

Chapter 16

Inhabiting the body

Discussion points

- Why mindfulness of the body?
- Mindfulness of sensory interactions
- Mind-body connection
- Insight meditation

The title of this chapter ‘inhabiting the body’ may, at the first sight, appear strange, for more than one reason. Doesn’t everybody naturally inhabit his body? When we all know the body is impermanent, subject to decay and death, and no one can escape bodily pain, what will we gain by consciously ‘inhabiting’ it? Isn’t our focus on the psychological suffering, how would inhabiting the body help?

For most of us, the present state of relationship to the body can be described by the oft-quoted line from a James Joyce story: “Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body”. Most of the time we tend to remain disconnected with our body and various senses which are constantly interacting with the environment. Only when the stimulus is intense our attention is drawn to it. Rest of the time we are on an autopilot.

Sitting in an important meeting, we keep on fidgeting due to unconscious response to the mild unpleasant feeling arising from the pressure of the hard seat of the chair, without our having any idea that we are moving again and again. The mosquitoes are floating around and our hand moves automatically to ward them off. We are eating food while seeing a very interesting programme on the TV, the food is automatically being chewed and gulped, and we don’t even taste it, nor are we aware about the quantity of food that we have eaten. We become aware that we are eating only when something ‘startling’ happens – say, we bite on a hot pepper.

Mindfulness of the body is highly recommended by the Buddha as a practice for liberation from unhappiness. The verse 299 of the Dhammapada announces:

Those disciples of Gotama ever awaken happily who day and night constantly practice Mindfulness of the Body.

Let us understand why it is rated so highly. As we saw in [Chapter 11](#) wise mindfulness is a key factor in the noble eightfold path for liberation from all unhappiness. Mindfulness of the body is recommended as the very first exercise⁵⁸ for strengthening it. We have already seen how it can be practiced in all postures – while sitting, standing, lying down, and while doing various activities – walking, eating, changing clothes, washing dishes, defecating... etc. In the beginning it may seem like a big ordeal – an additional ‘work’ to be included in an already overloaded schedule. But as we practice for some time, it becomes a natural way of ‘being’, especially during those activities which are usually done ‘mechanically’. Thus rather than eating hurriedly, since a more important task is waiting, we eat savouring every morsel. It helps to ‘enjoy’ the food, improves digestion, and we feel satiated with much lesser food intake. Washing dishes, instead of being an ordeal, an unpleasant task which has to be done out of sheer necessity, becomes an opportunity to cultivate mindfulness. The mind doesn’t get into a spin since the task is no longer viewed as a burden. Walking becomes beneficial both for the body and the mind, since the usual ranting which goes on when walking mindlessly is absent. Inhabiting the body does indeed make us more relaxed.

The human body is endowed with five senses, so inhabiting the body includes being mindful of the interactions happening at each sense door. We have already discussed in [Chapter 11](#) the benefits of mindful eating. Mindful listening, especially in situations involving unpleasant exchanges, has tremendous potential to reduce conflicts. The greatest gift that we can give to others – our children, our family members, our friends, and in fact to everyone – is to listen to them mindfully; for only then can we respond wisely. Often when we listen to some one, an evaluation of what we hear goes on in the background, and the moment something doesn’t seem ‘quite right’ to us, the mind goes into a swirl and associative thoughts engulf the mind. We are no longer listening, but judging, criticizing, defending our ‘selves’ in our mind. This often manifests as interrupting the other person while she is still speaking. A similar situation of mindlessness can arise even when we hear something that seems ‘very right’, or inspiring, to us. Now the mind begins to conjecture about the ways we can benefit from that inspiration, or eulogizes the speaker or feels happy at having his own perception ‘corroborated’, thus missing what the speaker said during this reverie of mental proliferation. This is what happens repeatedly with most students in the class while listening to the lecture. The mind keeps on wandering and after a few such episodes it becomes difficult to understand what is being taught, resulting in a vicious cycle which causes complete waste of time and the opportunity to learn. Of course, we don’t have to ‘do anything’ to check this mental proliferation, just being mindful to make a note of the mental state, would prevent its manifestation in action. The attention would then naturally shift to the ‘sound’ being heard.

