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7 Qualities of the Mindfulness *Body Scan*

Although in some ways it can seem quite simple, mindfulness is a multifaceted skill. The *body scan* is a great starting practice because it fundamentally trains so many aspects of working skillfully with experience. Here are **seven** qualities of mindfulness that should be practiced in the body scan.

- 1. Attention.** By consciously choosing to place the mind on an object, we are training our capacity to pay attention. Attention is also trained by moving the mind from one object to another, and by coming back to an object when we notice the mind has wandered. Training attention in a body scan is a bit like doing resistance work in the gym—it takes some effort, but it cultivates strength and flexibility. Remember, each time you practice a body scan, you are strengthening the muscles of mindfulness.
- 2. Awareness.** When they first practice the body scan, most people notice that their mind seems to roam all over the place. We intend to pay attention consistently, but that's not quite what happens. This is not a problem—part of the practice is to bring awareness to whatever is happening in the mind, even if it's not exactly what we'd like it to be. Knowing our patterns is the first step to working with them skillfully. With awareness, we are open to the landscape of the mind, able to see the terrain of our being.

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- 3. Embodiment.** Repeatedly bringing attention to our bodies balances the tendency to “live in our heads.” The body senses rather than thinks, so, by allowing body sensations to be felt, we can drop into a fuller sensory palette. Living from our bodies, we tune into a mode of perceiving that's more centered, grounded and directly in touch with the world around us, rather than always getting caught up in concepts.
- 4. Letting be.** Many of us are used to driving ourselves hard. We think of training as a way to try to force change, push, pull, cajole and badger ourselves into becoming something different. Mindfulness training encourages a different approach. Each time we come back to attention in the body scan, it's suggested we do so gently. When we notice the mind is wandering, we do so with acceptance—this is just the way the mind is, for now. While we may not always like what we find, we can practice allowing it as our starting point, rather than trying to resist it or try to force change, which just creates struggle and stress.

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5. **Leaning into Unpleasant Experiences.** As we move into body sensations, we may discover feelings that we don't like. Discomfort and pain, irritation and boredom, sadness and numbness are all common experiences for people practicing a body scan. Our usual way of meeting these sensations is to try not to meet them—to escape from their unpleasantness by distracting from, ruminating on, or battling with them. Sometimes, though, there isn't anything we can do to make them go away on demand—physical or emotional pain tends not to listen to reason. So, rather than exacerbating our misery by struggling with it, the body scan teaches us how to lean gently into discomfort. Although this seems counter-intuitive, it reduces the unwelcome sensations' power to derail us. When we approach our experience with interest, although we feel even unpleasant sensations fully, we also drop our attachment to the stressful thoughts and reactions that are typically layered on top of them.
6. **Appreciation.** It's easy to go through life taking things for granted. But contemplate it for a moment. Isn't it amazing that we have a body at all, and a mind to experience it? By paying attention to body sensations, and noticing what arises in awareness, we incline our interest into being alive, not as a set of philosophical ideas, but as actual phenomena—the very experience of things. This enables us to tune into the actuality of moment-by-moment living, generating appreciation that can nurture a sense of awe and gratitude.
7. **Getting Unstuck.** When we pay attention with mindfulness, we come to observe and feel the reality that everything is always changing. We notice how stress arises when we try to hold on to pleasant sensations and/or reject painful ones, and we see how sensations are moving, shifting, rising and falling in intensity all the time. We may even see how we are no longer so caught up in ourselves when we drop our sense of fixed identity (“My leg hurts!”) and invite an awareness of the aspects and processes of experience (“There is an ache right now, and a thought about that ache”). Getting unstuck from mistaken assumptions about how things are—and how we are—can start to bring some relief.

The Body Scan Practice

Body scanning is a foundational practice of most mindfulness courses. Although my first experience of it was neither easy nor pleasant, I have come, over time, to see it as a brilliant way to tune to presence. While often practiced lying down, it's important to recognize that the body scan is not a relaxation exercise—the point is not to feel calm (and particularly not to try to feel calm). The prime intention of a body scan is to incline the mind into sensory experience—to experience how it is to “be a body.” What we discover when we do this—mind wandering, tension, anxiety, boredom, peace, stillness, contentment, numbness, discomfort, irritation—is less important than our willingness to work with these arising phenomena gently and patiently, coming back to friendly attention each time we notice that the mind has drifted into thinking, or is buying into attachment or aversion. It can be especially helpful to practice the body scan with an attitude of “abandoning all hope of fruition.” Just like a scientist, see if you can carry out the experiment of the practice, and explore whatever results occur.

