



NEURO-SOMATIC MINDFULNESS

A Direct Path to Awakening



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In this eBook, I will offer an introduction to a deeply embodied, neuroscience-informed approach to mindfulness and awareness meditation that I call Neuro-Somatic Mindfulness.

I will first describe the practice and explain its purpose. You will also find a link to an audio recording, in which I will guide you in an introductory session on Neuro-Somatic Mindfulness practice.

If you are new to meditation, my aspiration is that, after reading this and trying the guided practice, you will feel much more inspired to go further with your practice because you are more easily and more quickly experiencing the depth and benefits of meditation.

If you already are a practitioner, I am confident this approach will catalyze for you an entirely new depth of meditative stabilization and realization, inspiring you to double down on your commitment to regular practice .

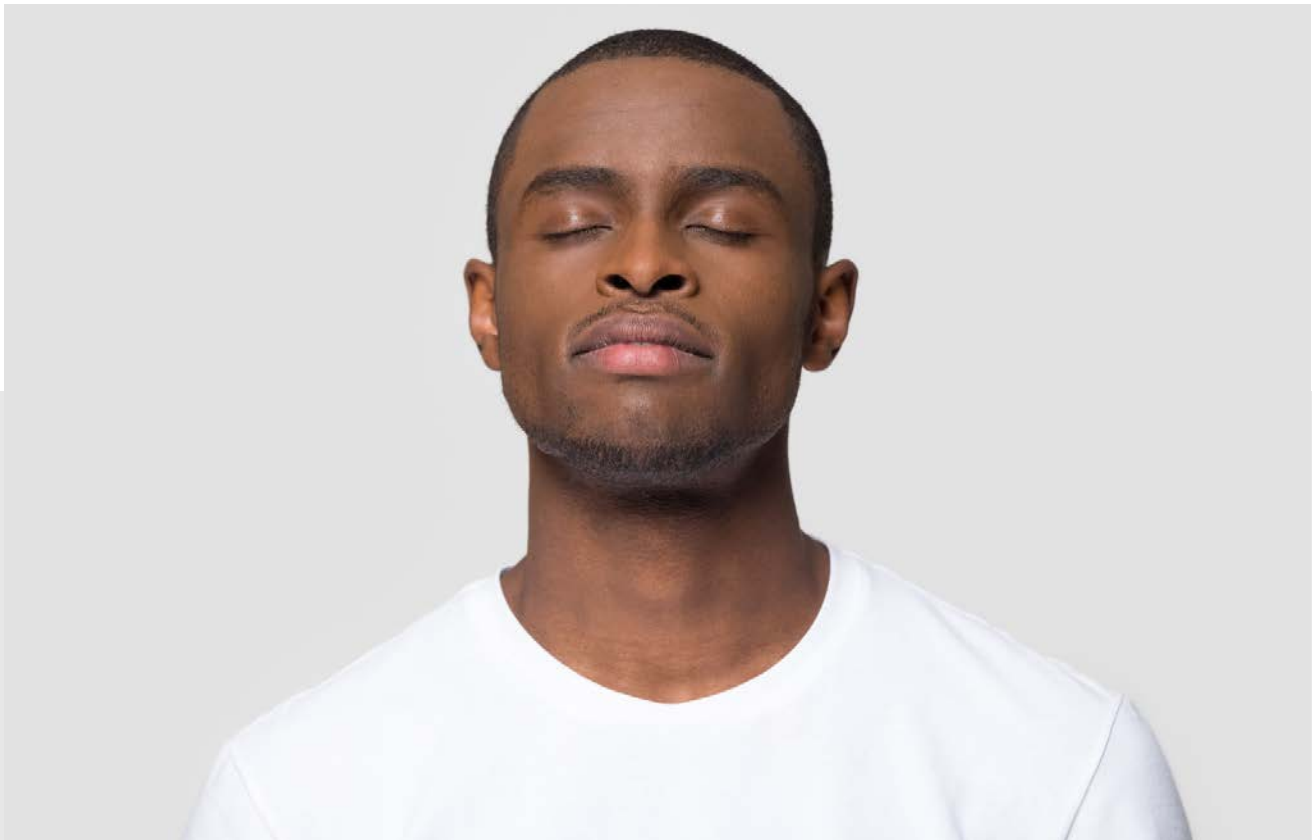




A DEEPLY-EMBODIED APPROACH

Let's start with the name "Neuro-Somatic Mindfulness." Somatic references the body—a deeply embodied approach to the practice of meditation. As you probably know, mindfulness practice involves intentionally placing our attention on something, and when we notice that our attention wanders, we bring it back to the chosen object of mindfulness. And we do that again and again, cultivating attitudinal qualities of curiosity, openness, self-acceptance, non-judgment, self-compassion, and so forth.

