

2008-03-10 Mindfulness of The Body

Sat, 8/1 11:07PM • 40:23

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

body, meditation, people, holding, unwind, happening, mindfulness, feel, lake, relax, muscles, meditation practice, mind, unwinding, refreshment, relaxed, tense, unfold, process, feeling

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

In my many years of doing, engaging in Buddhist practice, there have been a lot of surprises for me. And kind of surprise discoveries for me to the surprise discoveries in the process. And one of the one of the surprises that has been the most, among the more delightful ones, has been the tremendous value of mindfulness of the body, being connected to the body. So much so that one of the great things I've learned to trust is to trust my body, to trust being present my body mindfulness of the body. And it was it wasn't always that way. I think that before I started doing Buddhist practice, I was not particularly connected to my body. I didn't wasn't particularly aware of what was happening. My body And when I started my Buddhist practice for meditation practice, I had no idea that the body had any importance. The body was an appendage that got in the way that made meditation difficult. Because there was those knees that ache and the back that was uncomfortable and this and that. And somehow I had to kind of get by that. overcome that. get around that. So I can get into the real meditation. But what I've discovered is that there was no getting around it, that the body was very much a big part of the practice to get into the body. And in fact, what happened slowly over the years, was an awakening of my body and being connected kind of distancing, the body's ability to be have sensations, the body's ability to feel things to sense things and know what's going on. I became stronger and stronger for me, it's still a process still going on. And I'm delighted to kind of continue to watch this process. As my body wakes up more. There's a kind of a debate in Buddhism between when you get enlightened, what gets enlightened, and it's very common for people who are in this debate, to say that it's the mind enlightened the mind. Zen master Dogen and a few other people have said, No, it's the body that gets awakened. So I'm not going to side with the desire to debate. But it's interesting that there are some people who put so much value in the body. That's the locus that's the location of awakening enlightenment thing.

I read recently, a wonderful description someone had with about the process of the body becoming more sense Sitting more awake, more present more alive more connected to awareness and described just like having water wicker up a piece of cloth. So you can kind of is not a smarter kind of organic means is the right word the kindest way in which the water kind of soaks into the cloth it kind of slowly kind of recurs up and through it fills it. So, in that way the body slowly kind of wickers up your awareness, the awareness spreads through the body in some beautiful way to the teachings of the Buddha. He also gave some somewhat similar, I guess, similes or analogies for the process of awakening the body or becoming more sensitive with the body as we do meditation practice and I want to share some of them with you. One of them is Kind of initial stages of concentration practice is that of in ancient India they had I guess, powdered soap, dry powder so, and you would sprinkle water into the powder, the way you'd sprinkle water into flour. To make dough, the sprinkler sprinkle water into that soap powder to make it into a dough to make it moist. And you would massage it so that the water spread and became even throughout the powder. So just just right it wasn't gripping, wasn't sopping

wet, but it wasn't none of it was dry anymore. So in the same way as we stay with our breath, that rhythm of breathing in, breathing out, mind wanders off, we come back, slowly we settle in to being more settled and more concentrated. That's slowly that develops a kind of sensitivity and awareness and a lightness to the body. That is kind of like you're kind of working the body to kind of massaging. Every time you come back with a rhythm of breathing in, breathing out the rhythm of going away, coming back, slowly the body starts becoming more alive, more present more here in a very good, very nice way, comfortable way. And so, the Buddha least didn't like in this little bit to that of making this powder moist and holding it together. And that part of this analogy, I think, is that when we're not in our body, not connected to our body, the body is dry. And when you're connected in your body, the body feels moist, kind of nice, kind of a nice associations being kind of moist, organic, malleable, malleable, shapeable. Soft, as opposed to being kind of dry and brittle and hard. So another analogy that the Buddha used to go a bit further into meditation was that of a lake. We're doing Rain, and where there are no rivers that flow into the lake. But there's an underground spring that brings this refreshing cool water up from the bottom of the lake. And the water has a current of water that goes up from the bottom of the lake up into the lake spreading this refreshing water. And they have the analogies in India of cool water because it's a Hot Country. And in English, which was a language that was put together in a cold wet climate. We, we talked about how wonderful is to be worn, like being warm hearted. In India, they talk about being cool hearted and that's wonderful for them but you tell an English speaking person being cold hearted and it's like oh, that person's a little bit cold. But in a very hot climate apparently in a hot climate thing cool hearted is pretty good. So it's cool refreshing current. So certainly meditation sometimes it feels like this current, of energy or current of sensations, currents of coolness or refreshment, kind of coursing through your body, which is movement connected to it to form a flow. We say warmth, they say coolness depends on where you are, I guess we live. And, and so you have this kind of feeling of flow, the body feels alive, vibrant, connected, and it's a wonderful feeling, feeling the body alive and vibrant and connected. And then the next analogy and it kind of fall is kind of follow each other and it's kind of sequence the next elegy is that of also like also awake. interesting how much water is used as a symbolic of there's metaphors of this process. It's a lake

