

Bodily Awareness Skill Practice (Outline)

Before beginning the practice

Place, posture, eyes, duration:

- Quiet, comfortable place to sit free from distractions. Try to use the same place everyday
- Hands comfortably stacked in the lap or on each thigh. Do not roll the shoulders forward
- Erect and comfortable posture. Eyes either closed or partially closed and gazing 2-3 feet forward
- Timer: try starting at 10-15 minutes. Increase time as you become more comfortable

The objects of attention, the “teachers” of attention, and the 3 Regulative Skills:

- Object of attention: the thing you place your attention on (multiple objects in sequence: bodily experience)
- 5 things that hinder attention that we can also learn from (desire/liking, aversion/disliking, distraction, frustration, and sleepiness)
- When you notice mind wandering, use the 3 attention-regulating skills: Monitor, Disengage, Redirect
- Show yourself kindness as you are distracted – the mind is built to wander!

Beginning – During the practice

Breathing rhythm:

- Rhythm of breathing: cycles of breath and spaces between each breath
- Establish this rhythm as a base to which you can return after being swept away by the stream of thought

Bodily Awareness

Exteroception:

- Sense organs: eye, ear, nose, tongue, and skin
- Sense object: light (form, color, and intensity), sound, odor, flavor, and sensation
- Conscious awareness of sense organ and object interaction (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching)
- These three interdependent elements make up the “contact” that constructs sense experience

Proprioception:

- Mainly muscular-skeletal scan of the body
- Start at the face/head and scan down to the bottom of the feet
- Detailed account of position, tension, temperature, tingling, numbness, pain, relaxation, or any other sensation of each of the distinct areas of the body’s muscular-skeletal system

Interoception:

- Enteric Nervous System – the gastrointestinal tract – the “second brain”
- Move from the bottom of the gastrointestinal tract up toward the throat and mouth (also observe the heart and lungs on the way up the body)
- Notice feelings of motion, pleasant/painful sensations, tightness/looseness, tingling, churning, etc.
- Lastly, take the vantage of above the body. Attempt to “feel” what the whole body is like – all of the elements of exteroception, proprioception, and interoception simultaneously

Ending the practice

Embodiment:

- Remain in the vantage of the full body (interior and exterior) – feeling the whole body in this way can be thought of as being in a state of “embodiment”
- Place a hand over the heart and a hand over the abdomen to aid in cultivating the state of embodiment
- Purposefully feel gratitude and compassion for the body in which you are embodied.
- Much like watching the breath, this state of embodiment is one to which you can return in times of high stress, sadness, anger, anxiety, etc. Use is both as a tool of tranquility and of self-information

Take a moment:

- When the timer goes off, notice your overall physical, mental, and emotional state. Is it different? How? What was easy? What was more difficult or what did you feel stuck on? Try to avoid assessing your “performance” as good or bad
- Make note of what you will try to work through and what you will need to adjust for next time
- Before getting up, take several deep breaths (breathe in, hold, breathe out, hold, etc. 3-5 seconds each)

Bodily Awareness Skill Practice (Detail)

Before beginning the practice

Place, posture, eyes, duration:

Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit. It should be a place free of most distractions (although any noises you hear can be incorporated into the practice) and not too bright or dark lest you feel over-stimulated or become sleepy. You may want to choose a spot you can use everyday at the same time everyday – this may help your progress. You can choose to sit on the floor or in a chair. Sit with your back comfortably (not rigidly) straight – imagine you are a marionette puppet and there is a string attached to the very top of your head holding up your body. This type of posture will aid in maintaining alertness, comfort, and clarity. Set your hands either palms-up in your lap (one on top of the other – e.g. the left hand holding the back of the right hand with both palms facing up) or palms-down on either thigh. Whichever you choose, attempt to stay there throughout the session. This practice is typically done with eyes closed but may be done with eyes slightly open with the gaze angled in the direction of a spot on the floor about 5 feet in front of you. If eyes are kept open, try to keep the visual focus in the air about 2 feet away from you (about the distance of reading a book). Try to set a timer for the session. Choose a duration you think you could manage with only some difficulty (if you don't think you will struggle with 10 minutes, try 15; if you could easily sit for 20, try 30). Remember, the difficulty of concentration practice is what we use to improve our concentration – bringing the attention back after it wanders is the way attention gets stronger. Using a timer will allow you to focus completely on the objects of attention instead of wondering how long you have left.

