

Kathy Cherry

*The Wisdom of the Body: Connecting with Your Inner Resilience*

Part 1: “The Wisdom of the Body & Mindfulness”

August 7, 2021



Hi there, my name is Kathy Cherry. I'm a meditation teacher and a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner based here in New York City. (If you're not familiar with Somatic Experiencing, it's a body-oriented approach to working with trauma and other stress disorders.) I've been practicing in the Insight Meditation tradition for about 20 years, and the last 15 of those, I've been working to help run Dharma Punx NYC.

I landed on the meditation cushion and came to dharma practice after a long period of searching and struggle. The practicality of the teachings I encountered and the warmth of the community were the right invitation at the right time for me. The path that I stepped onto back then has unfolded and deepened in ways that I never could have imagined. It has completely changed the trajectory of my life and continues to surprise me on a daily basis.

This month, I'm honored to be part of Tricycle's Dharma Talk series. I'm calling this series "The Wisdom of the Body: Connecting with Your Inner Resilience."

Before we get started, I'd like to offer a little disclaimer, which is intended to give people permission to be flexible with what I'm offering. Because everyone's histories, life experiences, and nervous systems are different, please feel empowered to take a break at any time. If something feels like it's too much, feel into it. Is there a smaller expression that you could try? Or you can simply give yourself the permission to engage on more of a cognitive level, understanding what I'm saying but not engaging in the practice. What is supportive for some people is not supportive for others. You are the person who knows your nervous system the best, and I really want to encourage you to listen to that.

It's often said that meditation isn't just about being peaceful or being a better person—it's about being able to be present with whatever is arising in the moment. Sometimes, what's arising in the present moment is a beautiful, peaceful state of mind, but there can also be downright destabilizing states—not just at the level of thought, but also at the level of body.

Resilience is a capacity that allows us to meet more of our experiences without becoming overwhelmed—and when we do have those overwhelming experiences, resilience allows us to bounce back more quickly. Resilience in the mind might mean to reflect on the dharma, those foundational truths about impermanence or the universal nature of our struggles. There's definitely no shortage of reflections there.

At the level of body, resilience is the ability to engage directly with our physiology and our nervous system, cultivating a relationship with the tools and the skill to invite the nervous system back into balance. The balance of alert and relaxed is the body's natural state.

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I've always loved how the Buddha turned our normal way of experiencing ourselves on its head by making the body the first element in the four foundations of mindfulness. We're instructed to know the body as it really is. Most of us experience the body through the lens of emotion rather than sensation. We'll say, "I feel happy," "I feel sad," "I feel relaxed," "I feel anxious," but we miss the direct experience of those sensations in the body. When we can be attentive and curious, the body has a tremendous amount of information to share with us.

Let's do a little experiential practice here. There's no need for a special posture. I'm going to ask you to start to let your eyes travel around the space, scanning for something in the space around you that has a pleasant feeling tone. If there's nothing in this space, you can simply call to mind a pleasant thought.

As I tune into my space here, this is a room where I teach regularly, so I have some fond memories of the people that I've worked with here. As I tune into that in my body, I can feel myself sitting up a little bit straighter. There's a brightness in my chest. There's a smile at the corners of my mouth that makes my ears feel like they're getting tugged up ever so slightly, and that extends back to the back of my head. This is the somatic experience of happiness in my body.

So check it out for yourself. Notice any changes to your breath. How do those thoughts in the mind express themselves in the body? Maybe you stay here and continue to drink in the pleasant sensations, or if it's available to you, start to set the pleasant aside and call to mind something that's a little bit on the unpleasant side of the spectrum. We're talking about a 3–4 out of 10, a thought or a memory that calls up a mildly unpleasant feeling tone—not your nuclear option, please.

Doing this along with you, I'm tuning into some ambient sound, and that's attaching to an emotion that I would call worry or concern. When I tune into that in my body, I notice a hollowing out in my chest, a sense of weight in my shoulders. I can feel myself orienting out to the sound. Although my head is facing forward, there's a sense of my attention turning to the noise. There's also a constriction in the belly, a bit of a tightness, so the breath isn't flowing nicely.

Notice what's true for you. When you tune into something that's less than pleasant, how does that show up? Take your time—there's no rush here. We're maintaining curiosity, and then we're going to start to pendulate back. Return to that easeful experience. You might encourage a deeper breath or feel into the support of the ground below you. We're inviting this down-shift as we fully

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come out of the practice. You might even want to bring a little bit of movement, maybe a stretch or a deeper breath, just to invite yourself back.