it's completely still no current at all. Please still and no That Lake there grows lotus flowers. And those lotus flowers, the way lotus flowers can grow is they they rooted in the bottom of the lake. And the stems come up and some of the lotus blossoms blossom under the water and some of them will come up and blossom on top of the water, but some blossom underneath. And so here the lake is really refreshing again. It has wonderful cool refreshing quality, nourishing quality. But the refreshment here, there's no current it's completely still. And one of these lotus blossoms that it opens inside underneath the water is surrounded by this cool refreshment, this cool refreshing, nourishing feeling water and the text say no part of lotus flower is not touched by that refreshment. So in that sense We sit into a really connected deeply in the body. There's a kind of refreshing feeling, sometimes it can happen. It is tremendous stillness, that's there is really still. Here, there's still it feels very nourishing that stillness. present in the body, the body is alive or vibrant, which feels kind of wonderful and great. But it's much more satisfying. When that ripens, he settles down to a very, very, very peaceful still place. And no part of the body that you're aware of, does not feel untouched for that refreshment, that nourishment. And then it goes one more step, the last step of this process. And this is a, again, a hot, dusty place. Here someone goes may be very thirsty as well. And the first thing goes into the lake. gets really refreshed, nourished, drink some of the water feels satisfied that way and then comes out of the lake and wraps herself with a soft clean your white cotton blanket completely covered. And so maybe you can imagine maybe coming out of so you've got before before going into the lake versus dirty, tired, parched and maybe watched some get some refreshment but that's been satisfied. By being late It's pretty satisfied by drinking is the first comes out to like satisfied. what had to be done is kind of done. settled and other person is ready to sit at the edge of the lake underneath a tree in the shade. was very good, deep

satisfied, satisfying feeling with nowhere to go. Nothing to do and I want to I think to be for anybody, just except just to be be present content Saturday. Going and, and kind of feeling kind of cozy collected here with it kind of where you feel like you're like, if you remember some of you as a kid, metal tents under your table or something feel kind of nicely cozy inside your tent there is this cool, nice fresh blanket around you. And so here, no part of the body is not touched by this blanket with a sheet. So in the same way. So the Buddha's trying through these analogies to try to describe experiences in meditation, and now it feels like partly physically in the body. Because for the Buddha, the connection to your body is such a huge part of this practice. I think many people think of meditation as being of the mind. And, and sometimes there's a big split between the mind and the body. Some people say that in Western culture, parts of western culture, kind of reinforce To see a big spike between the mind and the body, in Buddhism, that strong split does not exist. And so, the cultivation of the mind and Buddhism, like through meditation, cultivates the body, cultivate the body, it cultivates the mind to have such a strong mutual relationship there. And we're always we always we can see that is with how much our muscles, react, respond, are activated by our emotions, by our motivations, by our feelings, by our reaction to what's going on. And, you know, we have these muscles that they're kind of designed to do all this work for us to flight or fight is, you know, expression. And so the muscles gear up, to fight the gear up to flight, the gear up to do whatever they need to be engaged and doing. It takes

