

Ralph Steele
Week Four, *Mindfulness of the Body*
February 27, 2017
“Turning Toward Insight and Concentration”



This is the fourth week of the series on mindfulness of the body. This particular talk is on mindfulness immersed in the body. The doorway to that is working with insight and concentration. In the third talk, the disadvantage of attachments, I mentioned a basic formula, training wheels, which is excellent in the practice of cultivating concentration and deepening one's insight. Let me review it here before we move on.

[This practice is] remaining focused on the body in and of itself with ardency, alertness. Ardency is putting your heart into it. Being alert. The various components that help us to be alert, correct intention, attentiveness and noticing the results. Mindfulness, right mindfulness. We know that very well by now, [how to work] with that. Subduing greed and distress with no reference to the world, and letting yourself die, to just let go and be with the body. Finally, understanding how precious this practice is. How fortunate we are. There's mass suffering that's going on our planet. Perhaps this always has been. We don't know, but because of communication we know that there's a lot that's going on, on so many different levels.

[A second practice is] the cultivation of insight and concentration, being a physician, working with this body, and utilizing the noble truth [which] begins to cultivate the breath. The breath is such a wonderful task. We can just settle with that in and of itself. Utilizing right mindfulness, mindfulness of keeping the breath and mind. Let's use this analogy of a knife, sharpening the knife. As we are aware of the breath, and any parts of body, paying attention to the breath, you're sharpening that particular knife. Tranquility is beginning to develop; [you have] this kind of attitude. Let me say it again with regards to this knife: concentration and insight—the knife itself. The sharpening—concentration. The insight is how we utilize that knife. The handle of the knife is the effort. It takes training. We have to be very delicate. We are doctors now. We are very good doctors.

The breath is sweetness. Let me share some points in this particular area for you. [You have] that wonderful breath just flowing through your body, [and you can] discern the quality of this particular breath. Not just that it's short or long. How the body is breathing. But is it hard, is it

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soft, is it gentle, is it kind, is it light, is it strong? There are so many other qualities of the breath that there's no language for. But it works for you; keep it, it being your whole system, nice and sweet and pleasurable.

Another purpose of having this kind of attitude is if you want to cultivate a sensitive quality in your own awareness. This is very important [in terms of] the mind-body with the body itself. The whole system becomes more subtle, and when it becomes more subtle other activities begin to arise. This is just one example; we can just say that [there are] activities that we have suppressed, but that's in the mental world, and there are activities that we haven't suppressed that arise. So other activities arise in the world of just the subtlety of how things work. The subtlety becomes a major component when one acclimates to this level. This is moving in that direction of acclamation.

When we move into that level we begin to notice how the body how is breathing. The body is always telling us how it wants to breathe for that particular moment. For example, if it's short breathing, well, you breathe for a short in and out. But just maybe for one or two or three breaths, that's it. Let go of that and notice what happens. Not for five minutes or anything like that, because it's always changing from moment to moment. Because we are such disturbed human beings, the body carries so much. There are a lot of various kinds of conditioning and we're not cleansed, so we're working on cleansing.

Again, you've heard me say this throughout my talks: this is about training the mind. You're learning to become a professional athlete, or a professional actress, actor, a professional Broadway [performer], a professional artist, and this takes repetition. We know that the best way our system works is through repetition: this is how it's learned.

We begin to notice our conditioning. We begin to notice our patterns in the body. Where we're holding difficulties without making any judgment and just seeing it for what it is. When we do

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that, when we breathe that body, that particular breath in the body, then it's clear intention. We want to notice what happens. That's clear intention. Just being there.

Simultaneously, there are a lot of things happening. I've been talking about a few of them. We are calming the fabrication in the body. We are calming the discomforts in the body. Not erasing them, but we're calming down enough to where the sense of self can be at ease. Remember I said the sense of self, as opposed to self no-self. Remember this sense of self is what's made up, beginning with our name and [accumulating] from that point on.

Rapture. Rapture is various kinds of sensation that arise when tranquility is cultivated. Now, there are some qualities of sensation that make us run, because we have had a very bad experience with this particular sensation. It's associated with an event and so we run. We get very tensed up if we're in sitting practice. There are some qualities of sensation that feel like we're going to throw up. I've never seen anybody throw up in a meditation retreat—at least, it hasn't happened yet. I have had a quality of sensation where [I thought] of course I was going to throw up, but that didn't happen. I had this one quality of sensation where I thought I was flying. To the point where I took my hand out and I pulled on the carpet that I was sitting on so I wouldn't fly away. This is how real it felt in my system.

It's important that we begin to acclimate with mindfulness. Immersing the body, we're simultaneously letting ourselves acclimate to these various qualities of sensations. One thing, when the sensation does arise, wash your body with it. Internally, wash with it. This helps with acclimation, especially the [sensations] we have an aversion towards. When we're doing that we're cultivating right mindfulness, and simultaneously deepening our level of tranquility. We are becoming more stable in there. We're developing the mind. Fear begins to decrease. It's easier to change our course instead of becoming tense. I want to work on getting rid of this tension. We are discerning and giving space to the discomfort. We're cradling it. Notice what happens from that particular practice.

