

Chapter 2: Simply Being Present With Body Sensations and Sounds

Quote from “Untangling Self” by Andrew Olendzki

“The first thing most people notice when they sit down to meditate is that the mind is restless. We are used to processing so much information, the mind has developed the habit of working quickly and is always hungry for more input. The antidote to this natural tendency is to slow down and relax both body and mind, which of course is easier said than done.” “. . .Whether it takes a few minutes, a few days, or a few years, eventually one can learn the skill of deep relaxation. Peacefulness is a living experience that can be cultivated by holding still, letting go, and allowing oneself to settle down into the quiet depths of the mind, again and again, one moment after another. The cumulative effect of this patient perseverance is a growing sense of ease, of comfort, of gentle well-being. . .”

Chapter 1 introduced us to meditation where we sustained our focus on the breath. When we noticed that thoughts caught our attention that took us away from our focus, with a gentleness of heart and kindness of spirit we guided ourselves back to being focused on our breath again. When we noticed a thought, we may have gently noted “thought” or “not now” before returning to the breath. Each breath, no matter how different each could be, was fine just as it was. Breaths were not judged good or bad nor did they need to be changed or fixed in any way. Letting go of control, we relaxed, received and allowed each breath to simply be as it was. We learned to flow with experience even if that included an occasional thought.

Our focus on the breath was a mindful knowing or awareness of what was happening in the body as we breathed. On an in breath, for example, we may have noticed our belly or chest rising or a sensation at the tip of our nose as we inhaled, or we might have noticed that our breathing was fast and labored or slow and easy. As we exhaled, we may have noticed relaxation in different parts of our body. We may have noticed in the body when our breath began and when it ended. Being aware of our breathing was an in-the-body experience. That being the case, what we experienced in Chapter 1, in part, was an introduction to what we will play with in Chapter 2 – Simply Being Present With Body Sensations. As a personal note, awareness of the body has been a significant area for me in terms of being present in the moment and in reaping the benefits of mindfulness and meditation.

Our body is an amazing vessel. It willingly and automatically gives us a wealth of data to help us navigate our daily life in skillful ways. That data is available to us all the time, and yet most people go about their lives totally unaware that it is there free for the taking. To receive the data, we only have to be present to notice it.

Our culture and our schools teach the value of the mind and analytic thinking. Science and technology depend on objective, verifiable knowledge. The church I was born into taught me to have faith and to trust and believe in only what I was told. Any inner intuitive sense that I might have had that may have varied from the teachings was ostracized. Nowhere in my upbringing was any effort invested in my being tuned into my body or the wisdom that it provides. This may be a reason that most people live in their heads lost in thought most of the time. It may also be a reason that many people believe and trust a computer printout or what a screen says compared to what the body might be telling them. Many people have been left not only lacking in knowing the natural wisdom of the body, but not even trusting it when they may get a glimpse of it. Objective knowledge is good, but objective knowledge without

wisdom is generally not good because it can lead to unintended consequences. One only has to think of climate change and the unbridled and ubiquitous use of plastics and its impact on the natural world to know that it is important to have both knowledge and wisdom. Part of the function of Chapter 2 is to begin the process of waking up and knowing our body as an informant and friend.

The body lives in the present moment. It lives in the now, and it never lies. The mind, on the other hand, often lives in the past or the future, and it often lies or tricks us. The body may sense misinformation and know something is off. The mind might buy into it. Our bodies have no agenda; they just know what is happening, and they respond automatically in sensations and inner knowings, whether we are aware of those sensations or knowings or not. The body seems to have an innate sense of the truth of any given moment.

At a base level of being aware of our body, we notice things like tension and tight muscles, relaxed muscles, itches, aches, if we are hot or cold, varying sensations on the skin, pounding, tingling, prickling, etc. When these sensations are strong, it might be easy to notice them. When they are more mild, they often go unnoticed. I find it interesting that when I am doing a body scan in meditation and I focus attention on my hands, I notice sensations and small aches that I would totally miss if I were not intentionally paying attention to them. Or sometimes when I am intentionally doing some physical activity like gardening, that I am so into what I am doing that I am not aware of the aches and pains in my body. When I am not aware, I often don't make conscious decisions to act skillfully with wisdom to take some time to breathe and relax a muscle or maybe just sit down and take a break for a few minutes. When I am not aware, my mind and will are driving.

The body also feeds us information at a more subtle level in the form of inner knowing. This form might include things like intuition, hunches, gut feelings, and felt senses. As the body participates in all that we say and do, knowing, feeling, and listening to the body helps us know the reality of what we are experiencing at any moment.

