

Kathy Cherry

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

Part 2: “Continuity of Mindfulness”

August 14, 2021



Hi, I'm Kathy Cherry. Welcome back to "The Wisdom of the Body: Connecting with Your Inner Resilience." In the first video, we started to link formal meditation practice and our biological responses to threat and opportunity, using our senses to invite us into the present moment, noticing things in our environment that create a sense of ease, which I call external resources. Then we started to incorporate internal resources: the release of tension in the body, connection with our breath, softness in the gaze, and especially a connection to the ground and receiving its support.

It feels important to name that for many, the body isn't a place of safety or familiarity. We're used to riding from the shoulders up. As a result, there can be a lack of accuracy, and that's not our fault. At times, things become associated in incorrect ways, and the body has a limited palette. Fear and excitement can feel really similar. And this is where our curiosity comes in. If the body feels like an unfamiliar or perhaps unsafe place for you, my encouragement is to really lean into your *external* resources. When you're really enjoying something, take a quick peek into the body to see if there isn't something there that's starting to resonate with the enjoyment of the external resource, something that's starting to become more present in your awareness. In that way, we can start to build this familiarity and relationship with our body.

Today, I'd like to bring in this second element of continuity of mindfulness, where we bring practice out into the world. We're stringing the moments of embodiment, mindfulness, and presence together so that mindfulness becomes the backdrop of our experience.

When I was introduced to meditation and embodiment, I knew it was working because I'd be at work and suddenly, I'd notice that my shoulders were creeping up. I had never noticed that before—I'm sure I walked around with my shoulders up around my ears for most of my life. Just tuning in allowed me to start to drop my shoulders down. When the shoulders would drop, my belly would soften. I'd start to have access to the story, and I could start to unplug from it. That grip, that trance that I was in would start to release.

We can start to use these embodied experiences as a clue that something needs our attention. We need to pause, take a breath, and add some time and space into whatever is happening. Our nervous system is designed to activate and deactivate as needed, depending upon our environment and the circumstances that are happening. But the effects of ongoing stress, systemic injustice, relational ruptures, and loss can cause our system to get stuck. That stuckness causes that lack of accuracy that we were talking about earlier. The continuity of mindfulness allows us to see and feel those patterns, so we're working with the intellect as well as the body.

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Because continuity of mindfulness is more about practicing out in the world, rather than offering a meditation, I'm going to offer a series of short pause practices, or mini practices that can be scattered throughout your day. The hardest thing about this will be to remember to do them, so maybe you can set a couple of alerts in your phone. You can also use mealtimes, bathroom breaks, or your commute to just take one or two minutes to check in, work with the nervous system, and bring yourself back.

The first pause practice is: Where is my mind right now? Believe it or not, I used to work in the fashion industry. It's a very, very fast-paced environment. In one of my first interviews, they outright said to me, "You're only as good as your last collection." It is not a place where there is a strong sense of safety and well-being. It was really easy to get caught up in all of that drama. I was caught regularly, so I started to do this pause practice of "where is my mind?" because I realized I would sometimes be off for large chunks of my day.

Because I was going into an office, I found it was useful to do this pause practice on the subway platform. I'd be waiting for the train, and I'd just notice, where is my mind right now? Am I having a fight with somebody in the future? Am I defending some choice that I've made? Am I worrying about whether something is selling or not? Where is my mind right now? I'd notice if I was out in the future or lost in the past. All the stress was in the future or in the past. Right here, nothing was actually happening. The pause gave me a call back to the present and an invitation to settle.

We'll do this together. No need to change your position. Just start to tune in: Where is your mind right now? You might take a breath. Notice what's present. Are there any images? Any words? What's the general flavor of your mind in this moment? Are you noticing a sense of hope, a sense of exhaustion?

With all those thoughts, can you feel their impact on the body? Is there a tightness in your shoulders? What's your belly like right now? Check in with your eyes. Are they leading your body? Are they resting back? Where is your mind? You can start to let your eyes travel around the space, noticing that textures, colors, and sounds. Maybe bring in a little bit of movement.

These practices are meant to be short. They're meant to interrupt that trance. If we're really caught in something, these practices invite us back. Stress and activation cause our attention to collapse in on the problem. This practice of "Where is my mind?" helps us to remember that we're more than that problem. We can start to expand our awareness through looking around and taking in different sights and sounds. That invites a release of tension. It invites us back into the present moment. Part of coming back to that present moment is this agency, this sense of "I can."

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Often the problem can trigger states of overwhelm, of "I can't," so we're breaking the trance and bringing back in this "I can."

The next three practices can be antidotes to what you find when you ask, "Where is my mind?" They can also stand alone as different ways to engage, settle, and activate the nervous system.

The second pause practice is extending the breath and noticing the effect. The breath is one of the few ways that we can directly impact our autonomic nervous system. We have two options here. If you're around people and it would be weird to make a sound, you can simply take an inhale and exhale through the mouth, softly pursing the lips almost as if you were going to whistle. You don't have to make a sound.

The second option is to add a hum or a sigh. As we're adding that hum or that sigh, notice the resonance in the throat, in the heart, or down in the belly. As we do this, be on the lookout for those sensations of settling and letting go.

Let's try it. Take a breath in, and slowly breathe out through your mouth. [Breathing out.] As the breath empties out and comes back in, keep noticing: how does this voluntary action impact the involuntary response in the body? What's different now? You might pause the recording here and try this two or three more times, just exploring the form and the tool.

Our third pause practice is called the butterfly hug. This is a favorite among my students and clients. Most people find it soothing, and it's also great as a simple settling device before you're going into a meeting that you think might be difficult or after an interaction that's been difficult. You can even try it before bed to settle the system.

Feel free to work with the limitations of your body. Take your hands and cross them. If you can put your thumb prints together, you can do that, but if that doesn't work, just cross your hands. Then, place your hands with the thumbs at the nape of the neck and let the fingers extend out to the collarbones. We'll start with some bilateral stimulation [patting the fingers against the collarbones on alternate sides]. You can experiment with the speed and the heaviness of the thump, just noticing how your body responds. If there's a back to the chair you're sitting on, you might rest back. Then, gradually let the hands slow, come to a stop, and notice what's different now.

Our fourth pause practice is called staccato breath. This last one is for clearing and energizing when things get kind of funky and you need something bigger—a bigger tool to shift the energy or mind state that's present. Again, feel free to work within your range and within your body's

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capacities. Take 3–5 quick inhales through the nose and then one exhale, a little bit forceful, through the mouth. We'll do about three cycles of this, but on your own, you might go for a couple more. What we're looking for is a sense of a shift—of being cleared out, being reset. So let's try it. [Staccato breath practice.] Notice what's different. Feel free to pause and experiment a little bit longer with this.

My encouragement is for you to think about these practices as preventative medicine. We can do them in a pinch, but ideally, we're doing them to keep the pinch from happening in the first place. I'd suggest that you start with any one or combination of these, trying to do them 3–5 times a day and building from that as you see how they're working for you.

Continuity of mindfulness allows us to course-correct throughout our day. We become familiar with the places that we get caught, and over time, we start to pause more naturally. It's a little reset—a breath here, a breath there. We can check in with that embodied presence, with the thoughts that are cooking in the mind, and then we see what's needed, perhaps calling on some of our internal resources or external resources to help invite that ease back in.