

CHAPTER 5

The Bodyscan

The monk trains himself thinking: 'Conscious of the whole body, I breathe in. Conscious of the whole body I breathe out. Calming the whole body, I breathe in. Calming the whole body I breathe out.'

– *The Satipatthana Sutta*. Page 90

There are dozens of practices based on scanning the play of sensations within the body. You could systematically relax the muscles from top to bottom. You could focus on subtle blocks and energy flows as in yoga. In Tai Chi you focus on moving the body in a fluid, harmonious way.

Despite their variety, these techniques all have a similar effect: they strengthen and harmonise your mental map of your body (the 'body schema'). Scanning the body slowly makes you mindful of your hidden tensions, and this alleviates many of them within seconds. It is like gently combing the knots out of a tangle of long hair. If you do so, you'll be amazed at how many knots you can find.

A good way to structure a meditation session is to scan slowly and systematically, three or four breaths in each place. For example you could spend four breaths in each of the following places: scalp and forehead; face; neck, throat and shoulders; arms and hands; chest; diaphragm; belly; hips; legs and feet. That would keep you occupied for several minutes, and you could easily vary this format at will.

After a slow scan, it is good to scan more rapidly up and down to integrate the body schema. You can also let your mind explore tensions, blocks, imbalances and discomforts when it seems useful to do so. Conversely, you can amplify pleasant sensations by focusing on them.

This can be very enjoyable and rewarding work with remarkable psychological and physical benefits. Although this may be hard for a novice to imagine, some people spend hundreds of hours doing this.

Scanning in detail can so alter our perception that some people will feel that they are sensing their bodies ‘as they actually are’ for the first time. They sense not just their usual body more clearly, but a kind of body that is qualitatively different. They feel an ‘energy-body’ of fluid sensations rather than the usual lumpish flesh and bones. The state of mind that induces this effect is often called ‘just watching’ or ‘bare attention’, but this is only half the truth.

Being mindful always improves some aspect of what we are focusing on. This is the biological purpose of attention, even if we don’t consciously target that outcome. Just to notice a subtle tension or a disturbing mood or a repetitive thought invariably leads to a reappraisal and adjustment, whether we intend it or not. Sensing the body highlights what is ‘bad’ and orients us to what is ‘good’. We notice subtle deviations from the homeostatic optimums and instinctively reorient towards balance. This means that exploring the body in detail will integrate and balance it in ways that we can’t even imagine until we become proficient. This effect is continuous and subliminal throughout any good meditation practice, and the results are cumulative over time.

When being mindful of something induces a positive change, psychologists refer to this as being an automatic or ‘implicit’ reappraisal rather than a conscious or ‘cognitive’ one. Because the transformation is not a deliberate act, it may seem as if we’ve done nothing at all – as if we really were just noticing something in a state of nonjudgmental acceptance.

In fact we did do something: we chose to become mindful of that sensation in the first place. We focused on it for long enough for an implicit reappraisal and an adaptive response to occur. We probably wouldn’t continue with the ‘just watching’ mode if that positive change didn’t occur. We always need a subtle sense of reward to continue with anything we do, even if we don’t consciously register it.

After 10 or 15 minutes a good meditator will usually feel that he or she has ‘arrived’ at some degree of body-mind stillness (*passaddhi*). At this point the formal instructions can and usually do take second place to a deeper kind of guidance from within. Beginners are often apprehensive about getting the instructions right at first. They are afraid that if they tweak anything the promised magic will fail. What will happen if they

breathe through their mouth instead of their nose? Or if they accidentally touch their thumbs to the second fingers rather than the first? Thousands stop meditating altogether because they can't afford the prescribed ideal timespan of 20 minutes or 45 minutes or an hour.

They shouldn't have worried. All roads lead to Rome. All meditations converge on the body schema to some degree. So long as your mind is inside your skin, you can do pretty much anything and it will work. You can clock up your training hours in many short sessions or in fewer long ones. Finally, an improvisational, exploratory quality of attention (Pali: *dhamma-vicaya*) will work much better than a plodding, dutiful one.

The body schema is a fully integrated, real-time map of the state of the body. It is highly dynamic and rich with feedback mechanisms. This means that relaxing the scalp will help relax the feet. Unlocking the jaw will reduce cortisol output. Noticing sadness will soften the face. Breathing out will lower blood pressure and so on.

The body will naturally gravitate towards homeostatic set-points if we let it. It never forgets what perfect health and well-being feel like. Buried in the depths it holds a detailed template of that goal. It compares where we are at any moment against those templates. The body knows where it needs to go. It continuously makes judgement calls: this feels bad. This feels good. If I do this it feels better. We accelerate this process by being well focused and mindful of the sensations with us.

'Homeostasis' means having optimal tone in every muscle group, optimal functioning in every organ, optimal balance and arousal and so on. The process towards this is subtle but very dynamic and it never stops. We can dimly sense this inner intelligence at work, even though most of it occurs out of sight.

The mind also has homeostatic ideals and will gravitate towards them when we let it. This process is mostly pre-conscious, but we do have an instinct for what a healthy, balanced, well-functioning mind feels like. It is a memory if nothing else. When we meditate, we can intuitively direct our attention in ways that feel compatible with these inner guidelines.

