

Lama Willa Blythe Baker

*The Art of Somatic Mindfulness*

Week 1: "The Body Is the Crucible of Enlightenment"

January 2, 2021



Hello, and welcome to the Tricycle online Dharma Talk series. My name is [Lama] Willa Baker, and over the next four weeks I will be offering a series of talks titled "The Art of Somatic Mindfulness."

Before I begin, let me take a moment to introduce myself. I am a meditation and dharma teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. My training is in the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages. At present, I live in New England, bilocated between Boston and New Hampshire. Once upon a time, I lived the life of a monastic, and during that time of my life I spent some years in retreat. Retreat practice helped me appreciate the value of noble silence, and the power of introspection and meditation practice to explore the nature of the mind, its light and its darkness. Those years also introduced me to the idea that the body is more than just to heat the flesh and blood, more than just the mortal coil. The body is the crucible of enlightenment. And that is what we will be exploring together here these next few weeks.

In essence, I consider myself a beginner. When I sit on the cushion, it is the first time every time. I know when I sit down, my restlessness and dullness will be there. Sometimes I will be greeted by a waterfall of thoughts. Sometimes unruly emotions will arise. In my early days, I used to see this as a failure. But right now in my life and practice, I see it as an opportunity. Everything that happens inside us is a part of being human. Everything that we experience and feel is the fuel for waking up. I try to teach the dharma from that place, not the states I think I should be experiencing but from the truth of what I am experiencing, as rough and tumble as it may be. As a dharma teacher, I am interested in how meditation practice meets my daily life.

In Tibetan, the word for meditation is derived from the same root as the word for familiarity. Meditation is a process of becoming familiar with new ways of relating to the internal landscape. Instead of being carried away by thoughts, we learn to take a step back and watch the show. Instead of fearing our difficult emotions, we learn to befriend them. Instead of dwelling in the echo chamber of reactivity, we become familiar with techniques to calm down and focus. Instead of ruminating on the past and anticipating the future, we become familiar with dwelling in the present moment.

Meditation is called practice for a reason. We are not practicing meditation to become great meditators. We are practicing to enact peace and compassion in our life and the world at large. We are practicing to meet adversity, injustice, oppression, and our own difficult emotions with grace.

I used to think that taming and training the mind was key to meditative states such as stillness, stability, and peace. But over time, I've come to discover something surprising: the body may be

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our most overlooked resource when it comes to learning how to focus and to become calm, even when it comes to enlightenment itself. I started to experience my body as the most powerful ally in a deep and meaningful spiritual practice. When the world is spinning, when my thoughts are tumbling, when my emotions are raging, the body is reliably present and stable. The breath is breathing, my feet are grounded. Sometimes it can feel as if our thoughts are so loud. We cannot hear the symphony of our present moment experience above the din of thoughts. But as soon as we pay attention to the body, we discover a fresh and full field of feeling that brings with it vividness, openness, and the taste of nonconceptual space.

Your ears are hearing the rhythm and cadence of my voice, not just the words. Your eyes are seeing shape and color. Your skin is experiencing temperature and wind. Your breath is moving. Your body's energy is vibrating. As you begin to pay attention to the body, you discover the power and expansiveness of everything that is unfolding in the present moment. This acquaintance with the body can be powerful. The body teaches us to slow down, to pay attention to everything that is happening right now, to find the richness of our immediate experience without needing to escape into distraction. We not only smell the roses, we become truly intimate with them. The body is a source of wisdom. In the next four weeks, we will be discovering the body's power to draw us into states of greater stillness, ease, and alertness. We will be meeting the body as a wise teacher and discovering that the key to cultivating mindfulness is actually bodyfulness.