Body and Mind

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 1:00:24

Settling into the present moment, allowing your body to relax.

It's often helpful to begin a period of meditation with checking in to see if the body and mind are relaxed. It can be helpful to scan through your body, checking for areas of tension and consciously relaxing the muscles of the body—particularly in places where you may hold tension, around the eyes or the jaw, in the neck and shoulders, throughout the torso. Check into whether there's any tension held in your buttocks and hips. Sometimes we unconsciously tighten that area. See if you can relax those muscles, scanning through and checking into whether there's any obvious or subtle muscular tension in the body.

Having relaxed as much as possible the muscles of the body, I often find it helpful to relax the core of the body, allowing an opening to relaxation behind your eyes. Relaxing inside your throat. Relax your heart and your lungs. Let go of tension in your stomach, your intestines, all the organs inside your abdominal cavity.

And see too if you can relax your mind. One way to approach this is to think of your brain as if it were a muscle. See if you can relax your brain, letting go of thoughts of the past, the future, even thoughts of the present moment in favor of connecting with actual felt experience here and now. There's nowhere to go. No one to be. And very little to do right now.

Having relaxed your body and mind as much as you have access to in this moment, allow your attention to open to the experience of hearing—receiving the sounds, subtle sounds and obvious sounds, distant sounds and sounds nearby. Allow the sounds to come and go. Receive them almost as if you were listening to music.

Letting go now of directing the attention to hearing, allow the attention to settle into the body, connecting to the sense of the body sitting here, receiving the sensations in the body almost as if you were listening to them. Within the body, connect to your anchor—the breathing, the sense of the whole body, hearing, whatever your anchor is. Receiving, relaxing, and allowing the anchor to come to you rather than having a sense of going out and looking for the experience. Settle back and see if you can allow that experience to find you.

As you rest with this anchor for your attention, other experiences will arise and be known. Other body sensations—pressure, heat, tension, coolness, tightness, lightness, heaviness. Thoughts, sounds, smells. There's no need to hold tightly to the anchor as if that were somehow a better object. Any experience can be used to cultivate mindfulness. We can open to any experience. So as other experiences arise, allow

mindfulness to connect with those.

One experience that may come up from time to time is emotion. When emotions arise, it can be helpful to acknowledge them with a gentle, soft note—whatever the emotion is: happiness, fear, loneliness, sadness. Just a quiet whisper in the mind, acknowledging the emotion.

You might recognize an emotion because of a strong pattern of thinking. We often understand emotion through thought. If you notice that a strong pattern of thinking is recurring, check in and see if there's an emotion underneath. Often if that emotion is acknowledged, the thoughts will diminish.

When emotions are strong, it's very helpful to recognize how the emotion feels in the body. There's a very strong connection between the mind and the body, especially around emotion. So if there's an emotion, check into how the body experiences it. Emotions will come and go as all other experiences come and go.

Be open in your meditation to whatever arises for you—sights, sounds, smells, moods, emotions, thoughts. And if ever it seems helpful, use the anchor for attention to ground and connect with mindfulness.

I have a few more thoughts to say about emotion. If you're using the noting practice to support your mindfulness, it's not necessary with emotions, if you don't know what the emotion is, to figure it out or to have a precise label for it. If you know that you're having some kind of an emotion but don't really know what it is, a simple note of "emotion" or "feeling" is fine. You don't need to figure out what the emotion is, and I encourage you not to try to figure it out, in fact.

Sometimes too we have experiences with emotions where it feels like there's a chaotic flow of many different emotions—anger and frustration and fear and loneliness and sadness—and it can feel just like this chaos of emotions.

And it feels a little odd to try to pick out one of those to name that complex of emotions with the noting. So you could just use "chaos." Chaos is happening right now. Or "confusion." It's not necessary to have a precise note.

Actually, for the noting in general, if you're experiencing hearing, or in daily practice seeing, it's not necessary to be detailed about what you're hearing or seeing. Just a simple note of "hearing" or "seeing" is sufficient. Simplicity with the noting—whatever is obvious for you is helpful as a note.

I wanted to say something about how thoughts and emotions work together. There's a very tight connection between thinking and emotions, at least in our culture it seems. When we have strong emotions, they often produce a lot of thoughts. It's as though the emotion is trying to get our attention through producing thoughts. So there's a very tight connection: if we're having strong emotion, thoughts will manifest.

