

## Mindfulness of the Body

Let's begin briefly by recalling where we have been with respect to our semester-long trip through the Noble Eightfold Path. We began with the wisdom section, consisting of Right View and Right Intention. These factors address the appropriate views and thoughts with which we should prepare our mind in order to make progress on the Path. Next we discussed the morality section, consisting of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Earlier this month, Adeesha began our discussion of the final section of the Path: concentration. This section is composed of Right Effort (which Adeesha covered) along with Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

The topic of mindfulness is a huge one, and it is summarized in a very important discourse called the *Satipatthana Sutta* (MN 10) in which the Buddha outlines four specific areas in which we should cultivate mindfulness. Tonight I'll be discussing mindfulness of the body. Next week, Chris will discuss the remaining areas, all of which are mental factors.

The first area discussed in the *Satipatthana Sutta* is the body. This is often a surprise to people, especially "spiritual" people, who may think of the body as a distraction from "spiritual" practice. But the Buddha placed a great deal of emphasis on the body:

"One thing, O monks, if developed and cultivated, leads to a strong sense of urgency; to great benefit; to great security from bondage; to mindfulness and clear comprehension; to the attainment of vision and knowledge; to a pleasant dwelling in this very life; to the realization of the fruit of knowledge and liberation. What is this one thing? It is mindfulness directed to the body." (AN 1.11)

The *Satipatthana Sutta* breaks down mindfulness of the body into six areas. We don't have time for all six tonight, but I'm going to touch on four of them.

## Breath

The first way of practicing mindfulness of the body is awareness of the breath. So if you're doing breath meditation, you're already practicing mindfulness of the body. A traditional Theravada meditation technique is to focus your attention very narrowly on the place of contact between your breath and your body, usually at the rims of the nostrils or the upper lip. You can still count breaths if you want, but the idea is to focus more on the physical sensation and less on the counting. By focusing on the physical sensation, the practice of breath meditation becomes a practice of body meditation.

## Postures & Actions

The second practice that is listed in the *Satipatthana Sutta* is mindfulness of the basic postures of the body:

"Furthermore, when walking, the monk discerns, 'I am walking.' When standing, he discerns, 'I am standing.' When sitting, he discerns, 'I am sitting.' When lying down, he discerns, 'I am lying down.' Or however his body is disposed, that is how he discerns it."

The third practice is a continuation of this to include actions of the body in a more specific sense:

"Furthermore, when going forward & returning, [a monk] makes himself fully alert; when looking toward & looking away... when bending & extending his limbs... when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe & his bowl... when eating, drinking, chewing, & savoring... when urinating & defecating... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, & remaining silent, he makes himself fully alert."

Obviously, both of these practices go beyond the meditation cushion. In the words of Bhante Gunaratana:

"[Mindfulness] means more than just staying clear about what the mind is doing while we are sitting in meditation; it means clearly

understanding every single physical and mental movement we make throughout every waking hour of every day.”<sup>1</sup>

Bhante Rahula has said that one of the most important parts of any meditation period is when you stand up at the end. This is when we make a decision to either continue our mindfulness into our normal activities or to slip back into our usual mental habits.

Most Buddhist traditions practice walking meditation, although the mechanics may differ. This practice serves the very practical need for an occasional break from sitting and also helps one to develop mindfulness of bodily postures and activities while still in a formal meditation setting. It acts as a kind of intermediate practice between the cushion and the real world.

Being mindful of our bodily positions and activities has a number of benefits. We often carry our bodies in ways that are unnecessarily stressful. By periodically bringing our full attention to our physical bodies, we become aware of the hunched shoulders, clenched jaws, and jiggling legs that often go unnoticed. This gives us the opportunity to relax these muscles, which improves our sense of well-being and further strengthens mindfulness. Even more importantly, when we focus on the body we are in the present. Much of our mental life revolves around recollection of past events and anticipation of future events. We can very easily get caught up in elaborate stories from a dead past or from a non-existent future. By focusing on the body, we ground our minds firmly in the present.

### **Analysis of the Composition of the Body**

The last practice that I'd like to talk about is the analysis of the composition of the body. In this practice we look closely at this body and consider what it really is. The simile that the Buddha uses is opening up a bag of mixed grains and picking through them: “this is a mung bean, this is a kidney bean, this is a sesame seed...”.

... in the same way, monks, a monk reflects on this very body from the soles of the feet on up, from the crown of the head on down, surrounded by skin and full of various kinds of unclean things: 'In

this body there are head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, gorge, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin-oil, saliva, mucus, fluid in the joints, urine.'

This traditional list of 31 components of the physical body is very interesting. When we think of “my body,” we tend to exclude things like gorge (undigested food), urine, and feces. But these things exist inside of each of our bodies right now. This puts us on an interesting line of thought: is my saliva “me” in the same sense that my bones are “me”?

In the time of the Buddha there was no awareness of the cellular and chemical composition of the body, but Bhante Rahula has suggested that one could continue the practice of body analysis by reflecting on these ideas. We’ve all learned what mitochondria do, but we don’t often reflect that mitochondria are part of what we consider to be ourselves. Are my mitochondria part of “me”? We learn the properties of sulfur in chemistry, but may not think of it as a component of our own bodies. Am “I” that smelly, yellow stuff?

If we look at the practice of body analysis in isolation, we might get the idea that Buddhism is anti-body. This isn’t true at all. The Buddha taught that birth in a human body is a very fortunate event. He also taught his monks to care for their physical bodies. The early Sangha was known for their clean and well-kept appearance, unlike the scary, naked, emaciated members of some other sects. So the Buddha’s teachings are not anti-body, they’re just anti-attachment-to-the-body.

So how does mindfulness of the body relate to the Noble Eightfold Path as a whole?

One benefit of this practice is to reduce our attachment to our bodies. Remember that the Buddha taught that all suffering stems from clinging and attachment. One of our most powerful attachments is to this body. Through careful observation and analysis of the body, we become aware that what we’re attached to is fragile, constantly changing (*anicca*) and often kind of disgusting or painful (*dukkha*). In short, we learn that the body isn’t worth being attached to.

We may also gain insight into the fact that our body isn't us (*anatta*). I mentioned this earlier with reference to mindfulness of the composition of the body, but it is also true for other forms of body mindfulness. As we observe our breath, we realize that we can control the process only to a very limited degree. Similarly, when we observe our bodily postures and movements, we quickly become aware of the limitations of our bodies, which also feeds a sense of "not-us-ness."

So we see that mindfulness of the body relates to the wisdom portion of the path via the Four Noble Truths and the reduction of attachment to the body. This and any other practice of mindfulness make it easier to practice the morality portion of the path, since we often make ethical mistakes when we are unmindful. Finally, mindfulness of the body helps us the practice of pure concentration, which Adeesha will be addressing in a couple weeks.

1. Gunaratana, H. (2001). *Eight mindful steps to happiness: walking the Buddha's path*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.