Here are some examples of how the body might give us subtle data. Have you ever experienced an inner sense of just knowing something feels "off?" Someone might have said something that just didn't seem right or you might sense that someone is not telling the truth. It is just a gut sense. What did you do in the moment? Did you trust and listen to it or ignore it? Or did you ask questions to discern what the reality was? If you've ever made a major decision like buying a home, asking someone to marry you, or accept a new job, what messages did you get from your body in helping you make the decision? Were your muscles tense or relaxed? How did you discern what to do? Was your resolution driven by obsession, fear, or desire? You give someone a truly deserved, felt, and warm compliment. Did the muscles in your body relax? They probably did whether you were aware of them or not. Most of us, at least once, have done something in our life that we were not proud of or that did not meet our standards. If so, what might you have been feeling in your stomach or shoulders or how was your blood pressure? Your body was there to help you know. As a gay man, over the years I've had lots of experience of being in groups where I was trying to feel out whether it was safe to be around the people in the group or safe in being open with what I said.

It is important to be aware of body sensations and inner knowings because it gives us agency. With information, we have choice. We can consciously choose to act skillfully from a stance of wisdom rather than to act unskillfully out of habit or past conditioning. Noticing sensations and being aware of the reality of the moment, even if for a brief moment, can quiet the mind and serve as a pause that

offers us an opportunity to choose to act one way or another. With information and agency we have an opportunity and responsibility to discern what is skillful to do next or to ask questions that will help us discern and know how we are to respond. Discernment is not reactive. It requires mindfulness. The thing is, we must notice and be aware of what is happening in our body if our body is to be this true friend and informant. Then, we need to trust and listen to it. So often, however, either because we are not aware of how our body is responding or because our minds are so busy, we discount or go unaware of these messages.

Noticing body sensations is part of the process of quieting the mind. As body sensations occur during most sits, in Chapter 2 we learn how to work with them in meditation. They are not something we avoid or try to brush away. We include them as part of our meditation. As we progress through the remainder of the chapters, we will see how clearly knowing how to be present with our breathing and with body sensations and inner knowings is necessary in being with and working with feelings/emotions and thoughts/thinking not only while we sit, but as we live throughout our day. Let's begin by simply becoming aware (mindful) of body sensations and seeing how we include them in our meditation.

Including body sensations in our meditation. . .

I've heard comments such as, "If only my shoulders didn't ache or my leg didn't itch, I could meditate," or "If only it were quiet in here, I could meditate," or "If I couldn't hear the cars on the street or the birds chirping outside my window, I could meditate." The assumption, of course, is that one can only meditate in the most perfect of conditions—a quiet place or a body that is free of discomfort. That assumption is a myth. Part of the myth is believing that these "not so perfect" conditions are an interruption to our sitting, when in reality, they are not an interruption at all. They are simply one more thing we happen to be experiencing in the moment. The solution is not to try to get rid of what we are experiencing, but rather to simply include them as part of our meditation. They become part of the flow of experience.

For just a moment, *stop* and *pause*. Close your eyes and take a couple of breaths, feeling the breath in your body. Now see if you can sense if any other part of your body is calling your attention—a tickle, itch, ache, pain, tight muscle, relaxed muscle. . . or now in this moment is your body free of sensations? All you need do is notice and allow; no need to judge, change, or fix anything. Simply notice and feel (have the direct experience) in your body. There is no right way to be. There is simply how you are in this very moment! My teacher, Mark Nunberg, at the Common Ground Meditation Center in Minneapolis taught me the phrase, "This is how it is now."

While meditating, if you notice a sensation somewhere in your body, and it is not strong, and it is only incidental and lasts only a moment, you can just simply note it ("itch," "tingle," "tension") and return to your breath as your anchor.

But, when a body sensation (i.e. itch, pain, tingle, twitch, tension, tightness, constriction, relaxation, warm, pulsing and throbbing, hot or cold) strongly catches your attention, and if it is lasting, simply receive and allow it to be as it is. Temporarily abandon the breath as your anchor and make that sensation your anchor. Stay with the direct experience of that sensation, receiving and allowing it to be

just as it is—without judgment and without trying to change or fix it in any way. Let it stay as long as it wants.

When the breath was your anchor, and when your mind wandered, you returned to your breath. If in the middle of focusing on a sensation your mind wanders, simply and with kindness return your attention to the body sensation. When the body sensation no longer grabs your attention, simply return your attention back to your breath as your anchor.

We welcome body sensations with open arms just as if they are a guest. And, as with the breath, we do not try to change or fix them in any way; we simply allow and experience them just as they are. We do not demand that the sensation stay (if it is pleasant) or go away (if it is not pleasant).