Mindful listening implies nonjudgmental listening, listening with compassion. It is particularly important while listening to someone who has a grudge against us. As venerable Thich Nhat Hanh puts it :

Do not listen for the sole purpose of judging, criticizing or analyzing. Listen only to help the other person express himself and find some relief from suffering.”

As we listen mindfully and compassionately, not reacting at all, absorbing not just the words, but also the emotions that accompany them, the sense of hurt or dismay that is revealed in the tone of the voice and facial expressions, we create the space for the person to express himself fully and frankly. This has a great cathartic effect, and reduces that person’s suffering. We are also mindful of the impact the words are producing on us, and mindfully note, any anger that might arise, so that it doesn’t result in mental proliferation. This whole process opens the heart and the possibility of removing misunderstanding, fostering reconciliation and thereby improving interpersonal relations between individuals and even between communities.

The first, and probably the most successful, mindful listening experiment was done in South Africa – to bring about reconciliation between blacks and whites after the end of apartheid⁸². It lasted seven years, over 21000 victims testified, 200 of them in public hearings. The TRC recommended financial relief for the victims for six years and the reparations program included community reparations. Its success led to a number of similar efforts in many countries to bring reconciliation and to give succor to the communities that suffered due to violation of human rights by the state or the extremists⁸³. Just to cite one more example, an inspiring effort to promote reconciliation has been the ‘Parents Circle–families forum’ (PCFF)⁸⁴, started in 1995 by a number of Israeli parents who had lost their children in the conflict with Palestine. Its membership has swelled to over 600 families from both the countries and it is attempting to bring reconciliation between the two communities through mindful listening and sharing the grief of loss suffered by the parents.

Mindful seeing is another aspect of inhabiting the body. During our waking hours, the eyes are open and exposed to a plethora of forms and colours. This contact, like contact at other sense doors, produces feeling – pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. When we are not mindful, unconscious reaction to these feelings keeps on happening and we fail to notice the ‘object’ properly – there is only a superficial recognition without any attention being given to detail. In our daily life too, if we observe anything, even a commonplace object like a tree, floor tiles, or a glass of water, by focusing attention on its novelty and uniqueness, we discern so many features which grip our attention thus increasing the mindfulness. Usually we categorize things and lose sight of the novelty, and then do not wish to pay attention to these and tend to be mindless. All trees are different – their shape,

⁸² Truth and Reconciliation Commission, South Africa see: <http://www.justice.gov.za/Trc/>

⁸³ List of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, see at :
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_truth_and_reconciliation_commissions

⁸⁴ Parents Circle – Families Forum, see details at :
<http://www.theparentscircle.com/Content.aspx?ID=2#.WBGgbfk2vIU>

structure, the way their trunks bifurcate into branches and leaves, but while going for walk in a garden, we do not even want to pay attention to these, since in our minds we have classified them all in a single category, 'tree' – and so what is there to see? If we mindfully look at the leaves we see virtually infinite shades of green, a fact that is lost in the usual statement, 'Leaves are green'. We even have different nomenclature given by painters for these shades - artichoke green, asparagus green, fern green, forest green, moss green, pine green, mint green , light green, dark green, bright green, etc.

This aspect of mindfulness has been greatly emphasized by Professor Langer, who introduced the concept of mindfulness in the western psychology. She identifies the key qualities of a mindful state of being as: creation of new categories, openness to new information and awareness of more than one perspective⁸⁵.

Mindfulness is a state of conscious awareness in which the individual is implicitly aware of the context and content of information. It is a state of openness to novelty in which the individual actively constructs categories and distinctions. In contrast, mindlessness is a state of mind characterized by an overreliance on categories and distinctions drawn in the past and in which the individual is context-dependent and, as such, is oblivious to novel (or simply alternative) aspects of the situation.

