

Mindfulness of the Body (1 of 4) Breathing with Challenges

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At the beginning of the year, I started teaching about how to practice with challenges. The plan is to continue doing that. Thinking about it today, I thought, “Well, that’s what all Buddhism is about – how to practice with and overcome challenges.” Buddhism doesn’t use that word at the center of it all. But I think that in focusing on it here this year, I am highlighting that practice is useful not only in everyday life, but also when there is stress, anxiety, confusion, and difficulty that heightens the sense that there is a challenge.

There can be a range of challenges. A challenge can be the simplest little thing, but it can also be one of the major life challenges that people have, such as sickness, old age, and death. People go through tremendously horrific experiences in their life. To call

them challenges might minimize them. But these teachings are about how to work with challenges and difficulties – what to do when life gets concentrated with a lot of intensity all at once.

This week I would like to go back to the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. In the beginning of this series, we spent a week on each foundation of mindfulness. This week, I would like to focus on mindfulness of the body. In Buddhism, mindfulness of the body has been emphasized tremendously since the time of the Buddha. It is such an important part of practice. The Buddha even said emphatically, in a variety of different ways, that there is no maturation in Dharma practice without mindfulness of the body.

In recent decades, a tremendous appreciation of the value of the body for psychological healing has developed. From the 1950s onwards, psychologists have been discovering how important it is to really drop into the body, feel the body, and feel the psychology as it manifests in the body. More recently, they have recognized how important somatic work is for trauma.

So in Buddhism, we have an emphasis on mindfulness of the body. Using the body and connecting to the body in times of challenges is invaluable. In the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, there are six exercises on mindfulness of the body. We will go through five of them

this week. The first one is breathing. In times of challenge, remember to breathe. Remember to breathe mindfully, with awareness, because when we get challenged, the breathing tends to get tight or constricted. This tends to reinforce tension and agitation, even shutting down.

It might be valuable for the breathing to stop, slow down, or be constricted if we have to get into a fight, run, or do something. But in many challenges, that is not what needs to happen. What often needs to happen is for us to calm down and take a deep look at what is going on, so that wisdom and clarity can operate. Then, especially if we feel challenged when there's not an immediate challenge present – the challenge is in the future or the past, and we are dealing with the repercussions of it – we can take time to catch our breath, come back, and breathe. We can take deep breaths and exhale.

It is invaluable to simply do the three-breath journey: maybe closing our eyes, and for just three breaths, following and being with those three breaths. As we go around in everyday life, to stop and take this three-breath journey is sometimes enough to shift and significantly change how we are, how we feel, and how we see the situation. If you do a three-breath journey once every hour, I bet that your whole day will start having a very different flavor. I come back and check in

with my breathing regularly and constantly. After all these years of practice, it has become second nature to feel and connect to my breath – to see where the constriction is, where I'm tight, what is happening in the belly, what's happening in the chest, how I am breathing, and to use the breath as a relaxation.

When the Buddha taught the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, he put breathing at the center of it because it comes first. We connect to our breathing and recognize the breath. Then, as we begin to recognize breathing, he said to begin feeling the whole body. I like to begin by feeling the experience of breathing throughout the body – wherever breathing is felt, whatever is influenced or touched by the experience of breathing, and take time to feel the somatic experience of breathing in the body. How is it?

The Buddha went on to say that after you have felt the whole body, relax the tension in the body. This is kind of a beginner's practice. However, many of you have been practicing for some time, and as I said in the guided meditation, I think that most of us, most of the time, are practicing as beginners. When we sit down, the mind is busy and agitated, spinning around with concerns. Maybe we've had a busy day, and there's tension in the body. The mind is not settled and calm and does not immediately get concentrated. So we are kind of like a

beginner. Just appreciate that maybe, as an assumption, we are mostly practicing as beginners.

Sometimes we are practicing more deeply in meditation. But people who are experienced in practice are quite willing to begin again and again, and to be beginners in meditation. But what has shifted is their attitude. One change in attitude is their willingness to be there for that experience, not to be fighting it, agitated about it, judging it, or thinking: “I’m not doing it right. I’m supposed to do it right, What is supposed to happen here?”

There is more spaciousness and a graciousness with it: “I’m here practicing beginning exercises. It’s okay.” There is a feeling that *how* we’re mindful is more important than how deep we go. Rather than jumping ahead – leapfrogging ahead into what we want to have happen in some depth of practice, this is where we take a backward step and ask: “How am I right now? How am I feeling? How am I being aware? Am I being aware with strain? Am I being aware with need, and wanting, and trying to fix something? Am I judging? Am I for or against my experience? Am I complacent? Am I here, but not really that interested in meditating – I’m just going to meditate every day; I’m just here, so I’ll just kind of daydream or something because I’m not really into it.”

So *how* is the mindfulness? How we are practicing becomes important for experienced beginners. They know that this is an important thing to look at and be with. Then, as we become aware of how we are in any situation. How are we with challenges? How are we paying attention to our difficulties and what's going on for us? Then, breathe in the middle of that. Allow yourself to breathe and feel the rhythm of breathing, the massage of breathing, maybe taking some deep breaths and exhaling long and deep. Then, with the breath at the center, start feeling the whole somatic experience of the body, as much as is easily available, and relax the body.

So these are the three steps that the Buddha offers as a beginning practice: to recognize what's happening with oneself; to feel it, to sense it, or experience it somatically; and then to relax. This is a wonderful, little, three-step process. As practice unfolds, it might seem that one of them is not really relevant and no longer necessary. Maybe you don't need to relax anymore, then you are just recognizing and feeling. At some point, feeling the experience might feel like too much, or recognizing the experience might be too much. Then the practice gets simpler and simpler.

So, when you have challenges, you can do a couple of things. You can do the three-breath journey. When you recognize, "I am challenged now," unless the threat is

immediate, take time. If there is some time and space, then take the time for at least three breaths. Close your eyes, and be really intimate with three breaths, following and connected to them – just three – and see what happens. The other is to practice the three steps that the Buddha talked about – recognize how you are, feel how you are somatically, and then relax. That can be done together with breathing.

This is beginner's practice. If you are an experienced beginner, then you know that *how* you're practicing is just as important. You can recognize how you're practicing. You can feel somatically how you're practicing – whether there is strain or tension. And you can relax how you're practicing so there is no extra tension involved in the practice that you do. If you have some challenges today, unless there is an immediate threat that needs to be addressed, I encourage you to engage with practice. Practice in the middle of it. It is invaluable to practice in challenges. It really strengthens and inspires you. That is where the muscle of practice develops, and where the maturation of practice really starts taking hold. Thank you.