effort and energy to register life. And so we have this wonderful system. by a system that's very adaptive, and so the breathing changes depending on what's going on. And when we need more money to run, to defend ourselves, we've completed different kinds of ways. And if we're relaxed, to have the energy, the ability to kind of dash and run off the mountain lions about to jump and we know that's probably maybe instinctively it's best to kind of hunched down, protect yourself. And so, you know, when there's fear, we kind of tighten up the shoulders and hunched down. So rider thinks the body does that good, adaptive way of being, maybe in the wild. But what's been said here in our modern culture, a lot of the ways in which the body has been adapted to deal with fear or deal with activity in the world becomes chronically locked into place into the body, by the kind of chronic emotions that or feelings or reactions that people live under, in urban culture, society. Doesn't fit urban, I guess with modern society. So there's plenty of people who feel fear, without the mountain line about the jump. There's no mountain line within a few miles of here. So most of us are not afraid of that. But we're maybe really afraid of being rejected by people or not being liked or being abandoned, or really afraid of, you know, losing your job or not performing well or there's a lot of things or losing some of your love or, or there's all kinds of things that people carry with him that are kind of chronic attitudes. And these chronic attitudes, get it get lodged in the body. Strong experiences that we have, like very strong emotional experiences that have strong physical reactions. Sometimes they take a lot takes a lot of effort to get these, the body to relax afterwards. That's why some people like to go to a massage get massaged and deep. There's really deep trauma there. The tension holding patterns that are locked in the body that can last for 3040 5060 your whole lifetime based on something very powerful that might have happened when you were a kid. The Well, I was going to tell you some of the stories that I know people that are so gruesome that I will spare you. But you know, screws terrible things happen to people, and, and then they get these things get lodged deeply in their psyche in their body. And so these chronic holding patterns, or some of you, I think, probably spend a fair amount of time in front of the computer monitor. And, and so there's not a psychological holding, but there's kind of workholding you know, intense and I see myself that I spend a lot of time in the computer. I didn't have like a tight my arm so it'll make the kind of holding engaged and I'm mentally I'm kind of, you know, content and relaxed. I'm not afraid of anything, but I'm really intent on getting this work done. And that intenseness can feel sometimes because of my shoulders into my arms and my back, sometimes in my face even. And so sometimes after it's kind of built up there, it takes it does, I can't just say, okay, relaxed skill. Like though, it takes a while for some others to kind of unwind. And this is one of the things I find so helpful

about meditation practice, is meditation practice, that is a chance for me to unwind some of the tension that's built up in the course of a day or course of an hour course of different activities. And I'm so grateful that I've had the practice to allow this unwinding. And really, you know, when I imagine what my life would be like, and what my body would be like, if I hadn't been meditating, I think it probably wouldn't have been a good picture. You know, because I get this kind of everyday I get this the body works where it feels like, it feels really good for my body to have it happen. Healing beneficial. Abraham Lincoln is supposed to have said, by time person is 40 they're responsible for their face. And, and I don't know what he meant, except that but imagine is that the attitudes that we carry with us, the holdings that we hold, we hold ourselves affects, you know, our musculature. And in fact, sometimes if you see, I've seen people who've had seemingly the same genetic ethnic background, who grew up in different cultures, like different countries, and, like the parents moved from one country to the other. And, and so they, they were ethnically of the parents situation, but they grew up in a whole different culture than the parents. And if you compare people like that, sometimes it seems to me at least,

