

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation | **Class 2 – Mindfulness of the Body**

Adapted with permission from a handout by Gil Fronsdal, at our sister center, Insight Meditation Center

Introduction

Mindfulness of breathing is a wonderful beginning to cultivating awareness. It strengthens our ability to concentrate and steadies attention on our present moment experience. It also weakens our tendency to get lost in reactive emotions and preoccupations. With time, attention to the breath helps us develop a clear, non-reactive awareness that can then be turned to the full range of human experience. As mindfulness develops, we begin to bring this awareness to more areas of our lives.

At its core, Mindfulness is an *embodied* practice. By practicing mindfulness, we learn to live in and through our bodies. Learning to be mindful of bodily experiences is one of the most useful aspects of mindfulness. It is much easier to have a balanced, healthy awareness of the rest of our lives when we are in touch with our immediate physical experience.

This week, we expand mindfulness practice to include the body. Many people ignore the experience of their bodies. The busier a person's life, the easier it is to discount the importance of staying in touch with how the body feels. Many people may be attentive to their body, but from the outside in—they are concerned about body image and appearance. Mindfulness of the body is attention from the inside out. We notice what the body is feeling, in and of itself. Giving a generous amount of time to be with the felt sense of the body helps the body relax. Remaining mindful of the body is also a safeguard against getting wound up with mental preoccupations.

Benefits of Mindfulness of the Body

Mindfulness of the body has several benefits. First, cultivating mindfulness of the body increases our familiarity with our bodies and with how the body responds to our inner and outer lives, to our thoughts and emotions, and to events around us. The Buddha saw the human mind and body as unified. When we suppress or ignore aspects of our emotional, cognitive, and choice-driven experiences, we also tend to disconnect from the body, from the physical manifestations of experience. Conversely, when we distance ourselves from our physical experience, we lose touch with our inner life of emotions and thoughts. The awakening of the body from within that comes with mindfulness can help us to discover, not only our repressed emotions, but also, more importantly, a greater capacity to respond to the world with healthy emotions and motivations.

Second, in cultivating mindfulness we are developing non-reactivity, including the ability to be present for our experience without turning away, habitually seeking or resisting change, or clinging to pleasant experiences and avoiding unpleasant ones. All too often, automatic desires, aversions, preferences, and judgments interfere with our ability to know what is actually happening. Learning to be aware, rather than to automatically and unconsciously react, makes possible a deeper understanding of the present moment and our reaction to it. This gives us more freedom to choose our response. Being non-reactive and present for our physical experience teaches us how to be present with the rest of our lives.

Last, but not least, mindfulness of physical sensations helps us both to relax tension and to understand its causes.

Mindfulness Exercises for the Second Week

- Continue your daily twenty-minute meditation session.
- In the midst of your regular activities, devote two one-hour periods during the week to being mindful of your body. During this time, perhaps using a timer or some other cue to remind yourself, periodically check in with your body, maybe every five minutes or so. Notice, in particular, your shoulders, stomach, face, and hands. If you find tension in any of these places, relax.
- Devote one meal to eating slowly and mindfully, paying attention to the tastes, textures, temperature, and other qualities of your food, and to the experience of your body eating. (When does your body tell you that you have had enough?) If possible, eat the meal in silence, with no other activities to distract you. You might want to put down your spoon or fork between bites. Whenever your mind wanders, or whenever you get caught up in reactions to what is happening, relax and come back to the simplicity of eating mindfully.
- Start noticing when, how and by what, your attention becomes distracted or fragmented. Are there any common themes or patterns in the kinds of thoughts, feelings, activities, or pre-occupations where your mindfulness disappears? If you discover any, discuss what you find with somebody: a friend, relative, or colleague.

Meditation Instruction – Mindfulness of the Body

During meditation, center your awareness on the physical sensations of breathing. With dedication, without strain, keep breathing in the foreground of attention. The idea is to be relaxed and receptive while alert and attentive. As long as sensations, sounds, thoughts, or feelings are in the background of awareness, allow them to remain there while you rest your attention on the sensations of breathing.

When a strong physical sensation makes it difficult for you to stay with breathing, simply move your awareness to this new compelling sensation. The art of mindfulness is recognizing what is predominant, then sustaining an intimate mindfulness with it. When the mind wanders from mindful connection with a sensation, gently, without judgment, return your attention to the physical sensation.

As if your entire body, internally and externally, was a sensing organ, sense, feel, your physical experiences. Allow them to be. Drop any commentary or evaluations you may have, and see, sense, the sensations directly instead. Carefully explore any particular sensations that make up the experience--hardness or softness, warmth or coolness, tingling, tenseness, pressure, burning, throbbing, lightness, etc. Let your awareness become intimate with each experience. Notice what happens to the sensations. Do they become stronger or weaker, larger or smaller, or stay the same?

As an aid to both acknowledging the physical experience and sustaining your focus, you can ever so softly label the experience. The labeling is a gentle, ongoing whisper in the mind that keeps the attention steady on the object of mindfulness. You should primarily sense directly the experience and what happens to it as you are present for it.

Be alert for when the focus of your attention shifts from the physical sensations themselves to your thoughts and reactions to the sensations. If this occurs, gently return your attention back to the felt-sense of the sensations. Try to keep yourself independent of whatever thoughts and reactions you might have. Relax.

Once a physical sensation has disappeared or is no longer compelling, you can return to mindfulness of breathing until some other sensation calls your attention.