When we notice that our mind has wandered off the object of mindfulness, we don't beat ourselves up about it. That's what the mind does. The mind wanders. In fact, being harsh with ourselves for getting distracted is completely counterproductive because it reinforces a centralized notion of me and exacerbates feelings of unworthiness or our tendencies towards self-criticism. We simply come back. We simply notice, with openness and curiosity, that the mind has wandered. And then, we gently bring our attention back to whatever object of mindfulness we decided to focus our practice on, for that given practice session.



The most common objects of mindfulness are the body and the breath. One of the advantages to taking the body, the deeply-felt, lived experience of the body and/or the breath as the object of mindfulness is that the breath and the body are readily available. We don't have to make them happen. They're already happening. They're not contrived or artificial. We don't have to visualize them. They're just right here. To the extent that we can join our attention with the directly-felt experience of physical sensation in the body and/or with the breath, then we're anchoring ourselves in the present moment, in nowness.

Very often, instructions on mindfulness of body or mindfulness of breathing meditation simply assume that we can connect with the body in a very direct way and invite us to bring our attention back to the body, back to the breath. But it is not that simple...



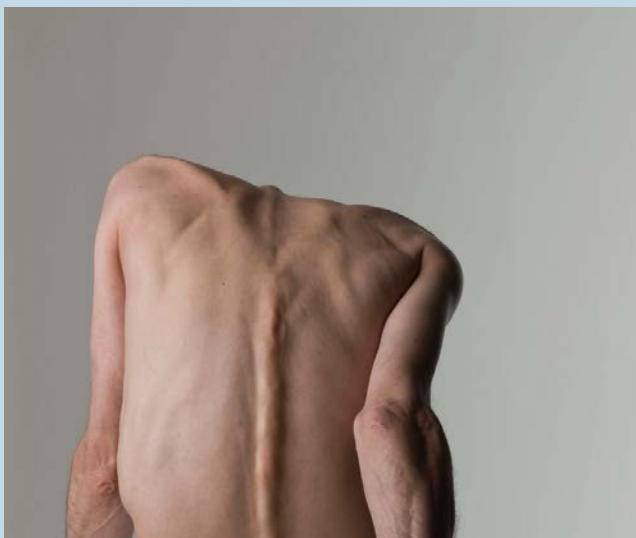
THE BODY-BODY

We have, at least, two lenses through which we can experience the body or breath. One is a conceptual lens and the other is a direct perceiving or direct experiencing lens.

My first meditation teacher, the renowned Tibetan Buddhist meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, offered a very unique perspective on the traditional teachings of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. He made a powerful distinction in talking about mindfulness of body, the first foundation of mindfulness, between what he called “psychosomatic body” and what he called “body-body.”

By psychosomatic body, he was referencing the ideas we have about the body. He pointed out that our relationship to our body is quite conceptual—it is made up of our thoughts and memories about the body, our images of the body, all of our self-talk around the body, our feelings about the body, the whole constellation of concepts, thoughts and feelings related to whatever the notion of body means to us.

And even if I had no particular feelings about the body at all, even if I related to it in a very neutral way, when I direct my attention to the body, am I really directing my attention to the direct experience of body? Or is my attention going to fixed ideas or recent memories of the body?





It is helpful to understand how our conceptual mind works, especially in relation to direct experience. Our conceptual mind allows us to do amazing things—abstract thinking, reasoning, problem-solving and creating amazing technologies of all kinds. There's nothing wrong with it. And, at the same time, our conceptual mind can be an obstacle to direct experience and awakening, because it very quickly replaces direct experience with a concept of that experience. So, when we're walking outside and we see a tree, do we really see the tree or do we see our concept of the tree?