The objects of attention, the “teachers” of attention, and the 3 Regulative Skills:

When expanding the awareness of the bodily state, the attention “scans” different chosen objects of the body in sequence. These objects range from sounds we hear, to the sensation of the skin, to the sensations of the inner organs. We will focus our attention on the breath first – finding the rhythm like we did before – before we will move to the exteroceptive (5 senses), proprioceptive (position and tension muscles), and interoceptive (inner organs) sensations. These objects can be chosen in a way that makes you feel comfortable (you don't need to focus on an image of something that you think is gross or revolting – the *sensations* are after all the important things, not necessarily the images). It may be obvious that distraction, frustration, or sleepiness may hinder the process of developing strengthened attention. Two other hindrances to attention development are not so obvious: liking and not-liking. Liking or not-liking what we notice during attention-building take our focus off of the object of attention and puts our focus on our response to the object. If we experience “not-liking” a distraction or “liking” a sense of joy while practicing, we are losing our attention to those feelings rather than simply placing the attention on the object. When becoming more aware of the body, liking and disliking (or wanting and not-wanting) often comes up: different inner and outer sensations are automatically given value by the brain (“this is good” or “this is bad”) – this protects us from harm, but can also make us less mindful of what we experience. You do not have to change the value your brain gives these experiences; just note that the value is being given and view it as a part of the hindrance of objective and stable attention. These 5 hindrances of attention are also the teachers of attention. We learn to strengthen our attention by noticing when we are not paying attention (due to distraction, frustration, sleepiness, liking, or not-liking) and move the attention back to the chosen object of attention (in this case, different sensations from the body). We learn to strengthen our attention by noticing when we are not paying attention (due to distraction, frustration, sleepiness, liking, or not-liking) and move the attention back to the chosen object of attention. The way to move the attention back is comprised of 3 skills of regulation: *Monitor* (for conflicts in attention), *Disengage* (from the distraction), and *Redirect* (back toward the object of attention). These take practice and work interdependently.

I will not mention this throughout the description of the skill practices, but whenever the mind wanders (as it inevitably will), recognize the wandering as a result of one of the 5 *hindrances of attention objectivity and clarity*, utilize the 3 *regulative skills*, and guide the attention back to the chosen object of attention with self-compassion (self-kindness, patience, unconditional self-acceptance, and even self-forgiveness).

Beginning – During the practice

Breathing rhythm:

Establish the tool of attention and sink into the rhythm of the breath (cycle of the breaths and the space separating each breath) as you did during the Attention Regulation practice. This is an important anchor point to establish before beginning the body scan. It will provide you a base to which you can return at any point during any mental skill-building practice – if you get washed away in thought during the bodily awareness practice, for instance: simply say to yourself “Back to the breath”, return to the rhythm of the breath, then start again where you got lost.

Bodily Awareness

Exteroception – from “extero-” (exterior) and “-ception” (receptive):

A reasonable place to begin in the process of becoming aware of the body is the outside. As you establish the rhythm of the breath, and you begin to feel settled in our posture, work your way through the 5 senses. Think of sense experience as consisting of three interdependent parts: the *sense organ* (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and skin), the *sense object* (form, color, and intensity of light, sound, odor, flavor, and sensations), and the *conscious interaction* of the sense organs and objects (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching). Together, these three parts “contact” to construct sense experience. If it helps, refer to the visual below:

<i>Sense Organ</i>	<i>Sense Object</i>	<i>Conscious Awareness</i>
Eye	Form, color, and intensity of light	Seeing
Ear	Sound	Hearing
Nose	Odor	Smelling
Tongue	Flavor	Tasting
Skin	Sensation	Touching (scan the skin from the bottom of the feet up to the top of the head)

You can go through in any order you choose, but I suggest you follow the order listed above. However you order them, the try to end with the sense of touch; it will set you up well to begin the next stage of *proprioception*. As you go through each sense, spend a few moments “sinking” into the experience of each one. Try to notice *only* the sense you are focusing on; allowing everything else to fade into the background. Time spent in each sense will depend on your experience: use your best judgment to feel when you are ready to move to the next sense. When you encounter mind wandering, recognize it as one of the 5 *hindrances*, utilize the 3 *regulative skills*, and compassionately guide the attention back.

