

Is Body Sensation a Prerequisite for Meditation?

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Q: I have a question on meditation that concerns me. Namely, I have been instructed on an important meditation, “Mindfulness on breathing”. The meditation starts with a short relaxation and then we should just stay aware of the breath. The instruction is: “Let come what comes, let go what goes, staying with the breath in and out”. Now, we have heard from Louise Redemann as a trauma therapist that this guidance could be dangerous for traumatised patients, “To let come and see what’s coming”. Because trauma patients obviously need something stable. That means, that if I do this guidance in a group where I do not know the persons who are attending, it could be dangerous for any person who is traumatised. Now, my question to you, Lene, is: if you would always recommend the instruction to feel the body sensation as a basis before any mindfulness on breathing exercise?

Lene Handberg: I think it is very good you are asking this question, Tarab Tulku Rinpoche¹ said we really have to look into these ancient traditions and the original methods to see what our conditions are in relation to these and not just adopt them blindly before practicing. Originally the methods were given on the basis of people being in quite a different condition than nowadays, where people are now more conceptually dominated. People at the time where these meditation methods are from and in this culture, people were deeply grounded in body sensation, even having some experience of deeper body sensation supported by the culture. They didn’t need to train this part, as they were already in this condition and the instruction of coming back to body sensation for re-joining direct perception, and connecting with inner resources, wasn’t necessary to instruct before mindfulness of breathing or any of the other meditation methods.

In order to get the conceptual mind to become quieter, instead of following the movements of your thoughts you can follow the movement of breathing, breathing yourself back home to awareness with body sensation, especially to where you feel best and most at home. On this basis, you could use the breathing means, as you describe, in the way it is taught in the *original* mindfulness traditions for letting go of any fixations, realising the changing/transitory nature of everything. That’s the main purpose. However, I would recommend that you should only guide this traditional mindfulness practice on the basis of being firmly grounded in body sensation, as people were in ancient cultures.

I don’t think it is only traumatised people but also neurotic people and we have lots of neurotic and generally stressed people of our culture with dominance of conceptual mind that need to be well grounded before any meditation practice is undertaken. I think, we have to look at all the practices of ancient cultures with this concern, we have to see what was the condition of people to whom these were originally created and taught and what is our condition today? And how do we transcend this gap? It doesn’t matter whether people are from the East or the West or whatever, we are all more or less in the same modern conditioning.

The people of the ancient traditions practiced with a basis in what in UD we have called body-mind (*lüsem*) and some even with ability for entering the sixth-mind body (*yilü*), the latter being the embodiment activated and used at the 1st meditation state. They used the practices as they were meant to be, where in modern culture we have to introduce and reach this natural condition of ordinary and then deeper body-mind (*lüsem*) and train the original practices on this re-discovered basis. It is not only for feeling safe. It seems that if we don’t get into the right condition from the very beginning, then we are simply misunderstanding and/or cannot do the practices suggested from the ancient cultures, and we

¹ Tarab Tulku Rinpoche, Lharampa Geshe / PhD, (1935-2004) is the originator of Unity in Duality.

won't get the required results. We have to be in proximity with ourselves, otherwise, whichever practice we do, it will never have the appropriate effect, the deeper the proximity to oneself, the deeper the effect. The deeper body-mind condition, the deeper effect you will get from traditional practices.

The good thing about breathing exercises is that most people undertaking these, get more into body sensation, gaining proximity to themselves. But some don't or they get only into tension structures in relation with a vulnerable self-feeling, some of which could be connected with traumatic experiences. Without proximity to themselves and in touch with vulnerable self-feelings, if they go on considering whether anything exists in and of itself; whether reality is of transitory nature and is thus subject to moment-to-moment changing nature; or whether everything is of 'void-nature', etc., they can get into problems, undermining that with which they identify. This could shake their inner stability with the effect of losing their support basis and at the same time losing their hold on outer reality.

Another way to say the same thing: With 'mindfulness' on breathing and letting go of fixations, you are trying to loosen up or make transparent that which people hold onto, so unless we find something else to give the appropriate stability, if we manage to loosen up that with which we identify, existential fear can arise. We always have to have a reference, hold onto something, then this grounding can be at an increasingly subtler level. We have a centre of reference, and we cannot be without this, and if this centre is an idea about ourselves with which we are conceptually identified and that dissolves and we don't have grounding, then the person easily gets into existential problem.

Therefore, always make sure to invite people to establish themselves by means of supportive body sensation of direct perception, giving proximity and without fixations and distancing (only conceptual domination makes fixation of ourselves and reality). That type of experiencing would be in line with the changing nature of our experience of self and other(s). This change of condition from an abstraction of self and other to a direct sense level should be done before trying to dissolve whatever was the stabilising point of identification, otherwise the fear of losing themselves can give people new and more serious problems. This is a very important consideration.

We have to understand that what we try to do is to move from an unhealthy identification, a conceptual identification or fixation of self and others, to the first level below, in connection with body sensation, where we are not fixating ourselves but just feeling. 'Feeling mind' cannot fixate as it doesn't use language. Body sensation gives proximity and inner strength and can provide a relational basis for reality to unfold, for our ways of experiencing ourselves and others. Then, if we could manage to join deeper and better body sensation, we would open up and join a deeper strength of oneself effectuating the necessary inner stability.

On such a basis, all these different practices suggested in ancient cultures would have a deeper effect: the deeper grounding in body sensation, the more we can loosen up and the less fixations are necessary to secure ourselves. This is all in accord with the deepening of our body, mind and self-reference condition.

