Meditation in Motion
by Jill Satterfield

Meditation in Motion is a way of practicing being present by being in our body, wherever it is and whatever it is doing. When we are exactly where our body is, we are in the present moment.

The body isn’t in the past or future, it’s not conceptual or imagined; it’s part of nature and contains all of nature’s elements. It houses our awareness, is shaped by our stories, thoughts, and emotions, and holds our memories within its tissues. The body is our house—and how we live in it and where we occupy it are uniquely ours, as well as being part of the common human experience.

The body is a treasure trove and an exquisite vehicle for our practice of waking up and being with what is. The body senses thoughts and emotions, and it displays this psychic knowing in sensations before our mind actually recognizes them. So being in tune with our bodies is a way to be intimately involved in having choice. Noticing a small vibration, a contraction, or a tightening of the breath all can signal that something is about to be announced, and if not needed it might be announced in a rather big way. (Think of the rumblings of the ground before the eruption of a volcano.) As we inhabit our body with increasing sensitivity, we learn its unspoken language and patterns, which gives us tremendous freedom to make choices.

The practice of cutting thoughts and dispersing negative repetitive patterns can be simplified by attending to the patterns in the body first, before they begin to be spun around in the mind.

Formal meditation practice is the ground of training that influences all we do at other times. As an outgrowth of the concentrative awareness developed by our meditation practice, there is a natural seeping of wakefulness into our daily life. We begin to notice what we’re doing while we are seated, walking, lying down, or assuming some sort of posture.

But our mind training doesn’t have to stop when we are not in a seated meditation posture, because most of the time we are in some sort of posture without actually naming it as such. For instance, sitting at the desk and crawling our neck forward toward the computer is a posture, albeit not one of very good alignment. If we’re standing in front of a crowd and giving a talk, we are in a posture, depending on how confident we feel, and if we simply walk through a crowd of people we don’t know, our body mirrors our self-consciousness by assuming some sort of posture called the way we carry ourselves. A posture is a posture whether we give it a name, practice it in a class, or abide in it unconsciously.

So how are we occupying the posture we are in? By simply locating our breath at any given moment, we begin to develop an intimate relationship with our body, its posture or shape, and the way it is reflecting our thoughts and emotions. In the Buddha’s discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness (Satipatthana Sutta), he asks the monks to notice the breath, whether it be short or long, and he says: “He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the entire (breath) body.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the entire (breath) body.’” We can notice what our breath is doing and, just as importantly, how it is reacting to what is going on both internally and externally, especially if we are sensitive to the entire body.

In many traditions consciousness and breath are considered to be two wings of a bird—like I think of breath and consciousness as travel partners. For instance, when we are asked to breathe into an area of the body, what are we actually doing? Certainly we aren’t literally breathing into our hands, for example, but we are beckoning our consciousness into our hands, or wherever we might choose to bring it. Consciousness, breath, chi, prana, energy—these are all words pointing toward the same thing. What’s important is primarily the experience of it, then the naming of it in order to communicate about it with others. What we notice when we metaphorically breathe into an area of our body is that we feel something. That something may be difficult to describe, as many esoteric things are, but it is an undeniable experience.

Mindfulness of breath can also organically lead us to be mindful of when we are not breathing. We may also recognize the conditions of the body around the area where we sense a contraction or holding of breath, bringing our mind and heart together to be with sensations—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. When awareness becomes keen, we notice our patterns of moving breath away from discomfort in the body. This refined awareness can eventually translate into knowing our patterns of holding, tightening, and controlling breath when we are in emotional discomfort. It’s easier to be aware of breath related to physical discomfort than it is to be aware of breath associated with emotional discomfort, so we can train the mind to stay with what is in the body first, and then take it up a notch to be aware of breath and body when experiencing emotional difficulties. This is not a conceptual practice; it is experiential, personal, and intimate.

Eventually we might choose to follow breath into many areas of the body as a continuation of training, to see how the mind and breath are intimately connected, and how they actively mirror each other both playfully and protectively. As we “see” how the breath and mind are connected, we begin to have the ability to move our awareness around our body, locating areas of emotional blocks and areas of unconsciousness.

After intentionally traversing our inner landscape with breath and mind, we can prescribe a practice that might hold the most treasure for us at any given moment. By witnessing how we are, in our body, heart, and mind, we become armed with the necessary information needed to respond thoughtfully and with care.

There are as many types of practice as there are mind, body, and heart states: whether we are seated, walking, or in a purposeful posture, we have the means to address ourselves with real kindness. This intention to pay attention leads us to skilful action—in our own inner and more private world and in the shared world at large. Ultimately, taking care—by taking time to be with what is—will provide a key to being more spacious and at ease, able to be present with whatever our lives hold for us as long as we have life, in this body, right now.

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