If you're having a strong pattern of thinking, you may well have an emotion underneath it, especially a pattern of thinking that comes up repetitively. There may be an emotion underneath it. A lot of planning

thoughts, for instance, may have some anxiety beneath them. So if you can, in noticing a pattern of thinking, recognize an emotion underlying it—the emotion may be trying to get your attention. Actually bringing attention to the emotion at that time is what the emotion wants. It doesn't then need to rattle the cage and produce all these thoughts. The thoughts can often quiet down if you attend to the emotion itself.

So emotions produce thoughts, and thoughts produce emotions. You may notice this in your sitting. You're sitting quietly and suddenly a memory arises—this often happens. A memory arises in our experience, and we react to that memory, as Joseph was mentioning last night. If a thought arises that we have a feeling about, that feeling can arise because of the thought. There's a very strong link between the two. So exploring this in your experience is worthwhile.

There's also a fairly strong link between emotions and bodily experience. I wouldn't go so far as to say that all emotion is experienced in the body, but there's often a physical correlate to emotion—very often. Anger perhaps feels like pressure and heat. Loneliness may feel like heaviness. Sadness may have constriction in the throat or in the heart. There are often physical sensations that come along with emotions.

This is a great place to ground our attention if the emotion is strong. It helps to bring us out of the mental world into the physical. It's very grounding to bring attention into the body when we're paying attention to emotions.

If you are using the noting and you bring attention into the body when paying attention to emotions, I encourage you to let go of the note of the emotion. So if you're noting fear, for example—fear, fear is happening—and then you notice there's a contraction in your abdomen associated with the fear, when you turn to that experience, use the note "contraction" rather than "fear." The physical sensations are not the emotion; they are physical sensations. Contraction is contraction. The fear is a mental experience, and you're attending to physical experience. It's very helpful to clarify what you're actually paying attention to—to use the note of the physical sensations you're experiencing as opposed to the emotion.

This also points to another cycle that happens for us. Body sensations arise because of emotion—when emotions arise, there's a physical correlate. But physical sensations can also arise in the absence of emotion. A contraction in the throat, for example, can arise just because a contraction in the throat is arising. And if there's a familiarity with contraction in the throat being linked to a particular emotion, sometimes what the mind will do is feel that contraction and then start to assign an emotion to it, actually constructing the emotion.

So it's very helpful to be attuned to the difference between the body and the mind here. If you're feeling heaviness and pressure in your heart, maybe it is sadness, maybe there's sadness there—maybe not. Hold an open mind about the fact that an emotion may or may not be present with particular body sensations.

I often find that if I end up with a particular sensation in the body, a feeling similar to frustration, for

instance, I will notice the mind starts scanning the environment to find out what I'm frustrated about. So be aware that this kind of cycle also happens in our minds and bodies.

A question arose about feeling the sense of self around decisions being made, choices, or actions. The questioner could see that there's an intention arising and then action taken on it, but pointed to the teachings about having a choice whether to refrain from wholesome or negative actions. That still feels like me, they said. Somewhere along the line, I'm the one who's making the choice.

This is a very common question, and particularly around choice and intention. This is a very powerful place where we identify. The way I'd suggest working with it is just to notice that there is a feeling of me or I doing that. The way, at least in my own experience, the way to begin to study no-self is to study the self. It's to study what feels like self. So anytime it feels like there's a sense of self, get familiar with that. What is it that you are calling self there? So that's one aspect in terms of the exploration of self and no-self.

The other piece about who's making the choice—I've had times in my practice where I've seen choice being made, choices are made, and it's clear that the choices are coming out of conditions. Those conditions either have the habit of greed, aversion, and delusion behind them, or wisdom behind them. So choices are made by greed, aversion, and delusion, or choices are made by wisdom. There's no I making the choice. The choices are made by the confluence of patterns and mind states that are arising in the moment. If it feels like you have a choice, choose skillfully.

Another question came about the seven factors of awakening: noticing the various enlightenment factors coming and going, and curiosity about what conditions support the arising of investigation, energy, and also the happiness that leads to concentration. What are the other conditions around them that support them?

This is a huge topic. The main thing I would encourage is that the seven factors are in that order and they do each support each other in that order. So mindfulness, when we bring the sense of mindfulness, supports that interest. Interest can also be generated through a little more precision of attention, bringing a little closer attention, but not a tight attention.

Energy arises through the application of our energy. Mindfulness supports energy. Energy also arises from a sense of spiritual urgency—for instance, a reflection on your own impermanence can bring energy into the system. So there are many, many factors that support it. In your own experience, as you're noticing the arising of these factors, can you notice what is supporting that arising in the moment?

Have a lovely day. Be mindful.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.