that there's something different in their face, depending on the country that you're up in that is not attributed to the culture, not to their ethnicity, not to the genes or whatever, you can make some sense because different languages require different muscles in your face. And when you speak a language, you don't just speak words, you speak expressions as well. And so you learn the expressions. And I remember when I was in Brazil I wasn't there for many, probably more than a few hours in Brazil, before I started using a hand gesture that every everyone was using it was like this is the way and for everyone I lived in Italy there was a different hand gesture was this one here you know that Tito's like you can't really get by Italian without going like this with your hand goes oh boy, you know, further boy. And so these muscles you know and this this that's that's good kind of silly, I guess example but but the idea that being you know, the added if so much gets held in their body. And so, meditation practice is a time to stop. And then it's stopping, have a chance for ourselves for our body to catch up to us. First notice what's going on. If we keep going, or not paying attention, then it's many people are ahead of themselves into the next wanting into the next planning into, or they're still behind themselves, but they're not here where their body is. And so they can't check in to the body, find out what's going on here. And if you're not really here for your body as it is, checking in with it, the body doesn't have this Good, good opportunities to unwind. Now it's possible you know, if you sit and watch television get distracted, your body will relax to some degree. It's been my experience, that the deepest way of really unwinding requires a lot of presence. You can to some degree you can unwind by being distracted, but if you want to unwind really really deeply, you have to be really present to be here. Because there's something about being present that for what's here that allows what's here. to unwind or to, to dissolve, unfold, move in the direction needs to go. like making room, I think of mindfulness practice paying attention as making room for our experience. And when there's room, then it can spread out throughout unfold, kind of like a if you hold a springs wound up tightly in a small space, it will stay round up. You open the space up in the spring can unwind. So whatever experiences if requests are phobic in her mind for writing things really closely preoccupied obsessed by things, then it's hard for things to unwind. But if we bring a careful nonreactive attention, noticing what's here, so it makes room and allows things to unwind. And I I was pretty surprised, at some point in most our early years of meditation to realize that I was more relaxed after my morning meditation than I was when I woke up from sleep that was surprised for me. I thought he asleep, that's pretty relaxing, pretty good. And normally, you know, I relax and feel good after sleeping, and then start my day without really feeling refreshed. But then when I started meditating first thing in the morning, wow, I think even more relaxed than I was to sleep. Isn't that neat? I think it's pretty neat. So there's a big emphasis in Buddhism of being connected to your body, the present here. However, we don't want to be in a hurry now to celebrate the body. Great. These Buddhists they love the body they do it. The awareness of your body is Not always good news. Because this holding stuff in the body, sometimes there's a lot of tension, a lot of strong feelings and

pain in the body. And part of this process, a very mature process, maturing process is to allow ourselves to feel the discomfort when it's there to pay attention, tension, the holding the fear, the emotions, they're there, and not to run away from it not to be in a hurry to fix it, but make room for it. So it has a chance to unfold the way it needs to unfold. The beginning of this talk, I said that I've learned to trust my body. Which means that I don't, when I feel something in my body, the unfolding unwinding of that is not on my agenda.

Not according to how I think it needs to unfold, but rather is a few, okay, I'm going to be present here for this body and what's going on my feelings. It's sensations, my body. And then I'm going to give a time to show itself so I can learn from it. And so I could let it unwind and do what needs to do. There are some discomfort in the body, which are physical or has to do with illness. And I've known people who've really relied on very careful mindfulness of it, in order to negotiate their injury or the thing. So they can minimize how much pain they're have minimize the impact it has on them. The mindfulness has been really helpful. They're going to kind of make subtle adjustments, how they walk so that, you know it doesn't affect some of you probably had experience of enforced mindfulness. You know, your back has gone out. And if you weren't mindful, watch out. And I loved it. Once my back went out. It was completely out boy was it out. And what I loved about it, it was I mean, I didn't A lot of it I didn't like but what I really liked was this it forced mindfulness. I was more present. You know, You know, something, you know, walking around with that bad back, then it wasn't much my daily life otherwise, because it was so consequential, every little Twitch. So, you know, mindfulness of the body can be helpful that way. But also even with physical pain that has an injury, there's often layers of holding around the pain that sometimes adds to it. I learned that I would have knee pain in meditation sometimes. And I learned to identify when I had aversion to the neat thing than the muscles around my knees with tighten up. And when they tightened up, I felt more pain. When I, when I didn't have the aversion or like over the aversion, the extra tightness would relax, and then I'd feel less pain. So almost like the reactivity sometimes to discomfort in the body can make it worse. Now, some of The when the muscles are chronically tight, chronically held, it seems that sometimes they go numb. And part of the process of waking up through meditation or through any other ways. Waking up the body. These places are numb have to become sensitized, become aware, again, alive with computer type sensation there again. And the process of going from numbness to sensation is often not a pleasant process. In order to because the Chronicle is chronicle of chronic holding there, they can feel actually quite painful as they wake up. And I've known people who've said, Oh, my meditations going backwards. I was so relaxed before and now I'm so tense, tight and hurts my shoulders and this and that. And they think something's wrong with him. But in fact, I'm making progress. The progress requires them to open up to wake up the places that are numb, and then be patient while they stay praying. For the pain for the discomfort, and the presence of certain kinds of pain is not a sign of some problem in meditation, it's a problem of the cure happening. Being to unfold and relax.