If we are mindful of what we are doing, we will also be able to evaluate whether this inner play is truly useful or just another distraction or escape. People often achieve a good degree of body-mind stillness and wonder, 'Is this it? Is this all there is?' This is the time to ignore the instructions, and whatever we were led to expect, and follow our imagination instead. The possibilities are limitless.

We may feel an inclination to go deeply into one place; or to notice an arising emotion or memory trace; or to integrate an emerging image or colour into the scanning; or to notice weird little bad sensations or peculiar new good ones; or to catch a visceral insight; or to realign ourselves in imaginal space; or to examine a mood; or to shift from one body-based practice to another; or to examine a problem through non-verbal feeling; or to just have fun with what we find. To playfully enjoy what feels worth doing, whether in meditation or not, has a very strong anti-depressant effect. It may be the best anti-depressant of all. Here is a list of some common bodyscan variations.

Variations

Scanning down or up. Scanning down is more relaxing. It works with the releasing effect of the out-breath but it can make us too sleepy. Scanning up is more energising. It is more likely to keep us awake.

Scanning in stages. It is useful to deliberately scan through the same stages repeatedly. This will train you to accurately target your attention. How you divide the body from top to bottom is up to you. You are likely to have more divisions if you scan slowly, and less if you scan quickly. You can also scan by visualising what you understand of your anatomy.

Slow scanning (15 minutes or more from top to bottom) is good for beginners. We shouldn't underestimate how long it takes to actually 'see' what is happening deep in the body. It may take weeks before you can sense each place in any detail.

Rapid sweeping. After a slow scan it is good to sweep in rapid and somewhat random fashion up and down. This leads to subtle changes that improve balance, open the body and integrate the body schema.

Fast scans are economical and you're likely to do more of them once you get the knack. I do dozens of quick scans each day. Most of them are less than a minute long and some consist of just a single sigh.

Scanning only the upper body. The face, shoulders and chest are psychosomatic areas. They tense up easily but also relax fairly fast. Scanning just the upper body can be more satisfying than going right down to the feet. You get strong positive feedback from the upper body that what you are doing is working, and this encourages you to continue. This isn't the case lower in the body. The buttocks and thighs for example, will automatically relax if the upper body does, but the feedback signs are much less obvious. They therefore have a weaker confirmatory effect.

Counting and affirmations. Props are often essential to keep yourself on track. You can always count three or four breaths silently to each stage, or say an affirmation repeatedly while you breathe, as I described in Chapter 3.

Visualisation. Focusing on the body is like illuminating it from within. It's just a small step further to imagine gradually filling the body with light or a colour or nectar or spiritual energy. The Zen master Hakuin suggested imagining a ball of aromatic butter on your head gradually melting throughout your body. (Hakuin is also famous for the saying, "Meditation in the midst of activity is a thousand times superior to meditation in stillness.")

The Central Axis. When you become very still and calm (*passaddhi*), your mind will want to go deeper inside. When scanning it will tend to move up and down the Central Axis of the body. We usually feel this as being slightly in front of the spine. It is not a genuine anatomical structure. It is how the body schema imagines us being straight and balanced.

Chakras. Along this central axis you will find places where your mind naturally wants to rest: the point behind the eyes; the centre of the chest; the centre of the hips, for example. Let your mind go to these places. In yoga these are called 'chakras'. These are not anatomically real locations but the feeling of being centred is very real. Don't worry if your apparent chakras don't exactly match the 5-, 7- or 8-chakra models of the various yogic or Tibetan systems. The fact that these are not compatible with each other makes it obvious that they are not an absolute spiritual anatomy. They are just frameworks to hang your experience off. You don't need to force your actual experience to conform to any of these.

Deep point focus. If your mind wants to go to any particular place, let it do so. It will be attracted in particular to the 'negatives' – to whatever is painful, awkward or out of balance. Focusing on those areas helps to correct them.

Do a Pain Search. Home in on what feels bad and let the sensations there come to the surface. Mindfulness typically acts as a troubleshooter. Error-detection is one of its major functions. We often have to become fully conscious of unnecessary tension or a runaway thought or a disturbing mood, and let it emerge fully in consciousness, in order to relax at all.

Scan with the breath. You can imagine 'breathing through the body' or 'breathing into' areas of pain or tension. This will help you create a sense

of space and openness throughout the body, thereby inducing the so-called 'breath-body.'

Augment the positives. Because the lovely states of mind are more subtle than the negatives, they can easily be missed. When they do occur, make sure you notice them: deep stillness, inner silence, bliss, vision, sensory delight, mental clarity and control. Don't forget why you're meditating: you do want to feel better. Keep the goal in mind and enjoy any unexpected rewards that come along.

Accepting the body

Bodyscanning can be profoundly enjoyable. It still surprises me that physical bliss can coexist with the inevitable discomforts of having a human body. Some of my students even say that severe pain and illness are no obstacle and can even help. Because scanning is so therapeutic however, people often try to force the process. This can lead to frustration: "I couldn't make my shoulders relax no matter how hard I tried!"