The same is true for the body. Body itself is just a word, a concept. And interestingly enough, we assume the body to be separate, a separate entity. However, we know from all the great spiritual traditions, and from current neuroscience and quantum physics as well, that our body is a complex living system, deeply nested within all complex living systems. We are not separate from anything. So, it is somewhat artificial to create the boundaries of body and say, "This is body and everything else is not body." All that is in the realm of concept, but it is possible to drop into simply experiencing what we call body directly, free of any concepts. And ultimately, free of concepts like inside and outside, separate, or not separate.



The concept of body is intended to point to a lived experience of physical sensation. We experience all of our sense perceptions through the body, but generally, we connect body with the sense of physicality, referencing the sensation of touch—the actual tactile, physical sensations arising moment-to-moment. It requires a gentle effort to drop beneath the conceptual layer into the direct, lived experience of what we call body, this complex living experience happening in the moment.





NEURO-BIOFEEDBACK LOOP

The more we know about the brain, the more we realize what we don't know. But we do know a lot, and new studies are discovering more all the time, specifically in relation to various forms of mindfulness meditation and the effect they have on the brain, which we can see through various forms of brain imaging and immunoassay techniques.

The neurosomatic part of this approach to mindfulness has to do with understanding how we can activate an organic, internal system of biofeedback, actually neuro-biofeedback, through intentional mindfulness and presence. Many of you may be familiar with basic biofeedback, where a person is hooked up to a heart monitor and facing a visual representation of their heartbeat. And by looking at it and being aware of their body, the person can learn to raise and lower their heartbeat, simply using their mind. It is called biofeedback and is very straightforward to learn.

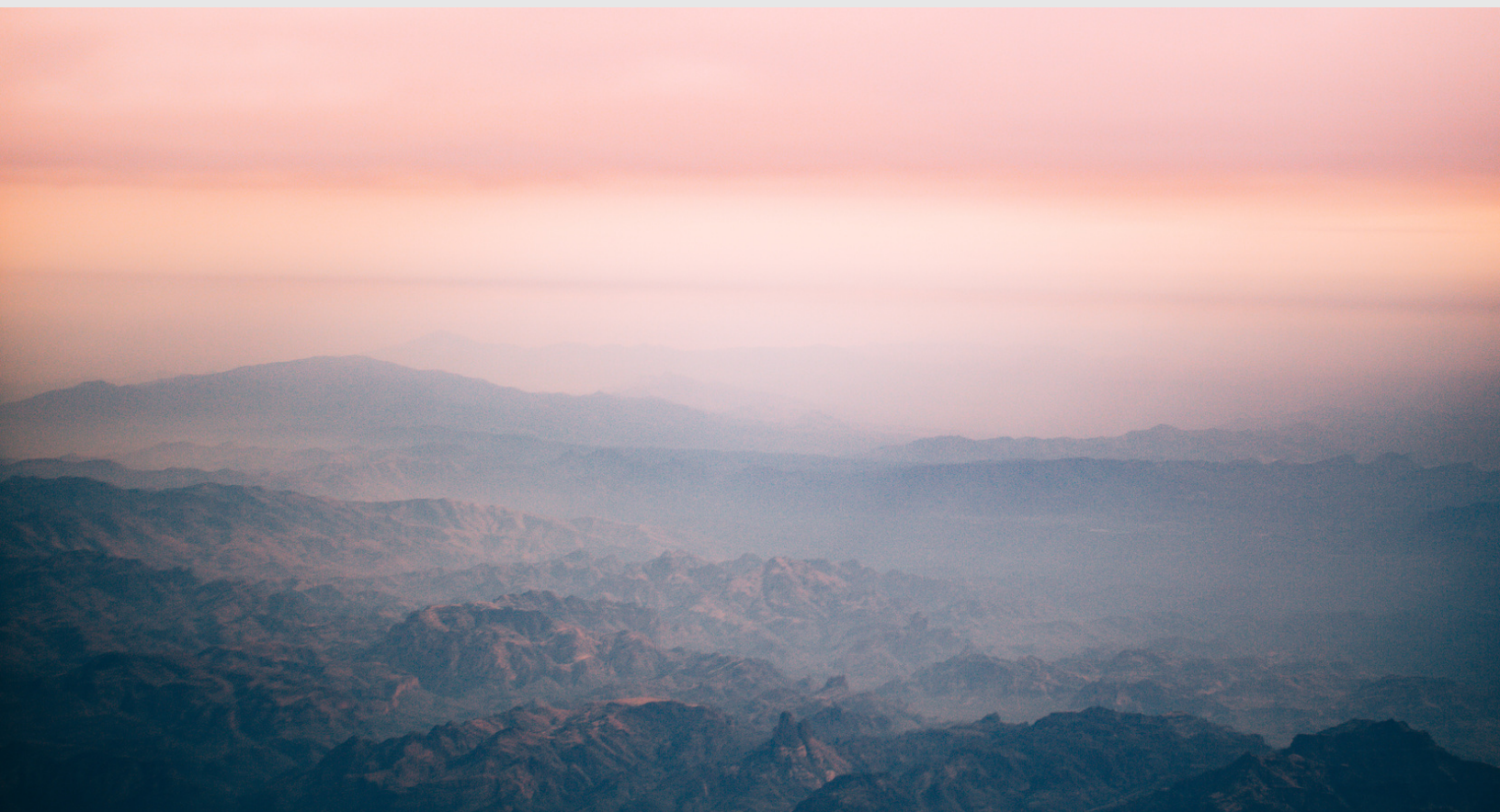
There is also another technique called neurofeedback, where the person is hooked up to monitors measuring brain waves. And again, by looking at a visual representation of their brain waves, the person learns to modify the brainwave patterns, moving from beta to alpha to theta, and so forth. The person is able to use the feedback from the external reference point (visual representation), match it with the internal feedback, and self-regulate in such a way as to affect their brainwave patterns or heartbeat.