Looking at the world mindfully reveals new vistas; even commonplace objects shine in novelty. This reduces boredom and stress, restores zest for life and enables one to enjoy simple pleasures of life. This additional information thus obtained is also helpful in understanding the world better. However , this is only one aspect of mindful living. As we simultaneously practice mindfulness of the state and the contents of mind encountered during sense interactions, inhabiting the body becomes a comprehensive methodology of developing insight.

The mind-body connection becomes quite evident during this practice of mindfulness of sensory interactions. Whether we are listening, seeing, eating or smelling, often we react to the feelings arising from the 'object'⁸⁶ of attention – we like something, there is craving , or we dislike something, and there is aversion, and if the 'object' neither attracts nor repels us , we ignore it and there is just indifference. If not observed, this reaction very quickly results in a barrage of thoughts which can influence vocal or physical action. One thus directly experiences how craving and aversions arise due to reaction to feelings caused by lack of mindfulness. Mindfulness of these mental states widens the horizon of our practice to include all the four dimensions of mindfulness in tune with the teachings of the Buddha⁵⁸. Careful observation reveals the incessant change in the feelings, as well as the mental states.

⁸⁵ E.J. Langer, Mindfulness – 25th anniversary edition, p64, Da Capo Press, PA

⁸⁶ The object => sound for ears, fragrance for nose, form and colour for eyes, taste for tongue, tactile object for body, and thought for mind

It becomes so evident that liking the pleasant feelings results in disliking their inevitable cessation - repeated experience convinces us all sensory experiences are inherently unsatisfactory. We see clearly, how little control we have over the nature of the feelings, which are dependent on a host of factors, most of them beyond our control. We begin to gain insight into their impersonal nature, for how could anything changing due to environmental factors be considered 'mine', 'me', 'my self'? This investigative reflection sharpens the insight into the three characteristics of all experience, viz. impermanence, un-satisfactoriness and impersonality and thus the wise view is strengthened.

Various meditation traditions suggest using different 'objects' for developing insight through mindfulness of the body. Though this can be done by noting the feelings arising at any (or every) sense door, two objects have been widely used for formal meditation, viz. the movement of the breath and the bodily sensations. The famous meditation master, Sayagyi U Ba Khin recommends noticing the feelings arising from contact at the body (i.e. body sensations) as the primary object of 'observation', using the breath as an auxiliary 'object' to help contain digressive thoughts. The main reason for this choice is: the bodily feelings are more tangible than those at other sense doors, so easier to experience. The feelings experienced in various parts of the body can be quite different – ranging from pain to highly pleasant subtle vibrations. This creates the opportunity for a comprehensive training of the mind to avoid a wide variety of reactions that would arise in the absence of mindfulness. Further, it is very convenient to put this into practice in daily life, for sensations in some parts of the body can be easily felt in every situation. Thus, while sitting on a chair in the office or at home, the feet are touching the ground (or the footwear) and the gross sensations there are easily felt. The trunk is resting on the chair-seat and the feelings in the bottom resting on the seat are also quite prominent. The feelings due to bodily movements arising from respiratory process are also very conspicuous. Of course, one who has practiced Vipassana for some time can very easily feel the sensations in other parts of the body too. Thus one can easily shift attention to consciously 'inhabit' the body for a few minutes periodically and practice mindfulness even during daily routine. As discussed earlier, we can also do so during walking by noticing the changing sensations in the feet (or in any other body part). In daily life we can also be mindful of the feelings arising from seeing various forms or hearing different sounds and thus check the tendency of the mind to react to them. These simple exercises of inhabiting the body consciously greatly help in cultivation of mindfulness, which is indeed the gateway to liberation from all unhappiness. As the practice matures, eventually there is no 'doing' involved in inhabiting the body – it just becomes a way of 'being'!

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