

Spring Washam  
Week Three, *Beginning Again*  
March 13, 2016  
“Embodiment and Working with the Breath”



Welcome back, everybody. This is Spring Washam and we are on the third week of our course, *Beginning Again*.

Tonight I want to explore some of the nuts and bolts of mindfulness-based meditation practice. It's important to understand why we're practicing the way we're practicing, and how an understanding of the body and focusing on the body is the foundation of our practice.

This whole teaching of mindfulness comes from a very powerful sutta called the *Satipatthāna Sutta*. Sati means “remembering,” and what we're doing with our practice is remembering again and again to be here, remembering to begin again. That's why I love the title of the course. We're beginning again, all the time.

The foundation of the *Satipatthāna Sutta*—which is translated as “The Four Foundations of Mindfulness”—is how to develop awareness. The very heart of the foundation, the first foundation, is mindfulness of the body. We learn how to become embodied through practice.

What do I mean by embodiment? It's a word that you may hear a lot. For most of us, our lives are very disconnected from our body. I always say, most people in the West, we're very mind-dominated. We don't always feel our body. We don't always know what's happening with our body. We live outside of our bodies all the time.

This leads to all kinds of suffering. I could talk about chronic conditions and not taking care of ourselves—that's one level. Another level is that, because we're not in our body, we're lost in the mind and we suffer more. We're not in the heart, we're not feeling, we're not connected to our intuitive awareness. We're not able to be present.

The first foundation of mindfulness is connecting to your body. Mindfulness of the body is a core practice here at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. At our retreats, we alternate between sitting on the cushion and walking meditation where you walk on the earth and feel your body. You



come into your body. We use the breath; we use bodily sensation as a way to train the mind. When the mind is habitually lost in distraction, what we want to do is keep tethering it to the body. We keep coming back to our breath, our sensations, and we train our awareness.

There are other practices that train our awareness to stay in the body: yoga, tai chi, qigong, and energy practices where we use the body as a way to develop awareness. This is very key. We are not interested in becoming experts in our breathing. Some people say: “I just sit down and breathe. That’s it?” No. It’s a doorway into learning how to develop presence.

Instead of being habitually lost in the reactivity of all our emotions and distractions, we learn how to stop, feel the breath, and become present through the doorway of the body and the breath. The breath is a cornerstone—a pillar of our practice. It’s how we develop and how we train, and it’s a beautiful object of awareness.

But you can use any sensation in your body as a way to become present. This is a technique, too, that is ancient. It was given to us by the Buddha 2,500 years ago. It’s a great tool. Sometimes your body feels pain or tightness. It’s important to know that when you’re doing a meditative practice, what happens over time is that when you come into your body, you feel those places that are habitually tight. Maybe you walk around at work and you feel contracted, but you’re not aware.

When you come into your meditation practice, your body begins to open. It has a life of its own. It’s organic, alive. All those knots begin to arise and pass away. The places holding tension begin to reveal themselves. That’s okay. Just know that difficult, painful sensations can be part of meditation practice while you’re sitting. The idea is that you feel things, and sometimes what you’re feeling is the tension held in the body. Work on that with mindfulness, and become aware. Become open to what’s happening.

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Mindfulness is about opening to bodily sensations and feeling things. Be gentle with yourself. Find yourself always—do it comfortably, by finding your place in a chair or cushion or standing if you prefer—in order to allow yourself to pay attention and feel your breath. Feel your body in a grounded way.

The more we are in our body, the more we're in the heart, the more we're intuitive, the more we're feeling life through us. We're not lost in the mind. Spending our lives lost in the habitual insanity of the mind is suffering. Learning how to feel and how to be more present in an embodied way is joyful. It helps end our suffering. We learn how to wake up through this amazing vehicle of the body.

Let's do some body-based practice. We're going to sit for a few moments and then I'll come back at the end and we'll wrap up.

Find yourself now as you close your eyes and we begin.

Become aware. Imagine that you drop in through the crown of your head. Feel this body as you arrive, and notice what you feel. You can even do a scan, relaxing each part of your body: your shoulders, your back.

Focus on the rhythm of your breath, particularly where the sensations of breathing are predominant. Feel into that.

Do you feel the breath in your belly? Do you feel it in your chest? Or in the nose? In the mouth?

Take some time and feel where those sensations are predominant.

Allow your awareness simply to feel. Do not think about the breath—feel the breath from the inside.

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See if you can notice the beginning, the middle, and the ending of a breath. Feel the rising and the falling, the sensations.

If the mind wanders, come back to your body. Feel your whole body sitting. Maybe you feel the breath through your whole body. Your whole body breathes. It's breathing itself, the breath.

Let it be natural. If you notice that there's a place in you that tries to control your breathing, see if you can let go. Come into just feeling your sitting bones as they touch your cushion, or your hands as they touch your knees. There's no need to control anything. It's just one breath at a time. One sensation.

Join me again next week for our last class, which will work with difficult thoughts and emotions. It's a very powerful aspect of mindfulness practice.

Thank you. See you next week.