Some additional thoughts about being present with body sensations. . .

Meditation will increase your awareness of the sensations that exist in your body. When our mind is busy and scattered, many, if not most, body sensations go unnoticed (or at least unacknowledged).

The intention is to have the direct experience of the sensation in your body rather than to have thoughts to describe the experience. You are not training the mind to simply observe, you are training the mind to be with your sensation—to feel all the nuances of your aching back or the nuances of your tense shoulders or the intensity of that itch.

When a body sensation really grabs your attention, you will likely notice that the sensation changes from moment to moment. You are to simply notice and experience those changes as they happen. Our work in meditation is not to make the sensation stay or go away. The sensation will likely either get better (possibly to your satisfaction), worse (possibly less to your satisfaction), or it may stay the same. Your sensation may have a beginning and an end just as your breath has a beginning and an end. Staying with the changes in a body sensation may be easier said than done. In meditation we simply do our best to receive and allow the sensation just as it is without trying to change or fix it.

As a quiet body invites a quiet mind, it is best to experience the sensation without moving the body. One caveat to this—if a sensation is painful, and if you fear that physical harm is being done by being in a certain position, you must take care of yourself and shift your position or do what is necessary to relieve the pain. You might for example, sit in a chair rather than cross-legged on a cushion, or you might straighten your leg. At the same time you might not need to scratch an itch.

To help hold your attention to noticing and being with a body sensation, you might consider noting with simple words like “hot,” “tingly,” “pulsing,” “itchy,” “tense,” etc. Your words may change as your experience of the sensation changes. The more simply and clearly the word represents what you are feeling, the better. And, if you cannot quickly come up with a word to represent the sensation, do not fret. Simply note “don’t know,” then continue being with the sensation.

You might also note any thoughts that arise around the sensation--“Will it go away?” “How long will it last?” “Will the pain hurt me?” “Why is this happening to me?” Simply note these as thoughts. There is no need to try to get rid of the thoughts or beat yourself up because they are there. When they arise, simply return to being with the body sensation itself. Sometimes a thought will be the catalyst to

encourage other sensations in your body. For example, a thought wondering if you forgot to shut off the stove before you left home may stir some fear and tension in your body, or a thought of a new grandchild may stir sensations of relaxation. Your job in meditation is to simply notice (and receive) moment by moment what you are experiencing or what is happening—no need for judging or fixing!

It is common when experiencing body sensations to have thoughts of liking what you are experiencing, such as a cool breeze on your body coming from a nearby open window, or a thought of not liking what you are experiencing, such as the ache of fatigue in your shoulders, or you may be neutral, neither liking or disliking, what you are experiencing. These “liking,” “not liking” or “neutral” thoughts and feelings about what you are experiencing are referred to as *feeling tones*. While meditating, if a feeling tone is present, it is good to notice the feeling tone without trying to change it or push it away. Just note it and see if it impacts the sensations in your body. For example, at times not liking something may increase tension in some part of your body. And again, all you need do is notice what is happening; you do not need to change or fix anything; there is nothing to do! You are simply being aware of moment-to-moment experience.

Expanding our awareness in meditation to include sounds. . .

We work with sounds that occur during meditation much as we do with the breath and with body sensations. Like body sensations, sounds are not an interruption to our meditation; they are not something we need to get rid of. They are part of our moment-to-moment experience, so we simply include them as part of our meditation.

If a sound (such as a car on the street, a bird chirping outside the window, or someone coughing in the room) is incidental and lasts only a moment, simply note it, then return your attention to your breathing,

But, if a sound really grabs your attention, and is lasting (such as a jet ski on a lake or the sound of a furnace or the dishwasher, or the ticking of a clock), temporarily abandon your breath as your anchor and make the sound your anchor. Be with the moment-to-moment experience of the sound without trying to change or fix it or make it go away. When it no longer grabs your attention, simply return to your breath as your anchor. And, as with body sensations, if a feeling tone of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral (or like, dislike, or indifferent) is present, it is good to notice that as well.

And one caveat—if the sound is really annoying (like a drill tearing the wall down next door), and if it is there before you start to sit, you might consider sitting somewhere else or sitting at a different time.

Some thoughts about noting what you are experiencing. . .

If you use words to note during meditation, consider using words at one of two levels, whichever works for you.

- a. object level – for example, if your experience is hearing a sound, use words that describe what you are hearing – “chime,” “car,” “bird,” “cough,” “chair”, or you may note with words representing the quality of the sound – “shrill,” “heavy,” “grinding,” etc. All are

okay, although words used at the object level may lead to discursive thinking and a story line (thoughts about what you are hearing).

