learning through Zen practice, to learn to walk in a new way. She tried to find exactly the right angle to put her weight on her feet. With that, she found a way to walk that, for her situation, meant she didn't have to have surgery. I don't know what happened to her in the long term, but I do know that discovery inspired her, and she went on to become a doctor.

We care for the body and ask what is really the right thing for the body, and how to be with it. I have had a bad back at various times in my life. I found this to be an exquisite occasion for mindfulness, because there was such a strong feedback loop between the slightest little move, and either pain or relief in the body. I had to stay right there and be aware.

Mindfulness of the body and respecting the body can give us the information to guide us to find a way to live with the body more caringly and wisely. One of the things that can also happen as we practice is that a sense of healthiness, vitality, or harmony in the body

can be restored as we do this practice. It is not just a practice of letting go. Letting go is a process of becoming whole, a process of not excluding anything.

When we get settled, relaxed, and somewhat calm in meditation, when we start thinking about something that has some tension in it, and we feel ourselves tensing up, at some point, it becomes really clear that following the tension and getting involved in that tension, tensing up even more, is detrimental. It is not interesting. It's more interesting to not do that. So we relax, settle back, and come back to a more relaxed state. The motivation to do this is partly that we see so clearly the disadvantages of tensing up. As we see tension starting to happen, we let go and come back.

That is kind of a negative motivation. It is also possible to have a more positive motivation. As we let go, we start feeling the benefits of that in the body. It feels good to feel whole and settled, where the inner life feels peaceful, calm, settled, and harmonious. When we start getting tense or preoccupied with something, we can sometimes feel the whole physical system start to lock up or get a little bit tighter as some of the micro muscles in the body tighten up.

Or there can be a disconnection. We lose touch with the body. It is quite dramatic. Maybe some of you had the experience of minding your own business, meditating

calmly, and the mind suddenly releases a memory of a difficult event that happened in your teenage years. It turns out there is still some charge around it. I have had this happen to me. Suddenly, there is energy in the body, I sit up straight, and I get tense. The energy flows into my mind, and I'm thinking and having conversations about what happened, and reviewing it. I have lost touch with my body, lost touch with a settled and calm body. It is quite dramatic to see that movement, and it is an education about how easy it is to disconnect from the body.

As we develop mindfulness, we are developing bodyfulness – the capacity to feel and sense the body. We do this not only so we don't tense the body, but the absence of tension gives rise to feelings of healthiness, harmony, and wholeness that can be there even when the body is ill, or there is pain or other challenging things happening in the body.

There is a different kind of energy, a different kind of attentiveness in the body. This energy is peaceful, calm, holistic, sometimes cozy, and seems to spread, open, and suffuse the body. There is a gentleness that has space to hold whatever is difficult that is also there, so we are not preoccupied with and caught by the difficulty; the awareness is holding it more widely. This is not just mental awareness. There is also a bodily awareness

that can hold what is difficult. The remarkable thing is that the body can start feeling as if it has lots of space.

Some years ago I went to a cadaver lab to spend some time looking at cadavers. I was surprised by how all the organs were squeezed in there. There was almost no space inside because everything was packed with the different organs. What surprised me is that when I sit in meditation, I feel as if there is lots of space in my torso. That space gets bigger and bigger as I sit. Sometimes that space feels as if it has no boundaries – it just opens up.

The way we experience the body can be different than what is actually there, because the experience of the body is the medium through which we create room and space to be able to hold everything, and not to deny anything – to make more room for it. As things have more room, they have more room to move, more room to unfold, and more room to relax. Also, some things get healthier, and they begin to flow more. Mindfulness can support the restoration of health, of flowing energy, and the restoration of a spacious calm in the body that can hold the challenges that we have.

The wonderful thing is that as we have more space, we have more capacity to be with difficulties. One of the great contributions of Buddhist practice is to expand our capacity to be with challenges, our capacity to be

uncomfortable, and our capacity to be in conflict with people because there is more space for it all.

Part of mindfulness of the body is not only to be aware of the body, but also to have a kind of receptive, allowing attitude that allows the space to grow, and allows the energies to start flowing more fully. We feel that. We feel the goodness that might be there and we make space for it, hold it, and are aware of it. Not in a utilitarian way, as in: “I’m going to do this for a purpose; I’m going to make this or that happen.” The utilitarian approach to mindfulness is very, very limited. Rather than the utilitarian approach, mindfulness is an appreciative mode. We appreciate, rather than making something happen. In that appreciation, we receive, hold, and experience the body in a bigger way.

This is the restoration of the whole body. For me, one of the great gifts of meditation practice is the richness of living in the body that has come from the practice. May your mindfulness practice help you rest in the richness of this living, vibrating body. May you learn the wisdom of the body, its healthiness, and its capacity to hold all things.

Thank you very much.