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You are able to utilize other skills that you can't put in language that work for you. That's the power of tranquility and concentration. The sense of self becomes much calmer. Insight cultivates tranquility; tranquility cultivates insights. They [work in] tandem.

We could look at an analogy of a coin, one side is insight the other side is concentration. In the practice we are learning how to roll that coin on its edge. This is when we are on the path, the dharma path. That only comes from practice. We can't read it. We can't talk it through. We have to practice.

Mindfulness becomes immersed in the body. We become more present. We're right there and we are only concerned with what's happening in the present. Let's talk about that for a little bit. Understanding the present, understanding that what's arising in the present is the result of our past actions. Especially if it's discomfoting. Of course to the one that's pleasurable [we think], "Ah yeah." But the one that's discomfoting, this is the one where, okay, we have the opportunity, because of the cultivation of that calmness, to change our intent. That intent affects our intention, which cultivates our present actions. I'll say that again. We have the ability when it arises in the present moment, especially if it's discomfoting, to change our intent, so that intention creates and changes our present action in the present moment.

Another thing that happens with mindfulness immersed in the body is that we clearly begin to notice our patterns. Noticing it we begin to learn from it. Learning because we are becoming attentive to the choices we make, and noticing the results. It's helping us to be more skillful with our actions, much more skillful.

Another component that helps with mindfulness immersed in the body is at the end of our meditation, as well as at the beginning, but specifically at the end. At the beginning I was going to say just wishing goodwill for yourself and for others so you can have a good feeling going into your practice. You may want to do some chants. But let me just go to the end of our meditation practice here and helping mindfulness immersed in the body. This only takes nano-seconds to do.

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It is to review your practice. Asking the questions: What insights did I learn, if any? What would I abandon, or work on abandoning and not doing again? When I have the opportunity to practice, what would I do that would be different?

This is the same in our daily activities. After a conversation: How was that conversation? What did I learn with regards to my own speech? If I had the opportunity to do it again, what would I change? As I'm walking, how is my walking? What can I do to make this walk more efficient? How can I be more present with all this sense of what's arising? Because you are turning up your mindfulness in your daily activity and moving more towards right mindfulness, when we move towards the cushion or towards our formal practice, you'll be surprised on how you just drop so far in so quickly.

Practicing is learning to go into your forest. The forest is our body. You're cutting a path into this forest. You want to pay attention to how you cut the path. Those are the skills that have been presented throughout this mindfulness series. By paying attention when you go back into your forest [you may think], "Ah yes." Because [you are] training the mind, there is the path. If the mind is not trained you don't remember the skills and utilize them; you have to cut the path all over again and start from scratch.

First, let me talk about the dangerous part of that. The danger to that is aversion that comes up. In other words, awakening, "No that's not for me. That's on the other side of the universe. I got too much to do in this life here. I don't have time to practice awakening." One can become diluted as an awakened master has shared with us. His name is Acariya Maha Boowa Nanasampanno. This was in Thailand. He got to the *jhana* level of concentration where it is thought he was awakened. [As a result there is] a lot of light. The mind-body shines. It's just brilliant, brilliant. He can light up a room just standing in a room. This went on for five years. He had a conversation with his abbot with regards to pain. Just questioning it. Not that there was pain, just questioning it, "I wonder if there's any discomfort in the body?" He said, "Well, the only one way to find out is to go there." He did that, and that took him out of the level of concentration that he was in.

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Of course, that was a level of absorption or *jhana* practice. I don't want to talk about that. I'll let you research that. The point is that there are so many levels of concentration that you have to be careful to not become diluted. That's very important. Now, of course, the path to the end of suffering does exist. You don't have to be somebody in robes or someone that's well known out there in the world.

We are so wealthy as practitioners, but we need to utilize our tools, our skills. Let me list a few of them for you.

Faith or conviction: Just from the practice itself, by becoming more stable in all practice. Our motivation is there. We want to practice more [and become] stronger and strengthen our faith, as well as our conduct. We begin to avoid harmful action, our livelihood changes. Right livelihood becomes more right, in other words.

Shame: Such a big deal, but a healthy sense of shame. Yes, we have done something wrong. Make adjustments and move on.

Sense of computation: Of course, when harmful action happens to us or comes our way, it doesn't have to be major. It doesn't matter how small it is. Take it seriously. Take it seriously. Please.

Generosity: We know about that. We know what it does for our system. Continue to exercise that.

Discernment, you're also aware of.

The other one is learning the dharma. The word itself, D-H-A-R-M-A, in the Sanskrit spelling of it, *dhar*, the phonetic meaning is cradle. *Ma*, the mother. The mother. And, in Pali, D-H-A-M-

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M-A; *dham* is another word for nature. So learning how to cradle yourself, of how precious this really is. All this will definitely guide you in deepening your practice, utilizing your wealth and the breath. There's so many different ways to utilize the breath itself, and most of those ways are nonverbal. You need to learn how it affects and changes your character.

Direct knowledge: Ah, that's the most important, as far as I'm concerned, we get that tool from our practice and however we need to learn from it.

You're so wealthy. Utilize your wealth. Please. Enjoy the dance. Have fun.