So slowly, so often, especially for beginners in meditation, there will be a process of working with discomfort. And that's takes patience. It hopefully comes with certain understanding that it's valuable to do this and, and how it's valuable to do it. So don't feel it's a drag or feel like you're a failure, feel discouraged. But with time, as you get more relaxed, more present more here, with time, the body starts feeling more delightful in this process of, of, you know, the water, being in the lake and all that kind of sense of well being sets of sets. That's going on Now the more relaxed the person can be in their body within, like say, let's say through meditation and also their mind more relaxed. We can, I don't think it's reasonable to expect to be able to maintain that relaxed state as we leave meditation and go into our daily life. However, one of the great values of the relaxed state we have whatever relax even just a very teeny bit of relaxation is we have a reference point that we didn't have before the reference point of that relaxed state. And that reference point helps show us when we start tightening up or we

start picking things up reacting to things. So if a person is always chronically tight, held and whatever, and then there's something you know, the mountain lion jumps if he jumps out of the woods. There's no movement to tighten up anymore. They don't see that they're even more afraid maybe because there's, you know, the muscles don't show it. But if you're really relaxed, and then something frightening happens, you'll notice very quickly how much you tense up. Have you have tensile capacity to make some sense what I'm trying to say. So because you have a tensile capacity, the greater your tensile capacity, it's a new idea that you're passing retention great, the more that becomes a reference point to see your reaction response. And so then you can learn from that in your study that so one really good thing to do is to be as relaxed, you can be the easy way. And then notice when you start tensing whether it's your belly or your shoulders or your jaws or your face or your eyes or your brain or anywhere you might feel it. But don't just feel it. If you can stop it, look at that. What was that about? What happened just now? Why am I tense my body? Why am I holding on somehow? What are the emotions? What are the beliefs inherent here in place. So it could be as simple as walking down the street. And some person who's ever seen before walks down the other direction, passes you, as a person comes closer to you, you feel your stomach getting tight. So you could just recognize that and cross the street to avoid the person. Or you could say, well, this is interesting information. This tension is telling me something what's going on here. So you look more carefully, and you see the ceiling of the person and maybe the person reading reminds you of your evil fourth grade teacher. So that's why I feel that way. And you have a ceiling Oh my God, but that's not the teacher so I can relax. Maybe there was a silly example but but I'm trying to give you an example of how you can use this to find out what's going on. So I do this a lot. I tune into my body. And, and I do it when I give Dharma talks here. Because what I do with my body, what happens with me, tells me something about how I am relating to the talk to you. And I've learned, for example, that if I start leaning forward, there's your intention that goes off my back as I'm going forward, get tight. Sometimes, I'd be careful. Notice that I'm giving talks because sometimes that happens when I'm worried that I'm not getting across what I want to get across. Worried I'm losing the audience. Lose. You got to make extra effort. So that's interesting to notice that I'm always tense, I don't have that information from relax to begin with. And I could notice that movement. So that's helpful.

So I trust my body. And one of the practices I have is to yield to my body. interesting concept of yielding to the body. So I feel what's going on in my body. And then I tried to relax into it, or try to open into it or open a part of my body or open to what's happening here. And what that allows me to do is to feel more fully what's happening both inside of me and outside of me, but also expects me to feel the emotions, the tensions and stuff that's going on, to be more open. And it's not so always so easy, because I try to stay open, then sometimes I feel more vulnerable. Or sometimes I feel more uncertain or feel, you know, I might feel like say that I'm impatient. And so I feel impatience a certain kind of tightness somewhere that are open to that impatience, relax or impatience. It's like I have this kind of awkward situation where there's just momentum is motivation to do something, to act to be impatient to be faster something and this openness at the same time, and I find it kind of very sometimes it kind of uncomfortable to hang out in those kind of in between place. But I find it very healing because it allows the body to do some kind of process of relaxing of unfolding or moving, revealing. That wouldn't happen if I gave into the impatience. started acting and doing a lot of things fast. Or if I feel irritated, or feel a little bit nervous about something, or, you know, to open, relax and open to the body, in a sense, metaphorically kind of settled back. Okay, here I am. And this is what's happening. Let's settle back and feel this right now. Let's see what's happening here. As opposed to, let's get something done. Or let's prove to the other person, I'm talking to them right? Or let's defend myself or let's do this and that lets people people don't necessarily, I don't think people necessarily see them doing this. But in my own self, I'm trying to imagine feeling settled back and feel this. And that settled back and feeling is a mindfulness of the body experience. And then sometimes I feel kind of tentative in that space. And I find