The most helpful attitude is a loving and tolerant curiosity towards the body just as it is. Psychologists call this 'nonjudgmental acceptance', and it is an excellent response towards things that we can't immediately change. All we can do is pay attention to the body and gently explore. We usually can't force it to feel exactly the way we would like. If we can feel comfortably at home in our less than perfect bodies, we stop fighting ourselves and automatically relax.

There can be hundreds of things that we don't like about ourselves – sensations, thoughts, moods and habits. In meditation, we meet them one by one as the minutes go by. Each one gives us a chance to let go a little more of our habitual negativities, to become more tolerant of 'negative affect.' The minor physical discomforts are a good place to start. Learning to do this enhances our capacity for what psychologists call 'distress tolerance' or 'pain tolerance.'

The results can be truly amazing. Although bodyscanning illuminates our discomforts, it is also the royal road to bliss. We can feel every part of the body, and all the systems within it, orienting towards a state of health and balance. Beneath the discomforts, the body can feel tranquil, radiant and alive.

Is it working?

Some psychologists say that we should practise without aiming for any particular outcome. 'Just accept whatever happens, good or bad.' That is a goal in itself (universal acceptance), but I'm not sure that it's a good one. It certainly wouldn't make us any good at golf or maths. Learning any skill is rewarding but it does take effort. We will only stick with it if seems to be worthwhile. We know that most students of any subject need frequent positive feedback on their progress or they're likely to get discouraged. This is exactly what happens to most people who attempt meditation. They fail to look for the benefits.

Meditation is about learning to relax rapidly, to focus better and to manage thoughts and emotions more intelligently. These are skills that we can readily improve if we know how to assess our progress. Let's look at just the first of these: relaxing consciously. Beginners often doubt that focusing on their bodies will relax them. We usually get sleepy and less conscious as we relax, so we are rarely alert enough to notice how pleasant it feels. So how can we tell if we are succeeding or not?

The shift from the Stress Response to the Relaxation Response, from sympathetic arousal to parasympathetic recovery, creates dramatic effects throughout the body. Here are some signs to be mindful of:

Muscle tension releases. We can easily feel the little muscles around the eyes, lips and jaw soften. The shoulders drop. The loss of tone throughout the large muscles of the body induces a feeling of heaviness. As tension fades, the body loses its jumpy, ready-to-move quality. It starts to feel genuinely still.

Tingling, warmth and pulsing occurs. The Relaxation Response diverts the blood flow from the large fight-or-flight muscles to the skin and the digestive system. The skin often feels tingly and warm, and the pulse may become more prominent. Stress shuts down the digestive system but relaxation wakes it up, sometimes with gurgling and mild nausea.

Physical discomforts emerge. Stress and cortisol mask our aches, pains and fatigue. Relaxation brings them to the surface. Their presence can be regarded as good signs of progress. Focusing on the body naturally amplifies sensations, and the brain will always give priority to unpleasant signals over pleasant ones.

Arousal drops. We sense this most clearly in the breathing. We shift from tense, holding, rapid, upper-body breathing to soft, releasing, slower, lower-body breathing. When this happens we know that heart rate

and blood pressure will also be returning to balance. We also get our first taste of stillness and silence in the gap between out-breath and in-breath.

You know you're on the right track if you feel heavy or light, soft, tingling, warm, tired, sore, still or any combination of the above. You may also feel your breathing soften, more saliva in your mouth, watering in the eyes, a gurgling stomach, a sense of inner space or flow. This is what it means to be 'mindful of the body.'

Mentally you may still be a bit distracted or sleepy, or you may feel fully calm and controlled. Your bad mood may have utterly changed, or it may just have weakened. You are likely to feel more grounded and in tune with your emotional state. Ideally you feel a stronger sense of agency after a meditation. You are more able to choose where to direct your attention rather than being at the mercy of whatever arises.

When we meditate, our quality of focus naturally fluctuates according to inner and outer forces that we usually can't see or control (biology, weather, stress, fatigue, cognitive overload, sickness, emotional cross-contamination and so on.) But we're still not helpless.

None of us can focus perfectly for long but we can certainly get better with practice. It is simply a matter of being 'mindful of your state of mind' and repeatedly checking. It starts with a simple question: 'Am I focused or not? Am I paying attention to the body as I intended to do, or am I distracted by some thought?' If we become mindful that we're not focused, it is easy to correct it. If we don't recognise it, we're as lost as a tennis player who endlessly repeats an error.

If we notice when our attention is good, we can amplify it. Just to recognise that 'this is good focus' and to embed that feeling in memory is sufficient. It lays down a positive template for the future. As the Buddha said in the *Sutta*: 'Recognise when a good state of mind is present and learn how to amplify it.'

Even acknowledging that your mind is hopelessly scattered is better than not recognising it at all. To notice that something is wrong is the unavoidable first step towards improvement, even if nothing happens immediately. The Buddha said that if you repeatedly recognise bad states of mind and store them in memory, you will eventually come to see what triggers them off and what helps them fade.