

CHAPTER 7

Why Focus on the Body?

“If one thing, O monks, is developed and cultivated, the body is calmed, the mind is calmed, discursive thoughts are quietened, and all wholesome states that partake of supreme knowledge reach fullness of development. What is that one thing? It is mindfulness directed to the body.”

– *Mindfulness of the Body Sutta*¹

Meditation is based on paying sustained attention to the breath or to the body. 10-day retreats, yoga, the MBSR program used by psychologists, and most traditional practices ask us to devote a huge percentage of practice time to observing the body. So why is the body so important?

The answer is not at all obvious. There is little consensus in either the spiritual or the scientific literature. A common argument is that the body is a refuge from thoughts. ‘If you get distracted by a thought, let it go and place your attention gently back on the breath.’ This suggests that any other object would serve just as well, which is obviously not the case. There are in fact dozens of other meditation objects in the literature, but most are relics or curiosities or add-ons. The body trumps them all.

We can only focus well on something if it seems to be worth the effort. People often struggle to focus on the breath because it seems so pointless. In fact the more frequently they get distracted the harder it becomes to refocus. Researchers call this reluctance the ‘inhibition of return’, and can even measure it. We can’t keep refocusing on something that seems of little value, and why on earth would we? We actually focus on the body for reasons that are far more convincing than the ‘breath as anchor’

¹ *Kayagatasati Sutta*. MN 119. Bodhi. 1995. p 949

argument, but these are quite hard to explain in words. They often seem trivial until they are well grounded through practice.

Focusing on the body can produce some very satisfying results. In particular, it can induce fine pervasive pleasure throughout the body, even in the presence of residual pain. Bodyscanning disarms the habitual tension and over-arousal that make many of us unconsciously miserable all day long. It can make us feel good and often very good indeed. This alone is sufficient to explain why meditation is such a good antidote to anxiety. The Buddha was adamant that deep physical pleasure (Pali: *piti*) is almost essential for progress. It is the reward for good work, the proof of success and the motivation for further effort. Pleasure induces the body itself to make a judgement: 'Meditating is good! Keep doing it!'

Vipassana Retreats

If you focus more deliberately than usual on the body, what do you find? On the 10-day retreats I did between 1975 and 1992, we spent as many as 10 hours a day sitting still and focusing on the body. The retreats mostly followed the same formula which originated from two or three Vipassana teachers in Burma. They were as standard as McDonald's hamburgers and they haven't changed significantly since then.

For the first three days we were typically asked to focus in microscopic detail on the changing sensations of the breath at the nostrils: pulsing, tingling, itching, aching, warmth, coolness and so on. In other words, we were learning the skill of selective, sustained attention directed at the breath. This strong focus simultaneously weakened our natural mental inclination towards action or random thought.

From the fourth day on, we would repeatedly scan the whole body with the same fine quality of attention we gave to the breath. An hour to scan down. An hour to scan up. Two hours to scan down. Two hours to scan up. We would notice pleasure, pain, warmth, pulsing, flow, knots, dullness, expansion, tightness and softness, darkness and light.

I always found it easy to stay focused. The work was fascinating and rewarding. There is a general rule in meditation that 'focus improves function.' If you pay good attention to what you are doing, whether meditating or not, the activity invariably becomes more efficient and satisfying. This principle certainly operates when you focus on the body.

By repeatedly scanning, I could feel my body softening, rebalancing, opening up, dumping chronic tensions and discovering new sensory

pleasures. I also noticed the subtle emotional resonances, the verbal scripts, the imagery and memories embedded within those physical sensations. By observing my *body* carefully I could see in much finer detail what was happening in my *mind*.

In other words, focusing on the body was not confined to the purely physical. Detailed body-awareness jumps that body-mind divide. The Buddha said that profound training in Mindfulness of the Body inevitably flows through into mindfulness of Emotions, of States of Mind, and of Thought itself. When we could feel each part of our bodies with a high degree of sensitivity, we were then told to sweep up and down more rapidly, to integrate our mental maps of our bodies. Focusing on the body still took effort but it certainly wasn't boring.

At this point, we were usually encouraged to contemplate the Buddhist theory of Suffering and its Causes. I don't know how many of us actually did that. I found the arguments the teachers presented were childish and unconvincing. They were also quite incidental to the remarkable and unexpected benefits I got from meditating.