- b. sense door level – use words that indicate the source of how you are receiving data – “hearing,” “seeing,” “smelling,” “tasting,” “feeling,” “thinking.” In the case of sound, such as hearing a bird outside the window, rather than noting “bird,” you could note “hearing.” If you sense a smell coming from the kitchen, you could note “smelling,” rather than a word to describe what you are smelling. These words are less likely to lead to discursive thinking.

For example, I was doing a walking meditation outside at a retreat. I came upon an apple tree with beautiful red apples, and I noted, “apples.” I immediately sensed the feeling tone of “liking,” and a judgment of how nice and ripe the apples were. That was followed by thoughts of wondering if the apples were as sweet and juicy as they looked, remembering the taste of my grandmother’s apple pie, my wanting to return home to bake a pie and what apples I would use for the pie, who I would invite to help eat the pie, and on and on and on. The next time I came to a beautiful tree (this time an evergreen), I simply noted, “seeing.” Discursive thinking did not follow.

If you find your mind is really active, and you want to quiet it down, consider focusing on an object (any object) at the sense door level – just see, or just hear, etc. This can be done in meditation or anytime throughout the day.

Sounds may trigger body sensations. For example, a loud bang may make your muscles jump or become tense, or a cool, soothing breeze in the heat of summer may trigger relaxation. Simply notice the sound and the associated body sensation(s) that represent the moment-to-moment experience. You might also note any judgment of the sound being good or bad, the beginning and the end of the sound, and/or thoughts that arise regarding the sound (i.e. how long will it last?).

Receive and allow sounds with a gentle and kind heart. Welcome them into your awareness and allow them to stay as long as they want. Do not demand they go away! Sounds are not an interruption to your meditation; they become part of it.

By now you are likely seeing that when we meditate, we are waking up to knowing moment-to-moment whatever we are experiencing in our bodies. We flow with experience. When we are in our head, we are typically functioning in either the past or in the future. When we are in our bodies, we are in the “now.”

A short note about meditating and being with any experience that we would prefer to not be having. . .

In meditating we are simply training the mind to notice, receive and allow what is present. Whatever shows up we work with it. There are no mistakes. We ebb and flow and are fully present in a relaxed way with what is presented—even with that which we may normally resist. By relaxing the resistance to what might be unwelcome, we are allowing the experience to be just as it is. In turn, we are creating

the conditions for the body and mind to become quiet and calm. All of experience is impermanent. Nothing lasts forever. In meditation we do not try to get rid of that which we might normally resist. By allowing ourselves to experience the unwelcome fully, what happens is more like a melting away or dissolving process. It is not a doing; it is more an allowing. We are giving what is happening the space to release, settle, just be, then move on. Those are the conditions for insights and peace and calm to arise.

And, what do you do if resisting what you are experiencing is persistent? As stated before, we work with whatever shows up, so if resistance is persistent, use resistance as your focus or anchor. Feel resistance in your body. Where might it be? Each of us may experience it a little differently, but likely you will not find it in your little left toe. It is more likely to appear as tension, breathing faster, increased amount of thoughts, etc. Welcome and allow it to stay as long it wants to be there or until it decides to move on. It is your guest, and it has come as a messenger that likely has something to teach you.

Homework

1. Sit (Experiential Knowledge)

Aim to meditate six out of seven days for a minimum of 10 minutes. It is important to do something every day—even if you only sit for 5 minutes. If you are having a particularly busy day, and do not have time to meditate, make sure you include the integration exercise of *stopping* and *pausing* presented below as many times as you remember to do it. You might also consider integrating walking meditation.

2. Study (Cognitive/Intellectual Knowledge)

Read/review Chapter 2 as it meets your needs.

Read Chapter 3, Simply Being Present with Feelings/Emotions (Part I), Pages 1 thru the middle of Page 4 only (up to “Language of Emotions”). Because the remainder of the chapter consists of exercises we will do together as a class in our next session, there is no need to read further. The PDF file of this chapter will be sent to you next week. Please have a paper copy or electronic version available with you to follow along in next week’s class. If you are taking the class a AUMC and you do not have access to a printer, let us know if you would like us to print a copy for you.

3. Integrate – “The Power of the Pause” (Experiential Knowledge)

Last week we began the *stop* and *pause* exercise by simply stopping and being mindful in the moment by taking three to five breaths. This week we will add the extra step of checking in with your body to see what is going on. What sensations are present and what might they be telling you about what is happening to you in that exact moment? Note any judgment or any desire to have things different from what they are—just note; there is no need to fix or change anything—all you have to do is receive and allow your life to be just as it is in that moment. Whatever you notice, just consider it useful information.