So, the fundamental principle of neurosomatic mindfulness is that we can learn to do this without the need for an external reference point, without that external visual input, and without needing to be hooked up to either a heart monitor or a brainwave monitor.

How is that possible? The more deeply we drop into the body with awareness, the more information or data we are receiving about our body. In the guided meditation linked to this eBook, you will be able to try it. We will begin by paying attention to the actual tactile, physical sensations we can experience on the surface of the skin, from head to toe.

And then, we'll explore the internal landscape of physical sensation, which could include the overall weight and mass of the muscles and bones, for example. It could include feeling our heartbeat. It could include any sensations of discomfort, aches, or stiffness. It could include feeling all the internal sensations related to the breath flowing in and out of the body.

It could include simply feeling the dynamic flow of nervous energy within the body, or even more subtle forms of energy, known as lifeforce energy, or in some other traditions, prana or chi.



This is based on the fact that the entire body is sensory, all the way down to the bones, and including the bones. Our entire body is a living organism containing neuronal cells connected to our central nervous system. Even the outer, white, hard layer of the bones, called the periosteum, is sensory. The marrow of the bones has neuronal cells, as well as all of the connective tissue, the musculature, circulatory system, all our vital organs, glands, lymphatic system, everything, every part of our body including the epidermis of our skin, all containing neuronal cells, all sensory.

The internal landscape of sensate experience in the body is a vast universe. And through neurosomatic mindfulness, we are accessing this vast landscape through enhanced somatic awareness. We learn to do this by activating what is known as interoception, which is a fancy word that is short for internal perception. We also sometimes reference it as interoceptive awareness—the body's capacity to feel itself from the inside out. As we learned to do this, we're getting a lot more data. We're getting a tremendous amount of information about all of our body's processes, about the internal sensate landscape of the body, as well as the external landscape.



INTEROCEPTION

Let me make a distinction between exteroception and interoception. In terms of physical touch, we have exteroception where we experienced touch on the surface of the skin, like pressure. And that goes through a particular set of highly myelinated neural pathways directly to the brain.

Myelination is a sheathing on nerve fibers that allows them to operate more efficiently. These sensations go to the brain quite quickly and directly. Internal sensations from within—from inside the body—go through neural networks that are less myelinated or perhaps unmyelinated in some cases, and they don't go to the brain as quickly. So, these internal sensations are subtler than the external sensations, but nonetheless, they are very real. And we can open up to them and develop greater awareness of these subtler sensations through practice.

By enhancing both exteroceptive and interoceptive awareness of the physical, tactile sensations throughout the body, external and internal, from head to toe, we're getting a lot of data about the lived reality of the body and all the body's processes. And our body can then learn, through an internal neuro-biofeedback loop, to self-regulate itself in an organic way, into greater attention stabilization—the doorway into expanded consciousness, and, potentially, profound states of nondual awareness.