Expertise

We know that the acquisition of any skill correlates closely to hours of intelligent (i.e. not mindless) practice. Most people can't afford to take 10-day retreats, but practising steadily over a year can clock up just as much time. So what distinguishes an experienced meditator from a novice? What is the result of the 100 hours of practice you get from a retreat?

Meditation profoundly enhances the proprioceptive and visceral way we feel our body from the inside. This data is integrated into a detailed map, or series of maps, of the body held in the brain. This is what we call the body schema and it is extremely fluid. It constantly adjusts to new information via feedback mechanisms. When we reach out or smile or burp or get angry, the body schema instantly mirrors those events.

One part of the body schema is 'proprioceptive.' It reads the signals from our muscles, tendons, joints and cartilage. This gives us our inner picture of where our body is in space; which part is doing what; how tense or relaxed we are; how easy or hard, how effective or faulty any movement is. It also connects with our sense of balance.

Because proprioception comes from the musculoskeletal system, we can control much of it with considerable precision. Meditators often make countless subtle adjustments while they sit that would be invisible to any

outside observer. More commonly however, they simply 'notice' sensations, and this mindfulness alone induces fine changes. Every one of those tiny shifts is likely to improve the sense of comfort and ease in the body, and the effect is cumulative over time.

The other big part of the body schema is 'visceral.' This is constructed from information emanating from our cardiovascular and respiratory systems, and our digestive tract. These tell us in particular about our levels of arousal (i.e. blood pressure and heart rate) which are the key indicators of stress.

The viscera also convey many of our emotions and moods to the brain. They are the biological sources for our intuitive sense of good and bad, right and wrong, about anything at all. These 'gut feelings' explain why being more grounded in the body helps us to make better judgements. Detailed bodyscanning puts us in touch with the substrata of sensations and emotions that support and inform our conscious mental activity.

Unlike the visible body, the body schema will change enormously during the day. Your body as you walk into a restaurant looks much the same as the one that walks out. But if you ate or drank too much, your body schema would be utterly different. Similarly a relaxed body feels different from an anxious one. A joyful body is different from a depressed one, and these different states can be worlds apart.

Because body awareness is non-verbal, it is mostly outside of consciousness. We all have a functioning body schema or we couldn't negotiate our way through a room, but our ability to do this varies enormously. A child can move with ease, agility and precision because of his good sense of body and the surrounding space. An old sick person is likely to grope and fumble at least partly because of his impaired body schema. He doesn't 'see' or 'feel' himself as clearly as he did.

Some people have good body awareness but most don't. Some people barely feel their bodies except when in pain. Others live totally in their heads or in their actions, and some deliberately split off from their bodies. People who rarely notice their bodies will have rudimentary, underdeveloped body schemas. They won't be able to detect signals of stress, pain, fatigue, hunger, or even their emotions, until these become extreme. They may realise they have a problem only when they start having panic attacks.

On the other hand, athletes, musicians, performers, tradesmen, people who work with their bodies, and those who exercise consciously, are bound to have more detailed and functional body schemas. They are more

‘embodied’, at least in the domain of their particular abilities. While having a good body schema is certainly no guarantee, they are also likely to be happier, more emotionally aware and able to make better decisions.

Bliss (*piti*) and contentment (*sukha*)

Regular meditators inevitably develop their body schemas over time, even if they think they are doing something altogether different. Since our attention naturally orients itself to what is problematic, when we focus on the body we first notice the ‘negatives’ – the stress, pain, fatigue and imbalances. Over time these negatives diminish, the body schema becomes balanced and the ‘positives’ become more prominent.

The positives that we feel in meditation can be quite splendid. The Buddha said that mindfulness of the body is the source of the most profound bliss (*piti*) and contentment (*sukha*) possible in this unsatisfactory world. Personally, I believe that there are superior pleasures, but a good meditation is right up there near the top.

The historical Buddha is correctly seen as a dour, world-renouncing ascetic, but that’s not the full story. Two of his key texts, *The Foundations of Mindfulness* and its companion work *Mindfulness of the Body*² were designed to induce profoundly positive states of body and mind. These are called the absorption states (*jhana*) and they can help answer the question: ‘Why do we focus so much on the body?’