Proprioception – from Latin “proprius”(one's own) and “-ception” (receptive):

The second stage of becoming more aware of the body is the positioning and tension of the muscles and skeleton. The emotions and the body are inextricably intertwined. The muscles and inner body in general reflect and inform the emotional processes of our brain. The reason it is helpful to end the *exteroceptive* stage with the sense of touch is because the muscular-skeletal scan of the body begins with the face. As the muscles and bones are scanned, the point is to merely notice any sense of tension, relaxation, pain, comfort, tightness, tingling, heat/cold, sensitivity, etc. that each portion of the body is experiencing. The purpose is *not* to change any of these sensations. Simply make a note of what you experience before moving on. Try to be detailed. For instance, when beginning at the face, move from the span of the forehead, circumventing the scalp, to the base of the skull, the ears, around the eyes, the inner eyes muscles, nose, cheeks, jaw, tongue/teeth, around the neck, the inner then outer shoulders, and so on. Try to imagine the sensation of each muscle/bone *without visualizing* it... This seems paradoxical, but beginning to observe without the aid of the visual systems of the brain will more prepare you to move into more advanced skills later. Just attempt to “experience” the sensations rather than “seeing” them. If you need to visualize some to remain focused (especially if you have some basic knowledge of anatomy), it could initially be helpful, but eventually experiment with non-visual observation. After you move from the neck and shoulders, move down each arm, upper/middle/lower back, under-arms, ribs, chest, sternum, stomach, waist, buttocks, pelvis, groin, thighs, knees, calves/shins, ankles, tops of the feet, heels, arch/sole of the foot, and toes. This practice alone can take a long time if you really try to become absorbed in it. Again, notice, but do not try to change, any feeling-tones (good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant). These can be very informative for later practices and throughout daily life.

Interoception – from “intero-” (interior) and “-ception” (receptive):

The gastrointestinal system is collectively considered a division of the nervous system called the *enteric (or intrinsic) nervous system*. This system is sometimes called the second brain because it is such a specialized portion of the autonomic nervous system and is lined with around 500 million neurons (from the esophagus down to the anus) that can inform you of the condition of the body and your overall emotional state. As you have just finished with the feet, place your attention at the bottom of the gastrointestinal tract and move up through the intestines and stomach. This is a very important part of the system, so stay here for a few moments: notice any churning, tightness, movement, “brick-in-the-stomach” feeling, tingling, etc. and any sense of pleasant/unpleasant. You may also place one or both hands over your abdomen to notice what sensations arise. As before, the goal is to *notice* not *change*. From here, move upward to include the heart and lungs – two other parts of the body that are heavily innervated by the vagal nerve and sympathetic/parasympathetic nervous systems. Pay attention to these informative organs within the body for several moments (you may also place one or both hands over the heart as you did the abdomen) before moving upward through the esophagus and into the mouth and head. From here, place your attention on the whole body (internal and external) all at once. Try to *feel* the entire body at once – all the parts observed through exteroception, proprioception, and interoception.

Ending the practice

Embodiment:

As you finish the detailed body scan, spend some time becoming absorbed in the view of the entire inner and outer body. The purpose of this is to fully feel “embodied”: filling the body with your presence in it. You may want to turn back to the breath for support and imagine that as you breathe in, your body is more and more filled with your attention (imagining breathing in something like light, color, or steam might help the visualization). Imagine your entire body is filled with your attentive awareness of it. You may notice either a “blipping” in-and-out or a sustained feeling of a fully embodied awareness. You may place one hand over your heart and the other over your abdomen again as you sit with that fully embodied experience. Do not try to hold onto that feeling too much (even if it brings great peace and comfort). Allow it to arise when it does, remain as long as it does, and slip away whenever it does. Trying to hold onto this (or any) sensation with too much effort can lead to frustration and, ironically, less success in sustaining it. Aim toward broadening the focus of attention to all sensations as opposed to the detailed approach employed earlier during exteroception.

So far, you have made efforts to merely notice the feeling-toned “liking” or “dis-liking” without making any attempt at changing it – at this point, try to add or cultivate feelings of gratitude and compassion for the body that you fill. If you have lots of pain, try to find one place that doesn’t hurt and be grateful for it. You could also imagine yourself being alleviated of that pain and being grateful of its cessation. This is the groundwork for self- and other-compassion.

Take a moment:

After the timer goes off and you have opened your eyes, notice your physical and mental response to what you just experienced. Notice any differences in your body, stress level, emotional feelings, pace and quality of thinking (racing thoughts, clear mind, or “spacey” brain), memories, and overall states of mind (well-being, anxiety, neutral feelings). Try to avoid assessing your “performance”. Being “good at” or “bad at” this skill is not important – the key is to maintain an attitude that allows you to continually return to the object of attention with non-judgment. This time after you finish your session can inform you for the next time. Try to be discerning about what to try to work through and what to adjust during your next session. Remember, each time you return the wandering attention you strengthen it. Breathe in deeply a few times (this is a quick-relaxation technique) before getting up and continuing with your day.