DEFAULT-MODE NETWORK VS TASK-POSITIVE NETWORK

The default-mode network (DMN) is the network in our brain that is active when we do not direct our attention. Thus, it is responsible for the noisy and discursive cognitive activity of our brain. It likes to time-travel, ruminating about the past and fantasizing and/or worrying about the future. It also keeps a running commentary going about the present and involves mindlessly generating all the opinions, judgments, and thoughts about others, and what others think about me that often dominate our mind. It is that very busy, speedy, and repetitive part of our mental faculty that continually reifies the self-sense and our separateness. When many of us first try to meditate, we go, “Wow, I can't do this. My mind is just racing all the time.” That's the default-mode network.

I don't mean to demonize the DMN because it serves important purposes. It can be the basis for creative thinking, free association, and creative daydreaming. And we can certainly benefit from reflecting on the past so we can learn from it. The DMN, therefore, has its very legitimate and necessary uses. But it can be very discursive and one of the primary sources of stress, because of something called the negativity bias. We're set up, in evolutionary terms, to give more importance and attention to negative experiences than to positive or neutral experiences. These negative or threat perceptions go right into long-term memory, whereas neutral and positive perceptions do not, unless we intentionally hold them in short-term memory for 12 - 20 seconds or more.

Our long-term memory is, therefore, dominated by negative impressions and perceptions that form what is called implicit memory or bias, which causes us to spin things to the negative, to make negative assumptions about our experiences. Thus, when we let our mind wander mindlessly, that activates the DMN, where the negativity bias can then dominate, producing a lot of stress. However, it is possible to consciously override that with awareness and intention.



When we join our attention with the body, what my first meditation teacher called “synchronizing body and mind,” we start to activate something called the task-positive network (TPN). The brain is a very complex organism and operates holistically. Everything is interconnected and interdependent. But to simplify things, the TPN has to do with directed attention, focus, and attention stabilization. We have all noticed that, when we're really focused on something, our mind quiets down. An example might be trying to thread a needle. When we are concentrating, our mind settles. We may only be able to do that for a few moments because we haven't trained the mind to focus. But a focused mind, when we're directing our attention to a specific task, tends to be quieter in terms of cognitive activity; whereas an undirected mind tends to be more discursive.

In the Neuro-Somatic Mindfulness (NSM) practice, we really focus and explore both the external and internal sensate landscape of the body in the present moment, synchronizing body and mind. That creates a shift in the brain from one neural network to another.

We can sense the shift in the level of cognitive activity in our brain. We can feel physiological changes in the body as our attention stabilizes—our breathing pattern tends to change and slow down.

Depending on how we're doing the meditation, there might be some parasympathetic activation, which means we're entering the more relaxed, restful, and restorative part of our nervous system, as opposed to the sympathetic (alert, stressed, fight-or-flight) part of our nervous system.

So, our body feels and detects all that sensory information and with consistent and subtle, directed self-regulation will organically learn to auto-regulate itself into attention stabilization and deeper states of awareness.



INSIGHT INTO SELFLESSNESS

This ability to naturally relax into profound states of awareness is often accompanied by various insights into how our body and mind work at the most profound levels. Such insights can ultimately lead to awakening and liberation from the inherent suffering caused by our confused way of perceiving and understanding our moment-to-moment, day-to-day human experience.

When I use the word “confused,” I’m referring to the dualistic perception that arises from the perspective of an imagined self or conditioned ego, leading to a sense of separateness from others and our surroundings. All the great spiritual traditions point to this dualistic confusion and separation as the fundamental source of our suffering. It is, however, illusory, even though it defines our experience as human beings. All spiritual paths are, in one way or another, attempting to deconstruct or dissolve that illusion of separateness, to see through it and transcend it. In sensory and psychological terms we experience this as the contrast between contraction, reifying the sense of “me,” a separate self entity, and expansiveness, opening to the experience of interconnectedness or interbeing.