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Below are some guidelines for practicing a body scan. However, the best way to practice is with audio guidance. Listen to a *three-minute body scan* audio track to have a sense of the practice by Diana Winston, Director of Mindfulness Education at UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center.

Technique:

1. Lie down, on a comfortable and preferably firm surface—a mat or blanket on the floor is good. Allow your body to sink into the ground underneath. This is an opportunity for you to let go for a time, to drop into stillness, to feel yourself being held by the earth. Close your eyes (if that feels okay for you) and invite a sense of presence by opening your awareness to the sensations of the body on the ground—the texture of the blanket or mat or your clothes, the heaviness and warmth of your body. Are these sensations the same right through the body, or different in various locations? Invite a friendly curiosity to your experience. For instance, you could ask, “How does it feel to be lying here right now?” There is no right or wrong answer to this question—noticing what you’re sensing is what matters.
2. Bring your attention now to breathing, feeling the rising and falling of inhalation and exhalation, wherever you are feeling it. Imagine that you’re dropping anchor into the breath, your attention placed gently on the rhythm of breathing, and allow your mind to settle into its pattern, riding the waves of the breath as air ebbs and flows within you. At any time during the body scan practice, you can “drop anchor” into the breath as a way of regrounding, resettling into your center.
3. On an outbreath, let go of attending to the breath and drop your attention into your left leg, moving your mind’s eye down into the left foot, and coming to rest in the left big toe. Notice what sensations, if any, are present in the left big toe right now. There’s no need to do anything with them—just observe them, let them be felt. If no sensations are present, notice what the absence is like. Be aware of changes in sensation, and any tendency to try to hold on to them or push them away.
4. If you like, synchronize your sensing with the rhythm of your breath by breathing “into” the left big toe on each in-breath, and breathing “out from” the toe on each out-breath.
5. Now move your mind to each of the other toes of the left foot in turn, giving each a few moments of attention. Be interested in the changing experience as you move your mind through the toes.
6. You will probably notice thoughts and reactions arising as you practice. This isn’t a problem, and there’s no need to try to alter or get rid of them. At the same time, as we’re practicing paying attention to body sensations in a particular part of the body, allow yourself to let go of following these thoughts and reactions. See if you can just let them be there in the background of your experience. When you notice your attention has wandered into thought, or is following an impulse, or has drifted to a different part of the body, you might acknowledge that this wandering has occurred, then gently return your attention to the toes.
7. Open your awareness now to the top of the left foot, resting with sensations in this region for a while. Now offer a friendly presence to the bottom of the foot, and to the heel. Gradually work your way up through the left leg (ankle, lower leg, knee and so on), giving your attention over to whatever sensations arise in the region you have reached. After arriving at the top of the left leg, drop the attention down into the right big toe, and gradually scan through that foot and leg, too.
8. Gently and carefully work your attention through the whole body in this way (hips, pelvic region, back, shoulders, each arm and hand, belly, chest, neck and head). Gently acknowledge mind wandering when you notice it, and let this be an opportunity to practice kindness, patience and conscious choice, as you bring the attention back to any sensations in the region of the body you have reached.

9. Practice working the muscle of mindfulness, not just by coming back when you notice the mind has wandered, but by playing with both a wider and a narrower focus of attention. In some regions of the body, experiment with moving in close to a particular part (such as a finger or an eyelid); at other times, expand to a wider perspective (such as attending to the whole of the back, a leg, or the head).

10. When you have scanned the entire body, let your attention open out to notice all of your body's sensations, and let them be held in kindly awareness. Perhaps imagine that you are breathing into the whole body as each in-breath happens and breathing out from the whole body with each out-breath. Rest in this open awareness of all body sensations for several moments before opening your eyes, stretching and gently getting up. See if you can maintain this sense of whole-body awareness as you move through the next phase of your day.

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References:

- UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center.
- Into The Heart of Mindfulness, by Ed Halliwell.