

# Healing the Mind-Body Relationship

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There is a Body: Exploring the mind-body relationship.

One of the exercises given in the Satipatthana Sutta (often considered the most important teaching because it guides us along a 'direct path' to liberation and is suited to both lay and monastic practitioners) is to note: "There is a body" while sitting in formal meditation.

This might provoke the thought "Of course there's a body, I'm sitting here, what's the point in stating the obvious?" A perfectly reasonable question. But remember we're in formal meditation, so questions are just another thing to be aware of. So we note "questioning ... questioning" and explore the experience of questioning. What flavours do we find here? The flavour of uncertainty perhaps? That's one I find quite easily in meditation – at least one thing I can usually count on!

Changing the noting word to "Uncertainty ... uncertainty..." allows me relax into a new view of experience. Sometimes I need to relax and allow uncertainty show me its nebulous aspect. Clouds of doubt may seem to be puffing out of the body. Where am I in all this strangeness? Sometimes I seem to be centred in one or other of the puffing clouds. Sometimes I seem to be lured back inside the tissues of the body. The noting words might change to "heaviness ... heaviness ..." as I register the earthy nature of the body. The closer I get, the more certain I feel. Something seems reliable at last. For a moment!

For a moment I know the hardness and heaviness of the bones in the arms, the back, the legs, the skull, and then uncertainty creeps in again: Whose arms? ... There seem to be arms hanging from my shoulders as usual. And if I try, I can lift them. But the notion 'my arms' doesn't seem to fit. The phrase "There is a body" comes back to mind and now finds resonance. This no longer seems to be stating the obvious, but a lifeline, a way of making sense of a strange and unsettling situation.

Knowing the body objectively as fostered by the phrase "there is a body", I sense gratitude for its stability, its powers of movement; for the life it offers, moment after moment. And yet it is, in this moment at least, quite obviously not me, not mine. Another question arises: How can something so close, so intimate, be other than me and mine? In answer, fear and aversion displace gratitude, compete for dominance, struggle to proclaim their story. But neither can get a lasting grip on the situation; the body simply breathes through them. It takes no notice, bless it!

The body-mind relationship is complex. At times we identify with the body, at other times with some aspect of the mind: feelings, perceptions, habits, consciousness. Its like being made up of a squabbling committee! And yet all our complex mental life, our hopes, fears, ambitions, dreams – all depend on their

being a body breathing away quietly in the background, heart pumping, stomach digesting, feet walking.

In our delusion, we take this miracle of biology totally for granted. Not a healthy way of relating to our earthly nature. The Satipatthana exercise of noting “there is a body” gives us a practical way of healing the mind-body relationship.

Like all intimate relationships, the mind-body one is a challenge. Who likes being totally dependent? And yet here we are, tied up within a very unreliable, mortal body, full of blood, sweat and tears, liable to feel pain at any moment, prone to illness, growing older and less able day by day. No wonder the mind tries to deny such an unedifying relationship, escape into fantasy!

Luckily the body holds no grudges. And luckily, greed, hatred and delusion are no more permanent and reliable than gratitude, compassion or any other state of mind. Within the gaze of mindfulness, the body is the perfect partner. It puts a limit on fantasies of hope and fear, and gives delusion free reign to express distress and displeasure at being tied up in chains of mortality. When the storm abates, its there, ready to get on with the practicalities of life.

Try the exercise sometime: sit in meditation and note “There is a body”. Let the reflection take you on whatever merry-go-round it likes, trusting this as the Buddha’s suggestion for how we might heal our mind-body relationship.

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