it very helpful to be tentative. Sometimes the bond feel vulnerable. There's so much more Learning, discovery by myself in that place to yielding cmcl to this era now, that's, that's relax into it. It's open to it. Here. I found really, really great, really great. And finally, I'd like to say about the but mindfulness of the body.

The body never lies. The mind none of you ever lie. But the mind is tricky. And many spiritual teachers and people sometimes treat part of the mind as being almost like a like, not you. It's like this the mind has a mind of its own. And the mind is can be to all kinds of has capacity for delusion. We're fooling ourselves for lying to ourselves. Putting on blinders, denial, repression, all these wonderful 440 and things. And, but the body doesn't do that body is never realize it's there. And so, not only is that so you can connect to what's happening, which is really true and notice what's happening. The very direct and honest way if you with your body, oh, I feel like I want to pull back into a shell to feel back in the body sometimes. Or you feel a certain tension or you feel a certain kind of something in your body going on. And this process of the body never lying. The body is also a lot simpler than the mind. Hearts, our minds are so sophisticated, intelligent, adult, knowledgeable, all these different things or confused Whatever. And they're both and, and some people can get involved in endless maze of analysis. And it's amazing to me how many times we do say we can repeat the same thoughts, the same analysis, same conversation, over and over and over again in the head. We're constantly going back and thinking about as if thinking is going to help us find the way analyzing the past, planning the future. The body doesn't analyze the past, the body doesn't plan the future, the bodies in the body, the process of the body, unfolding unraveling relaxing, unwinding, has a direct correlation to the unwinding the unraveling the settling of what goes on the mind, but it's sometimes much more direct than it is To go through the mind. So say that something, something, something difficult happened today to me. And so may I'm tense. And I want to, I don't want to be tense. So you go, What happened there? I was on the freeway, this person got in front of me. And then the other person I've slowed down, and this person card next to me said something, it distracted me. And then this happened, I should have this and that. And if only I you know, maybe I should go back and say this is someone just making some silly up and need to my stay tense, trying to remember the situation. Or I just noticed my shoulders are tense, and relax them. That was easy. It's not always that easy. But the body is a much simpler, much simpler way of sometimes accomplishing the same thing. And the body is so much so much the case the body is a direct way. That in, in I like to say that it's the body, which is the world road to the unconscious. You know the idea that dreams are road road road to your unconscious, I think the body is the body will take you much more directly, much faster. This entire process of discovery. So mindfulness of the body, yielding to the body, letting the body beat your body, be your teacher 30 from your body. Your body is always in the present moment. And your mind is occasionally in the present moment. And the task of mindfulness is to make it be so that your mind and your body are in the same place at the same time. And since you can't take your body into the future, or into other places where your mind is you could do The task here now is to bring your mind where your body is. So we bring our body mind or awareness or consciousness, back into this body over and over and over again.

And try to stay there in rest there, to keep the body. Keep in mind with the body, and when the mind and the body in the same place at the same time, then there's a very profound healing that can happen between those two, and the to support each other, benefit each other and awaken each other.

So was my little encouragement, hopefully encouragement for you to take an interest in your body now. And maybe for this next week, maybe you could take some extra attention, to explore your body, get to know your body. Find out what's happening with your body, in all kinds of situations throughout the day, not just meditation. And try this Practice of yielding to the body, settling back and feeling what's there,

giving it permission to be there and see what happens if you make space for it, instead of trying to make something happen so many many thanks