

## Mindfulness of the Body

Mindfulness is one of the central teachings of Buddhism. Bhante Gunaratana describes it broadly as the practice that trains us to do everything with full awareness of what we are doing. The Noble Eightfold Path, the main summary of the Buddha's teachings, lists "Right Mindfulness" as its seventh element. Of course, *right* mindfulness implies that there are some kinds of mindfulness that are better than others. We find the answer to that implied question in the Satipatthana Sutta (MN 10) in which the Buddha defines four broad areas in which we should develop mindfulness.

Tonight I'll be discussing the first of those four areas: mindfulness of the body. Many people think of Buddhism as a very cerebral religion and are a bit surprised at the emphasis that it places on the body. But the Buddha was very clear about its importance:

"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)

Happily, mindfulness of the body begins with something that we're already doing: breath meditation. By looking at breath meditation in this larger context of mindfulness of the body, we can make many observations that will enhance our practice. So why is breath meditation so important? Or, to ask the question another way, what is it about the breath that makes it such an effective object for mindfulness practice?

The breath is always present, so even if you are not on the meditation cushion and you've left your mala in your dorm room, you'll still have the breath. This makes it easy to bring our mindfulness practice into everyday life.

The breath is common to all living beings and is a reminder of our connection to them. You, me, the Dalai Lama, Whoopi Goldberg, yaks—we all breathe.

The breath happens in the present. We spend a lot of our time thinking about a dead past or a purely hypothetical future. If we focus on the breath, we automatically place ourselves in the present moment, the only time that is actually real.

The breath is continually changing. It's moving constantly. It gets slower, faster, deeper, shallower, often seemingly by itself, with no intention from us. With each breath we can notice slightly different physical sensations. The breathing process also involves slight emotional changes. When the lungs empty we feel a tiny unpleasant sensation of anxiety until we fill them again. When we fill them, we experience a pleasant sensation. But then a new unpleasant sensation arises which prompts us to exhale. And so on. This constant change reminds us of the impermanence of all phenomena.

When we begin breath meditation, it's usually best to focus on a limited area, like the tactile sensations at the rims of the nostrils or the upper lip. As our concentration becomes more stable, we can expand our area of focus, taking in the body as a whole. When we do this, we see that the breath is not an isolated phenomenon. It has repercussions throughout the body. Some of these are obvious, like the rise and fall of the abdomen, but there are also more subtle breath-related changes that you'll notice as your mindfulness improves. We realize that the whole body is involved in the breathing process. This makes breath meditation the perfect gateway to other aspects of mindfulness of the body.

After the breath, the Satipatthana Sutta goes on to discuss mindfulness of the four postures: sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. In terms of our formal meditation practice, this means being aware of the seated posture itself, the sensations and thoughts that arise in relation to it, and the continually changing nature of all of these.

When we sit down at first, we probably feel pretty good. We've got a stable base, our back is straight, our hands are perfectly balanced—all is good. It doesn't take long before gravity starts acting on our body. The

head nods, our shoulders droop. The vertebrae seem to squinch together. With mindfulness, we notice these things and employ effort to maintain our seated meditation posture. We make subtle adjustments such as pulling the shoulders back a bit if we've begun to slouch. Be mindful of this dynamic process that is involved in sitting still.

Most Buddhist traditions practice some form of walking meditation. The way I've been taught involves walking *very* slowly between two points. We're not really going anywhere, so the mind is free to focus on the walking itself: the sensation of the foot on the ground, the muscular contractions that move the legs, and the intention in the mind that causes those contractions. There's a *lot* going on when we walk.

One of the many benefits of walking meditation is that it represents an intermediate state between our seated meditation practice and our normal lives. Remember that our formal practice is only part of the story. We do our formal practice in order to strengthen our mindfulness for use in everyday life. And that's where the Satipatthana Sutta takes us next: the normal activities of life:

*"Furthermore, when going forward & returning, he 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.*

So mindfulness of the body isn't just for the meditation hall. It's something that we can do all the time. Just as we always have the breath, we always have the body. When we develop mindfulness of the body in everyday life, we inevitably take things a little slower, make fewer sloppy mistakes, and are less likely to launch into actions or speech that we will regret later.

An added benefit is that if we get in the habit of observing the body carefully, we can notice when tension is beginning to develop. We can then let go of the tension before it becomes harmful to ourselves or others.

Speaking of others, I'd like to close with a note about that. This intense inward focus on our own breath and body can seem a bit self-absorbed. But remember that the different aspects of the Path feed into each other. Right mindfulness naturally leads to more ethical behavior and, if developed with Right Intension, is an act of compassion to all those around us.