By stopping and pausing you are having a meditative moment during your day. No one need know you are doing this; in fact, it is better if they do not. You can do this standing at your desk, sitting in your car, waiting in line somewhere—the situations are endless! This is not hard to do. What may be hard is to remember to do it. Here’s a note about the benefits of the *stopping* and *pausing* from Pema Chodron, guiding teacher at Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia. Pema has written numerous books on mindfulness and meditation.

“Waking Up to Your World” by Pema Chodron

The pause practice—the practice of taking three conscious breaths at any moment when we notice that we are stuck—is a simple but powerful practice that each of us can do at any given moment.

Pause practice can transform each day of your life. It creates an open doorway to the sacredness of the place in which you find yourself. The vastness, stillness, and magic of the place will dawn upon you, if you let your mind relax and drop for just a few breaths the story line you are working so hard to maintain. If you pause just long enough, you can reconnect with exactly where you are, with the immediacy of your experience.

When you are waking up in the morning and you aren’t even out of bed yet, even if you are running late, you could just look out and drop the story line and take three conscious breaths. Just be where you are! When you are washing up, or making your coffee or tea, or brushing your teeth, just create a gap in your discursive mind. Take three conscious breaths. Just

pause. Let it be a contrast to being all caught up. Let it be like popping a bubble. Let it be just a moment in time, and then go on.

You are on your way to whatever you need to do for the day. Maybe you are in your car, or on the bus, or standing in line. But you can still create that gap by taking three conscious breaths and being right there with the immediacy of your experience, right there with whatever you are seeing, with whatever you are doing, with whatever you are feeling.

Another powerful way to do pause practice is simply to listen for a moment. Instead of sight being the predominant sense perception, let sound, hearing, be the predominant sense perception. It's a very powerful way to cut through our conventional way of looking at the world. In any moment, you can just stop and listen intently. It doesn't matter what particular sound you hear; you simply create a gap by listening intently.

In any moment you could just listen. In any moment, you could put your full attention on the immediacy of your experience. You could look at your hand resting on your leg, or feel your bottom sitting on the cushion or on the chair. You could just be here. Instead of being not here, instead of being absorbed in thinking, planning, and worrying, instead of being caught up in the cocoon, cut off from your sense perceptions, cut off from the power and magic of the moment, you could be here. When you go out for a walk, pause frequently—stop and listen. Stop and take three conscious breaths. How precisely you create the gap doesn't really matter. Just find a way to punctuate your life with these thought-free moments. They don't have to be thought-free minutes even, they can be no more than one breath, one second. Punctuate, create gaps. As soon as you do, you realize how big the sky is, how big your mind is.

How does this pausing, noticing, and simply allowing yourself to be as you are impact what you are experiencing? What, if any, changes take place when this awareness comes into your consciousness? What you are going to find is that when you are conscious or aware of what is happening with you right now, you are putting yourself in a position to consciously choose how to respond to whatever situation you may be in at the moment. For example, you may see that if your shoulders are tense, a skillful thing to do may be to invite a couple of calming breaths. Sometimes just the realization that your shoulders are tense and the allowing of them to be just as they are without resistance has a way of allowing them to relax. Or, if someone has just given you some bad news, or if someone has just said something that discounted you or angered you, pausing and taking a few mindful breaths can help you more skillfully know how to respond rather than compulsively react in a negative way. If you pause and notice that you are relaxed, maybe you can simply be happy and possibly enjoy the moment in a heightened way.

Some additional thoughts about what you can play with this week: (optional—pick and choose)

Sip some tea and look out the window and notice what is happening in your body.

Stand in line at the grocery store, and don't read the magazines or scroll on your iphone; just be present in your body and see and feel what is present.

Play with any experience and note at the sense door level—just see, hear, taste, touch, smell

The opportunities are endless—what would you like to play with?

Also see if you sense any moments where you have an inner knowing or gut sense of something—an intuitive hunch. Just note what it is and see any response you have. No pressure to do anything or make any decisions.

Processing What We Learned in Chapter 2. . .

(We will use this to check in at the beginning of class)

Using only words and/or phrases, take a few moments to respond to these questions before next week's class:

1. What was your experience of sitting at home last week? What issues came up for you in terms of integrating mindfulness of the breath, body sensations, and sounds into your meditation?

2. What was your experience of integrating the *stop* and pause exercise into each day? What did you discover when you checked in with yourself? What impact, if any, did that have on your day? What insights did you gain?

3. What questions, if any, do you have regarding anything we have worked with in Chapter 1 and 2?

4. What general question(s) do you have about meditation?