

From the Inside Out: Meeting life with your whole body

By Tara Brach

There is one thing that, when cultivated and regularly practiced, leads to deep spiritual intention, to peace, to mindfulness and clear comprehension, to vision and knowledge, to a happy life here and now, and to the culmination of wisdom and awakening. And what is that one thing? It is mindfulness centered on the body.

The Buddha, Anguttara Nikaya

Awareness of sensations is the first foundation of mindfulness because whatever we experience—feelings, emotions, thoughts and sensory perceptions —also arise as sensations in the body. We practice mindfulness of our body by opening to the changing stream of sensations without grasping or resistance. We may feel fear or joy, the intensity of aliveness or numbness. The Buddha states that this mindfulness is not a distanced kind of witnessing and suggests that we “observe sensations within sensations.” This means not imagining our hand, but directly feeling the energy that is our hand. We are training to experience the body from the inside out.

When we first begin this practice, we usually notice what the Buddha described as “seeing the waterfall” of thoughts—judging, commenting, worrying, planning. This waterfall, energized by our basic conditioning of wanting and fearing, carries us away from experiencing the moment. When sensations become unpleasant, our first reaction, such as a flinch, is instantaneous and unconscious—we try to get away from what we don’t like. We then compound this reaction by taking the unpleasantness personally. If we’re not mindful, the bare experience of sensations can, within moments, proliferate into suffering.

The chronic fatigue and headaches my friend Louise suffered made her feel that she was basically flawed. Every time her body became achy or tired, she immediately began to condemn herself. Assuming that sickness was a reflection of her weak character, each cycle of illness deepened her feelings of shame. She fearfully fast-forwarded into the future—“I’ll never get well”—and felt swamped in depression. Louise used food, mystery novels and obsessive thinking to leave her body and avoid feeling pain and fear. Some days she felt as if being sick and defective defined her entire existence.

Reacting against unpleasant sensations is a muscle—it gets stronger with exercise. As Louise discovered, our past habits of reacting color how we perceive and respond to the present moment. Rather than simply feeling the sensations of a headache, Louise was also reacting to her historical experience. A headache meant she was flawed and that her life would always be miserable. With each new arising of unpleasant sensations, she repeated the same sequence of reactions: pain, flawed self, fearful self, depressed self.

The chain of reactivity to unpleasant sensations is most extreme if we have been traumatized. After the terror and wounding of such experiences, the reflex to push away pain goes into overdrive, severing us from major parts of our physical and emotional life. Over the years, this buried fear and pain is periodically unleashed. Our partner might raise her voice in irritation, and the full force of historical wounding—all the terror or rage that lives in our body—can be triggered. Whether or not there is any present danger, we feel at risk, compelled to find a way out of the pain.

Even if we haven't been traumatized, we're conditioned to disconnect from our physical experience. In contrast to indigenous cultures that are more at home in the physical world, our Western culture views nature, including our living, dying bodies, as something to mistrust. Not only do we try to "kill" pain, we control and subdue pleasure as well. Early on we learned that our natural urges—being exuberant and wild, sexual and aggressive—were frowned upon. We learned that to be good we had to get rid of certain feelings. In order to belong, we split off from the full aliveness in our body. For many, it's not until we reach middle age that we realize we're out of touch with our wildness and vulnerability, our playfulness and vitality.

Coming Back to Our Body

We heal by reconnecting to the parts of our experience that we habitually push away. Yet, because we feel so unsafe, especially in the aftermath of trauma, opening mindfully to our physical experience may happen gradually. We begin by learning to put our toe in the river and, compassionately, step back when necessary. We do what we can to create a conducive inner environment—relaxing our body, sending ourselves messages of kindness. Sometimes we need the support of a meditation teacher, healer or therapist to help us ease into the raw sensations that we've been avoiding.

What happens when we bring a clear, kind attention to the sensations in our body? If we feel angry, what happens when we open to the heat and explosive pressure of anger? As we recognize the intensity of these sensations with awareness, the energy, rather than getting trapped, continues on its natural course. The knots of anger unfold, transform and eventually dissolve. This doesn't necessarily happen right away. Like the weather, anger comes and goes and, sometimes, it's turbulent. We might find that by making room for today's anger, we open the door to old, buried anger. Or we might find that anger turns into hurt, fear or loneliness.

In both Buddhist psychology and Western experiential therapy, an accepting awareness of sensations is central to transformation. Emotions, a combination of physical sensations and the stories we tell ourselves, continue to cause suffering until we experience them where they live in our body. If we bring a steady attention to the immediate physical experience of an emotion, past sensations linked to it are "de-repressed." By releasing the charged pockets of historical pain, we become increasingly able to meet new situations with a wakeful and fresh presence. As we bring a gentle attention to our body, we reclaim our life and our spirit. We discover, as Rumi writes, that "The cure for the pain is in the pain."

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Seeing Life As It Is

When asked to describe her spiritual practice, a Zen nun from fifteenth century Japan said, "I meet life with my whole body." Awareness of sensations brings us fully into the present moment. When we meet as pure sensation whatever arises, we see clearly how everything is constantly changing; how there is no self causing sensations to arise, no self that sensations happen to. They arise and pass on their own. By attending to the life of our body, we begin to see that we're part of the natural world. This entire universe is made up of changing, moving energies, and our bodies are one element of the dance.

Understanding this was a transfiguring experience for Louise. One day, after walking along the banks of the Potomac, she found a spot to sit and meditate. As she grew still, she could feel the firm ground under her, hear the sounds of birds and moving water, see the great sycamores leaning out over the river. When the inevitable tiredness and aches in her body

arose, instead of condemning them and herself in her usual way, she opened her eyes and looked around. Still feeling her body from the inside, Louise also included in her awareness the earth and sky, the brightness of the day and sound of the water against rock. Her body shared the rocky hardness, mossy tenderness and firm pressure of the earth. She felt how her body was pulsing, vibrating, changing like the swirling currents in the river. She belonged to the earth, and the sensations of pain she was feeling were part of the natural process of life. Her pain was the earth's pain.

As Louise released the weighty layers of self-judgment surrounding her sickness, she began to regard herself with a deep tenderness. "I felt free to be a caretaker of the earth," she told me. "The sensations of hurt and fear were there, and so were the wild rushing water and the leaves dancing in the breeze. All of it was living in my heart." By recognizing that the sensations of pain and shame and fear were not personal, Louise was able to relax into the open awareness that lets life simply unfold.

In the moments when we wakefully let be, we experience life as it is. As Hakuin Zenji wrote, "This very place is the Lotus Land, this very body, the Buddha." The Lotus Land is the cherished place of awakening that is always available in the present moment. When we meet life with our whole body, we are the Buddha—the Awakened One—beholding the changing stream of sensations, feelings and thoughts. Everything is alive, the whole world lives inside us. As we let life live through us, we experience the boundlessness of our true nature.