

Embodied Meditation Practice

I've been emphasizing embodiment-based meditation practice in all of my teaching lately. Part of the reason is to counteract the tendency we all have to "live in our head" the majority of time, completely disassociated from our bodies. At its most extreme, we walk around in a disembodied state, ruminating on the past, which has already occurred, or the future, which doesn't yet exist. We treat the body as an object rather than a subject, and this has serious consequences. We not only miss the present moment constantly, which is alive, vibrant, and energetic, but we create an exceptionally unhealthy environment for ourselves. We find ourselves out of touch with our feelings, spending more time thinking about our feelings than experiencing them.

So here is a practice intended to come to connect with the body as a wise, compassionate and powerful entity rather than as a mere object to cart around our craniums.

Assume a relaxed meditation posture

Sit on a meditation cushion or chair. If you don't have a meditation cushion, you can use blankets or pillows, but make sure you are sitting high enough, (i.e. your hips are above the level of your knees when your legs are crossed in front of you). If you sit on a chair, try not to lean against the backrest (unless you have a spinal condition), but sit upright a few inches in front of the backrest.

If on a cushion, cross your legs in front of you, no need for a full or half lotus. If on a chair, sit with your feet flat on the floor.

Sit upright so your spine is straight, but not stiff like a soldier. It should feel like your upper half is being slightly pulled upward as if a string was attached from your scalp to the ceiling, creating some gentle upward tension.

Now rest your hands palms down on your thighs. To find the proper place on your thighs, do this. Let your arms drop leisurely from the shoulder at your sides, and then maintaining that relaxed hanging state of your arms, drop your hands onto your legs. As an alternate placement of your hands, place the back of your right hand onto your left palm, and let your thumbs lightly touch. Then place your hands on your lap. Either is a traditional placement of the hands.

Relax your neck and shoulders, this is a very common area where we hold tension. Let your shoulders sink down by the force of gravity. Ideally, if you physically are able without strain, have your head, shoulders and hips all line up in a straight line, but don't obsess about it.

Let your face muscles relax, our face being another typical source of held tension. Let your jaw relax and that will naturally allow a slight space between your lips.

Lastly, rest your gaze slightly downward, about 3-4 feet in front of you. A soft focus is preferred, rather than staring, as we often overuse our sense of sight above the other senses. That alone can cause strain and tension in our head and neck area. It is recommended to keep the eyes open when sitting, as that is the way we walk around in the world normally. In addition, closed eyes can lead to sleepiness and daydreaming. At the beginning though, if open eyes are too distracting for you, it's fine to sit with eyes closed.

Meditation on a Cushion or Chair

1. When you practice meditation on the cushion or chair, begin by having a sense of sitting on the Earth. Like us, the Earth is alive, energetic and is not a dead object. It is considered a macrocosm of the human body, which is why it is often called Mother Earth. When we connect to its energy, we also connect to our own body, so feel that connection, feel that Earth energy as much as possible.
2. Then start with a body scan from head to toe. Working down from the head, slowly bring awareness to each part of the body, relaxing any tension or dis-ease you find there. If one part of the body is particularly stiff or tense, breathe into that area which brings healing energy to it.
3. For the main sitting practice (shamatha or "peaceful abiding" practice), identify with the breath. Don't observe the breath from the outside, but FEEL it directly from the inside. In addition, I emphasize breathing from the hara, the area of the lower belly, roughly 1 1/2 inches below the navel, and centered between spine and stomach. Breathing from there rather than focusing on the breath leaving the nose or mouth, will direct your attention away from the head area. Practicing in this way will bring a greater sense of body awareness, and also tends to cut down discursiveness and dwelling on thoughts, that originate from the head.

Meditation in Action

4. Off the cushion, remind yourself to inhabit the body throughout the day. First thing in the morning, don't immediately go into your head, (or your phone), with the day's tasks and worries. Instead, from your bedside, swing your feet onto the floor, sit on the edge of the bed and take stock of your body. Take some time to stretch your limbs that have been immobile for hours. Notice how your body feels, especially note any stiffness and residual tension, and breathe into that area. If an area is really stiff or uncomfortable, you might gently massage the area. The point is to take a moment to feel the body, (without judgment or analysis), to BE your body as the first act of your day.
5. During the day, at odd times; in your car, at your desk, in front of your laptop, do the same exercise. Relax and feel the body, possibly doing a body scan from head to toe. Breathe into areas of tension and dis-ease. Get up and walk around at regular intervals, paying attention to your legs and body moving through space.
6. Adopt a regimen of bodywork along with sitting meditation. It could be yoga, qi gong, massage therapy, mindful walking or running, or simply gentle stretching. The idea though is to do whatever body practice you adopt mindfully and while inhabiting the body, versus distracting yourself by retreating into your thoughts. Don't simply put in the time as a self-improvement project for that "thing", the body, that carries us around. You may find, that done regularly, embodiment practice invigorates your life, and brings a deeper connection to yourself and to the world around you.