

Mindfulness of the Body (2 of 4)

Postural Support in Challenges

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balanced, grounded, upright, collapse, unobstructed, fear, intentional, embodied, dismay, preoccupation, imagination, support, posture

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Hello, everyone, and welcome to the second talk in the series on mindfulness of the body, using the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness of the body as a support for working with the challenges that life gives us, no matter what the challenges are.

The second instruction the Buddha gives in his teachings on mindfulness of the body is mindfulness of posture. Posture can be a difficult and challenging topic for people. All kinds of physical conditions can exist. But it is also an integral part of human life – we are always in some physical posture. The Buddha emphasized the value of bringing attention to and really knowing the posture we're in, then discovering the different ways

that mindfulness of posture can support us tremendously.

In relation to challenges, one way that mindfulness of posture can support us is by preventing all our attention from going into our challenges – our fear, our dismay, our preoccupation, our imagination, and our spinning thoughts. If all our attention goes into our challenges, that can be a dark hole we can collapse into.

Sometimes doing this strengthens the sense of inner challenge, the fear, the dismay, or the anger. It can fuel the challenge and keep it going. Some people will spill out into fear or panic because of the loop between their thinking causing fear, and fear causing more thinking.

The same way with depression – there is a loop. That loop is strengthened by the degree to which attention is given solely to those thoughts or emotions that are there.

It is remarkable that when there is fear, anger, confusion, or greed – all the strong forces in the mind – people have a tremendous capacity for concentration. The very people who sit down to meditate and say, “I don’t have any ability to concentrate” – give them a good threat, and boy, they can be focused on it.

Everything goes into that focus – all their thoughts and feelings. Give them a good thing to be angry with, and some people can zero in one-pointedly – boom, they’re right there. They’re not going to leave it behind. It is as if

they are stuck on it. So, many people have much more capacity for concentration than they realize. It is just harder for some people to do it when there is no threat, nothing to blame, nothing to trigger their self-preoccupation, self-identity, and self-conceit, which can be a magnet for preoccupied attention.

Bringing attention to the posture breaks the hegemony of some of these strong, difficult mind states that come into play when we are with challenges. Not to deny they are real challenges, but excessive preoccupation with and absorption in them is counterproductive. We think that the more attention we can give to something, the better we can take care of it. But actually, sometimes when we have real challenges in our life, giving our attention can do the opposite. We need to find some way for our attention to be more beneficial for us as we go through challenges. One way is to have our attention rooted or grounded in our body. One of the ways to do that is to be cognizant of the posture we're in. In the meditation posture, there is a lot of value in having that posture be intentional.

For example, instead, you could just lie down in bed and completely collapse. For some people, lying in bed and really relaxing is very powerful. I don't want to undermine its value. But when there are challenges, you might not get the same benefits in the long term or in daily life, if you don't begin cultivating and valuing a

grounded intentional posture. “Intentional” means that it takes a little bit of internal effort – or intention – to maintain it. In order to maintain it consistently, there has to be consistent attention.

The upright meditation posture eventually becomes second nature. Eventually, there is a kind of meditative energy that keeps us upright and alert. But there is also a kind of foreground or background intention to stay upright. In the beginning, we’re beginners, so we slump, and we sit up straight, then we slump, until we find this intention to stay present. We take an intentional posture that allows for presence, for really being there with something – maybe turning towards it – sitting or standing upright in a balanced way, not crossing the arms or legs in a way that obstructs, limits, or closes anything down.

We sit in such a way that everything becomes open, available, present, flowing, and unobstructed within an intentional posture. We learn how to be embodied and grounded in the sensations of this posture – to be inhabiting this posture intentionally and attentionally. This is not the be-all and end-all, for sure. But we sit so it becomes second nature to be grounded and present in a good way as we go through our challenges. We sit so we learn not to collapse physically in the presence of our challenges, and not to tense up unnecessarily in the middle of our challenges.

The posture is a mirror for seeing our relationship to our challenges. If you have a balanced posture as a reference point – an aligned posture that is open, unobstructed, and present – you'll have a wonderful reference to catch yourself earlier if you collapse, if you slump, if you give up, or if you give into the pressure of anger or fear, and start spinning out. The posture is an early warning sign for a relationship to challenges that might not be beneficial for you.

Also, it is amazing that maintaining a strong balanced posture, rather than collapsing or acting out, does not deny how we're feeling. Instead, it almost gives more room for how we're feeling so that some deeper process of unfolding, evolving, and healing can happen. That process cannot happen if we collapse. It cannot happen if we engage from a place of hostility or blame. Mindfulness puts us in our body so that a deeper process of bodily wisdom and intelligence can move, relax, and open up to what's going on, so that we can think more clearly. We can see the situation more clearly without our projections, our fears, and our emotions excessively filtering our perceptions.

So, cultivate and make a practice of intentional, balanced, unobstructed posture in different circumstances. You might try it standing in line in a store. I don't know what you usually do standing there,

but you might stand there with both feet on the ground, feet apart, balanced, maybe with eyes cast down, because you don't have to see much more than when the person in front of you goes forward and you can take the next step forward. Really be there and practice this embodied, intentional attention to posture. See what you can learn about a posture that allows for a kind of strength in attention – a strength and confidence in your ability to be present and here.

Intentionality can be in how you sit in a chair. You might experiment in various times and places with not slumping or relaxing into the chair, but sitting away from the backrest – really sitting there. You are offering a stronger presence to the room and to who is there: “Here I am.”

This can be done standing, walking, and lying down. Even when people need to lie down to meditate, there is a way of taking care with the posture so that it is somewhat intentional – laying the body out in a careful and balanced way. The knees can be up, and that adds a little bit of intentionality. Sometimes people who meditate lying down will have one hand with the upper arm along the sides of the chest, and the forearm pointing right up to the ceiling. A little bit of intentionality is needed to keep that arm straight and upright. The value is in intentionality.

When walking, walk with confidence, because chances are that a confident walk offers you a beneficial posture to be in. If you put too much effort into the confidence, you might overshoot. But take a confident posture as you walk, and be embodied in that confidence. Be embodied in the walking, and track what goes on in your posture and what goes on in your body as you walk. When you're in a place where a lot of different things are going on, it is fascinating to watch the kaleidoscope of little responses and reactions in the body, for example, with something as simple as walking in the sun and then finding yourself walking in the shade. Or walking down a sidewalk when no one's there, and then someone comes in the opposite direction. All kinds of things happen. Track what goes on in the body with your responses and reactions, and see if you can maintain a confident, upright posture while walking.

Mindfulness of posture is a hugely valuable and multifaceted practice. I have only scratched the surface of it. But if you start practicing and making it second nature to have a balanced, aligned, mindful posture, then you will be ready for challenges in the future. If you first try to get the support and refuge of your posture in the middle of a challenge, you might not have developed it well enough to really make a difference. But if you build it up over time, you will be surprised. One day you will go through a challenge, and you'll

discover that your posture has provided tremendous support, so you can go through it in a balanced way. Thank you very much.