

Body Awareness Meditation

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Introduction to the Meditation

This is a led body awareness practice as taught at the West London Buddhist Centre.

The purpose of the exercise is to anchor the mind in a deeper awareness of the body. Being more present in the body we become more present with our thoughts and feelings as they arise and disappear. At home in the body we become more at home in the world around us.

See if you can make sure you won't be disturbed and if possible take the telephone off the hook. The practice can be done sitting up on a chair or on the floor on cushions, or lying down on a bed or on the floor. You may well need a blanket to keep warm and then just find yourself a posture in which you will be able to remain still and reasonably comfortable for half an hour. If lying down, you can stretch your legs out or else you may find it easier on your lower back to raise your knees up. Or just put a cushion under your knees and have a cushion under your head. If sitting in a chair you may find it helps not to lean back against the back of the chair. If sitting on the floor, maybe try kneeling astride some cushions.

We're not trying to get into any particular state. The practice is to invite the attention into a closer engagement with our physical experience - with the sensations of the body. It is an invitation to our attention, not a command. There's no need to try to relax. Just bringing awareness into our experience of ourselves, whatever may be there in the way of tensions, is enough to begin to relax the body and mind. No need to get too literal with what is said here. It is meant to nudge your attention, not grab it - to hold your experience, not tell you what it is. Notice if you are getting impatient with yourself or judging yourself. It is natural for the mind to wander off. The practice is to help the mind come back, not tie it down. The mind's deciding to wander off is always interesting, it's just that we aren't there when it does. So when you wake up to what has happened, notice if you start to get frustrated over this and then see if you can shift to an attitude of interest, curiosity, even amusement.

Led body awareness meditation

[Sound of the gong]

We can start by just attending to where we are, noticing our surroundings - maybe noticing something you particularly like and taking in our overall situation and our general state of mind and body at this moment. Acknowledging where we are.

You can close your eyes or if you like you can leave them open. Either way, let your eyes soften a little, letting go of the visual world around us.

Then taking in any sounds we can hear. You don't have to be disturbed by noises. Just letting them be there in the background. We can let go of the world of sounds around us.

And then taking one or two deep breaths. Noticing the in-breath, the out-breath, this breath, not the idea of the breath generally but this breath now. Not doing anything with it, not forcing it, just noticing the movement of the body, and as far as you can the feeling of the breathing. No need to focus hard. Imagining whatever we are turning our attention to is turning to us, coming to us, exploring whatever is there or not there.

Now letting the in-breath take our attention behind the eyes and the out-breath soften that sense of being present there. You don't need to be focused at that point. The eyes can rest. You can gently invite the eyes to rest.

No edge or boundary to our awareness.

Then the mouth. Noticing any tension there and inviting the mouth and lips to soften. Again you can use the in-breath to invite the attention there and the out-breath to invite it to release.

Bringing awareness into the face generally.

Then imagine that the in-breath draws our attention into the body, down into the belly. Noticing any movement of the belly with the breath. And with the out-breath inviting our attention to settle down wherever we can feel our contact with the ground.

Allowing awareness to drop down to the level of sensation in the body, and spreading out to whichever parts of the body are transmitting our weight to the support of the ground. Receiving that feeling of pressure of our own weight held. And as we breathe out, having a sense that we can let go of our weight, that the ground will support us.

Letting go a little bit more with each breath. Imagining that each out-breath is releasing any tensions and allowing them to flow down into the ground. Feeling the breath drop deep into the body. Using the breath to spread awareness through the body.

Letting the awareness sift the body for sensation down through the legs until we have a sense of the feet, however vague. Then starting with, say, the left foot, breathing in to the big toe of the left foot. Breathing out with a sense of letting go around it.

In, out.

Then seeing if we can feel the little toe, and then the toes in between. Breathing into the sole of the foot. What sensation is there? Breathing out with a sense of releasing awareness around it, to receive the softness and tenderness there in the sole of the foot.

And then the top of the foot. There may not be any very clear sense of some parts of the body at all, that's okay.

Breathing in, breathing out, just letting the sensation come to us.

Then the heel, the ankle, then the right foot. Opening up our sense of the right foot into a more detailed reception of sensation - the big toe, the little toe, the toes in between, we know they're there. Just inviting them to come to our attention. Not pushing for an answer. Letting the body wake up in its own time.

The sole of the foot, just resting the attention there - breathing in, breathing out. Letting the softness, the tenderness of the sole of the foot just emerge. And breathing in to the top of the foot. Breathing out with a sense of receptivity. It may help to imagine the foot itself just taking in the breath and releasing the breath.

The right heel, the ankle.

