

Andrea Fella-06-16-2010



Andrea Fella has been practicing Insight Meditation since 1996, and, under Gil Fronsdal's guidance, began teaching meditation classes in 2003. She is particularly drawn to intensive retreat practice, and has done a number of long retreats, both in the U.S. and Burma. During one long practice period in Burma, she ordained as a nun with Sayadaw U Janeka. Andrea teaches residential retreats for IMC, and is in the Spirit Rock teacher training program with Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein.

Mindfulness of the Body

Mindfulness of the body brings us into the present moment, because the body is always in the present. As Andrea said in her notes on Mindfulness of the Body, published on our web site:

Now one of the marvelous things about the body is that it is always in the present moment. Our thoughts and our mind might be somewhere else, but the body is always here and now. So part of the task of meditation practice is to bring the body and mind together so they are in the same place at the same time; so they are working together harmoniously; and so they are not at odds with each other, or going at cross purposes. When you meditate, it is not a matter of bringing your body to the mind, it's a matter of bringing your mind to your body, so the two can be together in harmony. If you are sitting here and thinking about what you are going to do tomorrow, then your body is here but your mind is in tomorrow. If you're sitting here and thinking about what's on television tonight at home, then you're here in the present but your mind is in another place. It's really important for the purpose of mindfulness meditation to bring the body and mind in harmony.

We tend to live in the world of the mind -- thinking about the past, planning for the future (which almost never comes out the way we expected), and scripting current events (now I'm walking up the stairs, now I'm taking out the trash, etc). Coming into the world of the body helps us let go of the world of the mind.

One of the ways to help train our awareness is to look at the traditional 4 elements – earth, air, water, fire—to bring us into the physicality of the body. The sensations of the body can be classified as:

- Earth is solidity -- structure, weight, heaviness, hardness, softness
- Air is motion – breathing, tingling, feelings of pulsation or tingling
- Fire is temperature – warmth, coolness
- Water is moisture

Learning the 4 elements helps us recognize sensations. For example, close your eyes and hold out your hand. What do you feel? Now make a tight fist. Do you feel burning or aching? Now, relax the fist slightly. What do you feel? Now as slowly as possible, open your hand. What does that feel like? Open your eyes. None of those sensations were

“hand”. Hand is a mind concept. Sometimes beginners may say “I feel my hand” but with awareness will feel other sensations.

Explore your mouth with your tongue. The teeth are earth. The pushing of the tongue against the teeth is air. The slipperiness is due to water. What might your mouth feel like if there were no moistures in it, and it was completely dry?

One of the benefits of getting familiar with the body is that it helps us distinguish between mind and body. Mind experiences include such things as anger, worry, uncertainty, etc. These can arise out of things happening in the body. Mind experiences can also cause things to happen in the body – the feedback loop goes both ways. Either the body or the mind can produce anger. But, if you feel the sensation in either, just hang out with it – maybe nothing will happen. Just noting the sensations slows things down, and may prevent knee-jerk reactions.

Everything we feel is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We tend to want more of what causes pleasant sensations, and to avoid unpleasant. Much of our mental life is based on whether we categorize something as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The same physical sensations can be categorized as either pleasant or unpleasant, depending on the context.

- Imagine you are on a busy street corner, waiting for a friend. You feel a light touch on your shoulder, and it’s pleasant because it means your friend has found you.
- Imagine you are on a busy street corner, not waiting for anyone. You feel a light touch on your shoulder, and it feels unpleasant because it’s an intrusion or startling.

The context creates a mental state. Physical pain can be worse or better, depending on how we feel about it. If we are angry or resentful about the pain, it will probably feel worse.

Perception is a way of recognizing things. It’s a shortcut that tends to develop as we grow older. For example, when we hear a crying child, all we feel is vibrations in the ear drum. It’s perception that labels it as a crying child. Perception is very close to thinking, and can cause proliferation. The crying child may be irritating, and we start thinking bad things about the mother for letting it cry. These are things we are attaching to the reality, not the reality itself. This is not to say we should avoid perception --- it’s very useful in daily life. However, while meditating, we want to be able to be able to tease apart the direct sensory input, the perception, and the thought train that accompanies it.

In a transcript of Gil Fronsdal’s talk about mindfulness and the body, he says:

Now one of the marvelous things about the body is that it is always in the present moment. Our thoughts and our mind might be somewhere else, but the body is always here and now. So part of the task of meditation practice is to bring the body and mind together so they are in the same place at the same time; so they are working together harmoniously; and so they are not at odds with each other, or going at cross purposes. When you meditate, it is not a matter of bringing your

body to the mind, it's a matter of bringing your mind to your body, so the two can be together in harmony. If you are sitting here and thinking about what you are going to do tomorrow, then your body is here but your mind is in tomorrow. If you're sitting here and thinking about what's on television tonight at home, then you're here in the present but your mind is in another place. It's really important for the purpose of mindfulness meditation to bring the body and mind in harmony. In Buddhist circles they talk about unification—bringing the mind and body into unity. So in meditation we train the mind to come and be in the same place as the body.

The body is an important help in this process because if you are connected to the body you are in the present moment. Now, any time we do mindfulness meditation, which is this very simple practice of noticing, we bring our attention to the experience, living that experience, and registering what's here. If you are with your breathing it's not only being with your breath—breath in breath out breath in—it is also letting the experience of breathing be registered in that experience. You are taking in the sensations of that experience in a deeper, fuller way. It's like you are on the beach on a nice sunny day, you're on the edge of the ocean, and you stand there and take in the breeze, the smell of the ocean, the sight. You really register the experience; you take it in. So, in the same way, you sit with your breath and take in the fullness of the experience of breathing in.