Both of the above texts start with the same 1-2-3-4 stages: Focus on the breath. Calm the breath. Focus on the body. Calm the body. The relief that comes from reducing arousal and muscle tension to its minimum is followed by the subtle pleasure of body-mind stillness (*passaddhi*). The Buddha said that this sense of tranquil embodiment was the indispensable foundation for what follows.

At this point, the *Satipatthana Sutta* branches out to explore emotions, states of mind and thoughts (the other three ‘foundations of mindfulness’), while *Mindfulness of the Body* goes more deeply into the absorption states (*jhana*). Let’s follow this latter route.

The instructions go like this. First establish sustained point focus on the breath (as in the first three days of a 10-day retreat). Then become absorbed in the body schema by scanning in minute detail (as in the last seven days of a retreat). Sooner or later bliss (*piti*) will start to occur.

² *Kayagatasati Sutta*. MN 119. Bodhi, 1995, p 949.

The term *piti* covers a vast range of dynamic body sensations ranging from mild pleasure to ecstasy, not all of which are pleasant. *Piti* typically has a radiant, bubbling, alive quality within the body. Its emotional quality is described using terms such as delight, joy, exhilaration, rapture. The word 'bliss', which implies both its physical and emotional qualities, is probably the best one-word definition of *piti*. The range of *piti* is so wide that we need to hold its definitions lightly, but we can say three things about it.

Firstly, it is a very positive state that arises from transformations within a tranquil body. *Piti* can be thought of as the very best of the sensations that accompany relaxation. Secondly, it is hard to continue meditating or see any point in doing so without experiencing at least some degree of *piti*. Why would you meditate if it didn't feel good? Thirdly, *piti* can be so subtle that we may not even notice it when it is present. Many people get dull and sleepy when they meditate, so they can miss it. *Piti* can be life-changing, but it is usually profound and pervasive, rather than flashy or exciting.

When people feel that meditation can heal the body, this fine internal effervescence is the source of their intuition. *Piti* roughly corresponds to the yogic term *prana*, and the Chinese *ch'i* and the Greek *psyche*. It is the 'life-force', but manifesting as a real-time, ever-changing play of sensations rather than a concept.

Over time an even richer state than *piti* will emerge. This is *sukha*, which is translated most inadequately as 'contentment' or 'happiness'. It involves an uncritical acceptance of the moment: 'Whatever happens is okay.' It implies a complete absence of mental disturbance or conflict, even in extreme situations. It roughly correlates to the sense of mystic union with the world found in other traditions.

*Mindfulness of the Body*³ presents a string of vivid metaphors that describe what good bodyscanning feels like. Here is one of them: "The monk makes the bliss (*piti*) and contentment (*sukha*) born of seclusion 'drench, steep, fill and pervade' his body so no part is unpervaded by it." Bodyscanning intuitively aims for this kind of effect.

Here is another metaphor from the text above. The monk's body becomes like a lake with no inflow. The waters well up from an internal spring so that every part of the lake is pervaded with cool water. In the Pali Canon, coolness symbolises freedom from the passions, which

³ *Kayagatasati Sutta*. MN 119. Bodhi, 1995

presumably are 'hot'. And another metaphor: The monk's body is like a lotus that grows entirely beneath the surface of the lake, so that cool water will 'drench, steep, fill and pervade' the whole lotus from tip to roots.

Among serious meditators, this sense of upwelling or enveloping bliss is quite common. It typically occurs as the text says 'in seclusion', with 'no inflow' from the outer world. This explains why doing retreats and being cut off from the world for a time is so valuable. Many practices from Kundalini yoga to the elaborate visualisations of Tibetan Buddhism try to evoke it. It has the paradoxical effect of being both dynamic (*piti*) and deeply soothing (*sukha*).

Although *piti* ('the pleasure born of seclusion') is most likely to become obvious on a retreat, the first signs of bliss are very ordinary. They occur whenever we relax. We shift from the tight, holding on, blocked, slightly painful, awkward sensations of tension towards a softer, flowing, more gentle way of being in our bodies. When people say that they meditate to 'relieve stress', they are intuitively seeking this shift towards pleasure and ease. This shift is why we unaccountably feel so much better when we meditate.

In the *Sutta* the Buddha asks us to notice not only the presence of positive states such as *piti* and *sukha*, but also what precedes them and what causes them to arise. The most primary and necessary cause of *piti* is enhanced body-awareness. Absorption states rarely last very long, but even regular ordinary meditations will cultivate a rich and detailed mental map of the body over time.