If tuning into this feels difficult, know that you're not alone. Few of us are taught how to be aware of ourselves at this somatic, interoceptive level, the level of our internal experience. If anything, we've been taught over and over to override this. Think about the things that people say to us: "You're so sensitive, you need a thicker skin," or "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me." We all know that names can hurt us. When these kinds of overrides are ongoing, when they become chronic, we lose the ability to accurately assess our level of safety. We start to live in that vigilant state when it's not necessary.

Another teacher of mine, Kathy Kain, calls this "living in survival physiology." That vigilance that we're talking about isn't just a mental state—it's a biological reaction in the body as well. Unfortunately, in addition to making it really hard to meditate and potentially triggering a hindrance storm of doubt that says, "Clearly, I'm just not cut out for this meditation stuff, I'm just going to stop here, thank you very much," living in that vigilant state has a high cost: we don't come back down to the parasympathetic side of the nervous system, the side of rest and digest. We can cultivate this rest and digest response in meditation practice. When we're settled and easeful and here, we can rest and digest; when we don't rest and digest, we wear down our bodies prematurely.

When we sit down to meditate, we're naturally going to come up against this kind of emotional content. This can be an obstacle, or it can be an opportunity. Pairing dharma and mindfulness with somatic tools for understanding and regulation increases our capacity to meet the challenges that we face and return to our natural state of relaxed awareness. Familiarity increases our capacity—the sensations aren't as startling—and more capacity means less and less time and effort to settle back down. You can see the positive feedback loop that meditation creates: the familiarity reacts in the body, the body settles, and this continuous loop allows us to ground and ground and ground.

Let's do a short practice, beginning to bring in these external and internal resources. You might want to pause the video at this part and restart when you're ready. We'll start this practice first by taking in this space around you again, letting the eyes travel. The external resources might be pleasant sounds, pleasant fragrances, or objects that bring up a warm memory. Some of us will have little altars nearby that we can drop our gaze on, or these resources could be as simple as a nice pillow or your pet. Just notice how these resources start to invite you into practice. At this point, the eyes might shut gently, or they can stay open.

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Now we can start to tune into some of the internal resources. Feel down into the contact points. Notice the support of whatever surface you're sitting on and reaching down to the earth below that. Notice if you're letting that support in. What has to happen to let that support in?

Take your time. There's no rush. We're just noticing. We're tuning in to what's working right now and what feels good, noticing the small ways that tension and bracing start to unwind and get released from the body. Maybe the breath naturally deepens. Lean in to a sense of a general okayness. It doesn't have to be big or bright, just a general okayness.

If this is feeling good, you might pause the recording and continue to explore these external and internal resources, continuing to let the system settle.

For now, we're going to start to extend the attention back out into the room around us as we notice those same objects. What's different now?

Thank you for that practice.

Over the next three weeks, I'll be laying out a progression of practice—a map, if you will. I want to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to my teacher, Heather Sundberg, for offering me this map and to all the other teachers and people in my life who have encouraged me to make it my own.

The first element on this map is mindfulness, something we have all probably heard about. No surprises here. Mindfulness is paying attention, getting better at staying present with whatever is arising in the moment, calling in an attitude of curiosity, and using external and internal resources to support the system as it's settling.

The second step is continuity of mindfulness. Here, we're stringing those mindfulness moments together, both on the cushion and off the cushion. It's even more important to start to bring mindfulness out into life with us. When we do this, we start to become intimately familiar with how our minds and bodies work, as well as all the different places where we get caught. We start to feel it and see it cognitively, so we're starting to put it all together.

The third step is wisdom arising. With this continuity of practice, we start to see ourselves get caught over and over again. We're seeing it in real time because we've taken our practice off the cushion. We start to recognize the cycles and the patterns, and these become our "I see you, Mara" moments. It can be really powerful to have these insights pop through in our day-to-day lives.

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The last step is releasing patterns. This clear seeing from wisdom arising leads to a letting go that's not based in aversion or in being better. It's more of a recognition: we see all of this playing out in real time, and our response can start to be, "That's not going to work. Why would I do that?"

That's the general trajectory for our four-part series. I hope you found today's class useful and that you'll join me for the rest of the series as we continue to explore these themes.