Noticing whatever thinking is bubbling up in the mind. Not pushing it away or getting involved with it, just noticing what the mind is doing.

So the back of the heel, then the right lower leg. Noticing whatever is different in our experience here - the hang of the muscle, the feel of the tendons at either end, the long bone in the front.

And then the left lower leg - breathing into it, breathing out with a sense of its weight and solidity.

The left knee - breathing in, breathing out, a sense of letting go around it.

And then the right knee - breathing in, breathing out. Feeling the complexity of the joint. The knee cap floating on top of the knee.

And then the right upper leg. We're not anticipating the next thing, not just ticking off a list of things, Giving our attention to whatever is before us here and now. So the right upper leg, the big muscle of the thigh, and the big bone.

And then the left upper leg, the left thigh. And with the out-breath imagining the muscles lengthening, broadening, smoothing. Breathing awareness in, and as we breathe out letting it be heavy.

And then the buttocks - just letting the buttocks soften, releasing into the ground.

And then breathing into the pelvis - letting the pelvis and hips be open and heavy. A soft spacious sense of presence there, with the out-breath just stopping and resting our attention there. Breathing soft attention in.

And with the out-breath letting the legs loosen and drop away from the hips.

The lower back - noticing whatever is there. With the out-breath maybe tucking in the tail bone at the bottom.

Breathing into the experience just as it is, just now, pleasant or unpleasant. Noticing any resistance to this experience. Not adding to it, not taking anything away.

Noticing the feeling of the breathing there, any tenderness, discomfort, tightness, and breathing out with a sense of the muscles around the spine lengthening, broadening, softening.

Breathing in to the abdomen with the out-breath - letting the awareness gather around the internal organs. Letting the in-breath take us into this moment - this flowing, changing quality of awareness we call the present moment.

And then letting our awareness slowly soak into the abdomen, feeling the internal organs shift gently in the diaphragm. Feeling the diaphragm gently massaging them. Noticing any holding back any pushing away of feeling, just noticing. Feeling the belly move with the breath, letting whatever is there or not there be enough for this moment.

Then the heart - listening to the heart as we breathe in. Letting go of expectations as we breathe out. So we are listening out for that other great rhythm of life that goes with the breath, the heartbeat. Maybe we can feel the heartbeat, maybe not. But listening anyway, listening not just to the heart, not just to the heartbeat, but to whatever feeling is there or not there.

Noticing any closing down or hardening of sensation or feeling.

And then spreading this receptivity to include the whole of the chest. The receptivity is the important thing. Taking in the ribs at the front and the lungs underneath. Noticing the ribs making room for the breath.

Noticing any movement of the ribs around the back, any broadening of the back with the in-breath, and as the breath is released noticing any holding or softening in the muscles of the back.

Not trying to change anything, just receiving the present just as it is.

Then becoming aware of the breath moving through the torso like a wave rolling down with the in-breath and ebbing back up the body with the out-breath.

Feeling the spine release with the out-breath, gently lengthening and shifting freely all the way through the back of the neck - like driftwood resting on a quiet sea, gently rocked by the waves of the breath.

Then breathing into the shoulders as we breathe out, noticing any holding in the shoulders. Letting the shoulder blades drop and letting the upper arms and elbows be heavy. Letting their weight hang freely from the shoulders. Letting the lower arms hang freely from the elbows. Breathing into the wrists, breathing out, the hands falling away from the wrists.

Looking for any tensions in the hands. And as these begin to release, perhaps noticing extra feeling in the hands, the palms of the hands, the fingers, the backs of the hands.

The big muscles of the neck - adjusting the position of the head so that they can ease up, the skull drifting lightly up. Finding the breath in the throat.

Just giving this experience time to come more closely present to our attention. Noticing whatever our mind wants to add to this experience. Noticing, perhaps, tensions releasing with the out-breath.

Then the whole of the head, including the back and the top of the head. Unclenching the jaw, and with each out-breath feeling the jaw loosen a little more. Feeling the breadth and smoothness of the forehead. Any wrinkling smoothing out. The temples lengthening. Imagining a sense of releasing all around the eyes, and around the mouth and lips, and across the cheeks towards the ears.

Now broadening out our awareness to take in the whole of the body. Just this moment's experience - always changing. Nothing fixed or solid. Sensations and feelings arising and passing away moment by moment - pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings, a river of experience of feelings, sensations, thoughts. Each one there and then not there. Always a receiving of experience.

And now, in our own time, we can bring the practice to a close. Noticing the sounds around us, becoming aware again of the world outside the body. Looking around and beginning to move. Noticing how it feels to move. And seeing if we can continue to rest our attention in that movement, in this moment now, the next now, always now.