

A Place To Stand

Once again, we find ourselves in a critical moment. Something triggering has happened. The mind is beginning to spin the familiar stories, and we feel caught in what seems like the inevitable flow toward our long-familiar suffering. It may not lead to a lapse, but we know from experience it leads nowhere pleasant. We have been here before.

It can be hard to break the spell of those thoughts once they have gotten going. Are we going to think our way out of this? The thinking mind, in this moment, may not be the tool that helps.

But there is one thing we always have, and it is easy to overlook because it is so close: the body. The mind can inhabit any time it can imagine. It will spend hours in the past, or thoroughly explore every worst case for things that have not happened and may never. The body cannot do this. The body is only ever here, right now, in the present. It is always in a specific configuration, sitting or standing or moving. It registers a particular temperature, a specific texture against the skin. The heart is beating and the lungs are breathing, all without much input from the part of us that thinks it is in charge.

The physical senses are pre-verbal, underneath the thinking mind. So turning our attention toward them has a chance to short-circuit the story-making, proliferating mind. We cannot push the craving away, that never works, but we can change how much of our attention it commands. And there is nothing to believe here, nothing to accept on faith. It is simply remembering that the body is here, and giving our attention to what it is actually doing. It is the kind of practice we can try for ourselves and see how it works. It is also the kind we can talk about with others, to see how it is working for them, how it is helping. Though we each carry our own bodies, we do not practice alone.

It would be dishonest to pretend the body is always a friendly place to land. For many of us, especially early on, the body is where the craving lives. The pull is physical, worn into the body's wiring, and dropping our attention into the body can sometimes mean dropping straight into the wanting. For others, or at the same time, close attention to the body can be activating for different reasons, including trauma and shame, and many of us have spent years at a distance from our bodies for reasons that make good sense.

None of this is failure. It is information. What we are building here is slower than a quick fix: we are learning, gradually, to be present with the body we actually have, until it becomes a place we can stand rather than a place that runs us. The tradition offers many doorways, not one, the breath, the posture, the contact of the hands, the simple weight of sitting. We can choose one that feels tolerable, keep our attention light, and stop if it

becomes too much. A small, brief contact with the present is enough.

With that in mind, here is one way to practice. The cushion is where we build the skill, in the relative calm of a formal sit, so that it is available later when the moment is hard. Begin with posture. Notice how the body is arranged right now, the angle of the spine, the set of the shoulders, the position of the hands. Not adjusting anything, just noticing. Then find the points of contact: the feet on the floor, the weight of the body on the seat, wherever the body meets something solid. Feeling the weight of gravity. What are we touching. What is touching us. Rest attention there for a few breaths, feeling the simple fact of contact and weight.

Notice temperature, the air on the skin, the warmth or coolness of the hands. Notice that the body is rarely just one temperature. And then the breath, feeling it move, the rise and fall, the places in the body where it can be felt. If we find that we are controlling it, notice that it will take over on its own once we get distracted. When the mind pulls back into its stories, and it will, we simply return to contact, to weight, to breath. That returning is the practice. It is not a thing we get right once. It is a thing we do again and again.

This is an experiential practice, not a conceptual one. We are not trying to change the body or make it more comfortable, only to notice how it already is. We are not thinking about the body, we are feeling it. The difference is the whole point.

Buddhism describes this as the first of the four foundations of mindfulness, the contemplation of the body. It is first for a reason. It is the most concrete and the most available of the four, the ground the others are built on. Coming back to the body is not a beginner's exercise we graduate from. It is where the practice starts and a place no practitioner ever stops returning to.

It is also worth mentioning that while we train this on the cushion and apply it to hard situations, we can practice it before things get hard at all. We can check in with the body when we get into the car, when we change positions at work, anywhere at all. We always have the body, and we always have right now.

So even when the mind begins its well-worn tricks, we find we already have a place to stand. We are already there, in the body. The body is not a solution to the craving. It is a stable place to rest our attention, a way back into the present, while the thought stream plays out and the craving works itself through. It asks nothing of us except attention, and it is always there. In the hardest moment, when nothing else seems available, we can always come back to the body. The place to begin is the place we already are.

Sources

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), contemplation of the body
Kāyagatāsati Sutta (MN 119), mindfulness of the body