The mental benefits

I've described the physical rewards of good embodiment, but there are powerful cognitive benefits as well. The Buddha describes 'Mindfulness of the Body' as a fortress against the world. If your mind completely pervades your body, it is like a door made of heartwood. It repels temptations as if they were balls of string thrown at it. This suggests that a good meditator can escape the tyranny of thought by retreating to the sanctuary of his body. Nor does he require constant interaction with the outer world to feel good. He really can sit quietly in his room and be blissful.

The Buddha then described good embodiment as the basis for directed attention. He said that the mind grounded in the body is like oil within a jar. When you tip the jar, the oil will flow out smoothly in that one

direction only. This means that good embodiment allows you to focus effortlessly on whatever you choose without your attention spluttering.

In a similar metaphor, he says that Mindfulness of the Body is like having a team of thoroughbreds harnessed to a chariot at the crossroads, ready to go anywhere. A man with a well-trained mind can go out on any road as far as he wishes and return at will. In other words, a mindful person can investigate any thought safely because he remains grounded in his body. He is too strong to be ambushed or tempted by mental detours. He can also disengage from any train of thought and return to body-mind stillness (the crossroads) whenever he wants.

The Buddha also said that Mindfulness of the Body is the essential base for all intuitive knowledge. Because the body mirrors the mind, good body awareness is thus the foundation for understanding our emotions, our states of mind and thoughts. He then goes on to list another twenty metaphors and benefits that come from enhanced embodiment, some of them magical!

We can now understand why the ‘breath as anchor’ argument is so inadequate. If our attention sits too lightly on the breath it will soon flit off to something more interesting. The breath is almost too simple to focus on (the body as a whole is more engaging). Trying to focus on the breath to avoid thought is far too cerebral and unrewarding a reason to stay there.

The breath is most valuable as a proxy entrance into the body schema. A good breath meditator will simultaneously feel his whole body and the state of the life-force within it. This positive somatic feedback will strengthen focus, and the benefits listed above can start to appear.

Whether we focus on the breath or scan the body, the primal underlying object of meditation is always the body schema: our unified, real-time, proprioceptive-visceral mental map of the body. fMRI tells us that regular practice strengthens this mental map and bulks up its neural correlates in the brain. That part of a violinist’s brain that maps his fingers becomes larger and more richly connected over time. Similarly, a good meditator will develop a strong, integrated image of his entire body.

Over the years this builds into a disposition of body awareness whether we happen to be meditating or not. This explains how sitting down and apparently doing nothing can be so valuable. It gives us a rich, flexible and enhanced mental map of who we are in the moment. It makes us ‘present.’

We now have many good reasons for focusing so much on the body. Rapid relaxation. Dissolving stress and anxiety. Bodymind stillness (*passaddhi*). Physical bliss (*piti*). Deep contentment (*sukha*). Immunity from temptation and distraction. Strong sustained focus (*samadhi*). A sense of embodiment (*kayagatasati*). The capacity to follow any thought or action as far as we want and then return to baseline. Emotional awareness and the ability to make good judgements. I could go on but I think that's enough.

Don't be surprised if all the above seems unfamiliar to you. It is hardly ever mentioned in the modern literature. Psychologists and popular writers invariably privilege mind over body. They tend to present mindfulness as being purely cognitive: an ideal state of 'nonjudgmental acceptance' or 'the observer mind.' This parallels the way Tibetan Buddhism and Zen tend to seek out an underlying purity of mind while ignoring its contents.

Many of the early writers on psychological mindfulness were even hostile to the idea that physical effects such as relaxation could be at all beneficial. They saw relaxation as an epiphenomenal side effect of little importance. This is presumably because, as specialists in the field of mental disorders, they preferred to emphasise the mind as the causative agent in therapeutic change. Experienced meditators tend to find this attitude absurd. It doesn't at all describe what they know happens as a result of meditation. It seems glib and superficial to suggest that all satisfaction happens in the mind.

Good meditators tend to be equally critical of the trivialising, quick-fix, 'change your mind and be happy' approach of the self-help literature. A novice really can meditate from scratch and get good results within minutes, but cultivating strong body awareness is analogous to sports training. It does take months of steady, self-monitoring practice. We don't become more embodied by flicking a mental switch, or thinking: 'Just be present.'