It was exactly because Tarab Rinpoche recognised that in modern culture most people don't have this necessary grounding anymore that he started to introduce grounding in body sensation as a prerequisite practice. Rinpoche always introduced body sensation for people to regain this natural foundation of proximity and inner stability, which we had naturally in childhood, in fact with which we were born. For becoming a harmonious person, we simply need to have this proximity to ourselves whereby we re-join with our own inner strength and inner resources, without which, whatever practices we introduce, it can have the opposite effect and create fear and loss of stability and even more so if the person has former traumatic experiences.

Comment: My experience of working with traumatised patients is that the therapist consciously tries to anchor them in the body. But it is difficult to detect whether at all and how far I manage to lead the others into body sensation. And actually, the first time he/she is not feeling at home but might feel he/she has lost the ground under his/her feet, could actually be due to only living in the head.

Lene Handberg: That is the problem. Normally, we don't get terribly traumatised people in our UD groups but some could be slightly traumatised one way or other. In the beginning, I would normally introduce body sensation by basically asking participants to join this where they feel well, where they feel inner support and where they feel deepest and strongest. I think this is quite important to train for encouraging a firm anchoring, which doesn't trigger vulnerabilities and old traumas but the opposite: it reconnects you, cultivating your own good grounding and with good and safe inner strength. However, you are always in the danger that persons only do this briefly for then again to be just conceptual, i.e. splitting from themselves. You have to be aware of this and encouraging the participants to keep working on the good grounding until it is reached in this manner. And sometimes it is necessary to work with troubled persons on a one-to-one basis for some time for reaching the appropriate condition.

Q: Some people say it is difficult to find any such place.

Lene: Then I would suggest encouraging patience or not let participants with such problems into a class situation and continue to work with them individually until the good grounding is achieved, which also means they would become more stable and well in themselves in everyday life. They need to train to re-find the right condition from which they can start to work with the other practices, you want to introduce. Everybody can find a place that is alright, but it might take some time and support, which you will have to respect. In connection with some participants to get back into body sensation, you have to be inventive.

I know from a Finnish UD Graduate and psychologist, who was working in a hospital in Sweden in an out-patient-ward with psychotics, that the psychologists and psychiatrists here found out that the only thing that really helped was to get people back to body sensation. And you have to be inventive and find out with the individual how to get there. If participants are unwell to such an extent that they cannot reconnect body sensation at all, for sure they cannot do this kind of breathing practice or any other meditation training in a group.

Some of these people without grounding and with troubled conditions would come to meditation because they think meditation is a way to get away from their old condition. Therefore, we have to be even more careful when having meditation groups, because people attending could get lost and get into fearful experiences instead of the harmonious experiences that was the goal when using any of these ancient practices.

Somehow, when we know a little about Unity in Duality and understand the text material from Vaibashika, Sautrantika and so on, we can see that before we can join any meditation, we have to get back into a normal, good harmonious being of ourselves. I mean, we cannot just jump from a neurotic, conceptually dominated or maybe psychotic condition into a meditation state.

Tarab Rinpoche suggested at first to become a sound human person and get back into shared human reality. Shared human reality means to join our common sense field. To make this clear, Tarab Rinpoche was often saying that he feels in modern cultures we often have a wrong idea of what is meant with getting into meditation levels: when saying we are in a meditation level, for sure we are not, as this *saying* is just conceptual. Most times we are instead at a surface level of reality, in an artificially created conceptual reality about meditation, and we most of all need to get back into a human-agreement-reality, our sense reality. And then, if you want to go towards a spiritual level of existence, we have to go deeper from there. If we don't first get into a human-agreement-reality, we are in danger of just building spiritual reality on top conceptually. That's what Trungpa Rinpoche wrote a very good book about. He called it: "Spiritual Materialism".

We don't have to tear down anything or go anywhere else, we simply have to get into the basic human condition and corresponding reality, on which basis, we can go further for re-joining our spiritual basis, probing deeper into the reference-existence of ourselves and everything else with our human perceptive and cognitive means in a cooperative balanced function.

The spiritual realm is not hanging out there somewhere as we might think. We can get seriously side-tracked because the spiritual traditions are mixed with religion and cultural beliefs, which makes relations to paradises as if they exist in and of themselves somewhere above, generating the notion that I just have to travel over/up there. For some people, this idea gives rise to the view that I don't need to deal with my problems but just get into meditation and it will bring me straight into the spiritual realm, beyond these. Tarab Rinpoche advised us to avoid such traps that has nothing to do with meditation but the opposite, i.e. building up spiritual conceptual realities.

However, in the ancient cultures because their people were completely grounded, i.e. in proximity with themselves, existentially balanced in body and mind, they could use spiritual traditions and progress without much danger. Such grounded people, for instance, using energy-light from an imagined or visualised deity and the deity field, would effectuate a grounded condition of deeper body-mind (*liisem*) and even, at least momentarily, a body-mind (*yilii*) condition, the basis for the spiritual field and realm to open and become available.

Whereas, if persons are not grounded, undertaking the same practice, they could feel invaded, they could even get alienated and dissociated conditions when imagining deities or deity fields, losing their central reference or identity on imagining energy-light emanating from the deity. Even such practices could effectuate a psychotic episode. So, the condition of persons, the subject-side, is very important to take into account, not just the practice itself, the object-side. If we are not grounded at all but conceptually determined and overruled, and we don't take care and ground ourselves for getting into proximity, the opposite of what we wish for and what was meant with the practice could happen for us: the original spiritual practice could unfortunately bring us more out of ourselves than we are already, instead of into a deeper or higher constitution as meant and wished for.

Therefore, the grounding and proximity is absolutely necessary in whichever way one can attain this, one of the ways is to establish a firm ordinary body sensation that can carry one throughout the practice and which, when the practice works, should deepen even more.