

THE FEELING BODY

One thing that I notice about so many people who are new to meditation, new to spiritual practice, and even a lot of us who are more experienced is that basically we need to become more comfortable with feelings and emotions (bodily sensations). And this becoming comfortable with bodily sensations is essential if we are to live a happy and satisfying life. Becoming comfortable with all our bodily sensations can be done very effectively through body awareness.

What we need to remember is that meditation is not about reaching a certain stage or experiencing a certain state of mind, but about having a full-blooded, authentic experience of oneself as one is and being able to observe ourselves. What we need to do is to feel our body, that is to feel our body with awareness, to feel all the sensations that are present. There is nothing more we need to do. We just feel whatever sensations are alive in the body now and that includes the breath too. I

There are of course many benefits of body awareness in meditation but one benefit that I have experienced is that it helps with using appropriate effort. I long had a tendency to be driven in meditation, driven by an idea picked up from God knows where. The idea was that I had somewhere to reach, and that somewhere was never where I actually was, surprise, surprise.

This led to a lot of straining and over exertion in meditation and at the end of a session I would feel like collapsing in a heap, exhausted. What is so simple but unfortunately I was never taught (though maybe I was and didn't listen) is that the body can show us how we are doing, can show us the kind of effort we are using. For example, the head may strain forward, the chest may tighten, or the belly may tense up. These can all be signs that we are not using appropriate effort, they can be signs that we are straining. Or we may be drifting and be out of touch with our body, which again is an indicator of how we are doing. If we are in touch with the body as we practice we learn to see these signs early and so save ourselves a lot of headaches, literally.

Another benefit of body awareness is that it allows integration and healing to happen. A lot of us have certain aspects of ourselves that we find unacceptable which means we are uncomfortable with them. We may have painful memories from the past, we may have long held hurt from the past, or resentments going back in some cases for decades. What we can easily tend toward is to trace back and to know why we the person we are. I think many therapies encourage this. In some cases of course it may be appropriate to do so if done with skill and care. What I'm talking about here however is not analysis, it is the end of it analysis. In meditation we are not trying to work out all the reasons why we are the person we are.

What we need to remember is that all this hurt and all these memories are present right here in the body. Our personal history is stored within the body, every thought we have, every incident in our life we have has an effect on the body. If it's a kind thought or event the body responds positively, if a nasty thought or painful event then the opposite happens, it contracts. As we (as most of us will have experienced) relax and bring awareness into the tensions and contractions of the body it eventually relaxes and releases the energy stored in them. We may start jerking as a consequence of this, or memories may arise, tears may flow, but what is happening is that the unresolved issues of the past, the tensions that we may have carried around for years are slowly being resolved and dissolved. This happens because we are no longer ignoring the body but giving it the attention it deserves. We could even say that we are listening to the body and the reward of that listening is the healing of our (quite often unacknowledged) pain that we have carried around for years. Also as the tensions and contractions begin to release we will also experience more energy, we will experience more vitality and aliveness than we have previously. It can be a welcome to life experience.

It's easy to speak of body awareness but how exactly do we do it? What I mean by the term is the act of bringing a certain quality of feeling and listening to the body, a quality of warm creative interest to the feelings, sensations and deeper felt senses within the body. This is not thinking about the body nor is it relating to an image we have of it in our minds. What body awareness means is to feel the body with the body. This is not a technique that can be taught but a spirit of curiosity about our selves.

For instance we may be experiencing a sensation of something vaguely uncomfortable in our belly. All we need do in this situation is to allow the feeling to be there, we need first to accept the feeling of discomfort. Allow it to be there like you allow the breath to be there. What the sensation wants to do is to release itself. However, most of the time we are too busy ignoring ourselves for some "greater" purpose. So we allow it to be there, we allow it to arise into consciousness and to pass away. Our job is not to interfere with it but to be a space for it. This is not something that is only done on our meditation cushion but can be done whilst buying your biscuits at Tesco, collecting your winnings in the betting shop, whilst talking to a friend, or doing your famous belly dance routine.

All the emotional healing that comes from body awareness is a wonderful thing. But in my opinion it isn't the greatest benefit. The greatest benefit is that awareness of the body allows us to be present with life whilst it's happening. A lot of the time we live a life of abstraction, that is we live our lives in our heads. We prefer to think about life than to feel it. We prefer to think about our life than to live it. We often get lost in thinking about how we would like our life to be, or we think about how our life could be, or even worse how it should. What's happening whilst we're doing this?...life is going on and we are missing it. This doesn't

mean that we don't think about our life when appropriate, but means that we don't get lost in constant fantasy about it.

If we allow ourselves to be constantly lost in our thinking minds we will be in constant conflict, always ill at ease. Like the man who was sitting in the centre of a giant concert hall listening to the most wonderful symphony he had ever heard. The place was full and everyone around him was completely rapt by the sheer brilliance of the music. Suddenly he had a thought and a moment of panic "Did I lock the car?" "Of course I locked the car," he repeats to himself, "just enjoy the show man." He rests back into listening. Then another thought attacks him, "are you sure you locked it, I can't remember actually doing it. The car is new and sure to get stolen?" "oh for goodness sake I always lock the car, don't I, it'll be fine." He shouts to himself.

And on and on it goes. The poor man couldn't leave the hall and couldn't enjoy what was going to be a night of great joy. All this because he believed and was caught up in the thoughts. He had two choices, either to do something about it and go out and check, (in this case however he couldn't move) or to forget it and to sit and enjoy the show. He couldn't do either so sat in conflict for the rest of the show.

Q, "But isn't it good to worry about things a little, it means we care and we will get things done?"

A, In my opinion no. Worry, being caught up in anxious thoughts is a state of inertia. It's a state of being stuck in our neurotic thinking which leads to a feeling of helplessness.

Actually it's not thinking that's the problem but the identification with thinking. Thoughts themselves are natural but it's when we believe them that the trouble starts. If we practice awareness of the body it allows us to watch the thoughts rather than getting lost in them. This is great a freedom.

Written by Suryacitta