Neuro-Somatic Mindfulness (NSM) develops this internal, neuro-biofeedback loop, allowing us to organically self-regulate and then auto-regulate into deep attention stabilization and profound states of nondual awareness. With this depth of direct experience of the body-mind spectrum, we're not only experiencing the physical body but our emotional body as well, since we experience emotions in the body. We're also beginning to experience what is sometimes called the subtle energy body, which in Vedic traditions is called Prana.

In Chinese, it's Chi, in Japanese it's Ki, and in Tibetan, it's Lung. In the Western languages, it's basically spirit or sometimes called the etheric dimension. This journey through the body-heart-mind-spirit landscape, which begins with feeling and grounding oneself in tactile, physical sensation through enhanced interoceptive and exteroceptive awareness, will lead us into the subtler dimensions of that landscape and eventually to resting in pure, embodied presence and being, into the very depths of who and what we really are.

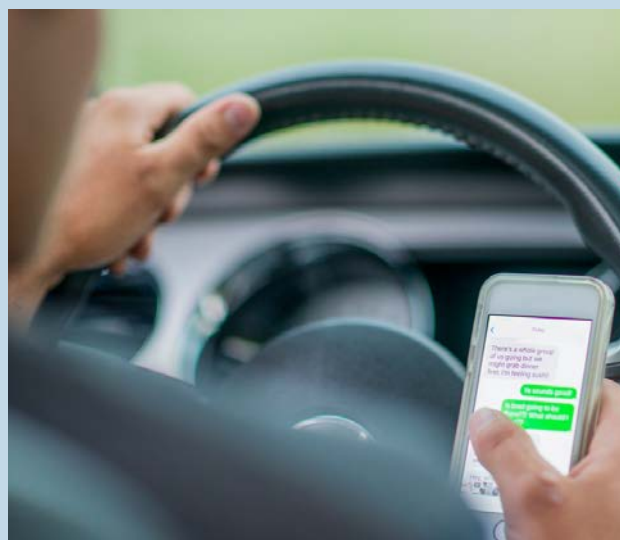


EVER-DEEPENING PRESENCE

As we are doing this practice, we evolve from being lost in our experience and somewhat mindless, to being mindful and witnessing our experience, to relaxing the witness and moving into direct experiencing, and eventually, relaxing further into pure being. So, that's the spectrum we're working on. Here is a quick analogy to illustrate it.

Before we start practicing mindfulness or awareness methodologies, to one degree or another, we're kind of lost in our experience. Of course, we all have some level of natural mindfulness.

We couldn't function without it. We have moments of awareness throughout the day. But, in general, we stumble through our lives in a state of relative confusion, reactivity, and mindlessness, as if on automatic pilot. We are floating in this river of sensate experience—sight, sound, smell, touch, physical sensation, emotion—carried along by its current of repetitive and habituated cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactivity, speed and busyness. We're not really in control of the situation. The mechanical, fearful, survival-based, and comfort-seeking tendencies of our conditioned mind have taken over, keeping us preoccupied and mindless, in a constant effort to seek comfort and avoid discomfort.





It's a little bit like the well-known trope... Are fish aware of the water? Because in the world of fish, the water is completely ubiquitous, right? In the same way, we, as human beings, may not have much awareness of the space, or even the air surrounding us, because again, it feels so ubiquitous. We become aware of the air when it's moving, a cool summer breeze on a hot day, or we might feel the air temperature. We may be aware of other people, animals and objects we share the space with, but how often do we really have much awareness of the space in which we function and experience our lives?

The idea is that, to begin with, we're in this river of sensate experience without a lot of awareness, and then, as we develop a mindfulness practice, it increases our ability to be present, awake, and self-aware. It could be likened to climbing out of that river, sitting on the bank, and witnessing the river. Now that we've separated ourselves from that flow of sensate experience, we're able to observe the river. We can look at all the hydrodynamics—the whirlpools, eddies and currents—and perhaps various kinds of debris, leaves, and branches floating by on the river; or perhaps we're able to see some fish swimming along or birds landing in the water; or maybe it's a larger river, where there are small boats. We are sitting on the bank, observing all this activity, the content and flow of the river. With our mindfulness-awareness practice, we step back from the experience, and we are then able to witness it.

The witness mind is always available, but now we are becoming conscious of it. Or the witness mind becomes conscious of itself. It's really important because, from the witness mind, we can make choices about how to respond to the content of our lives, to that flow of internal and external sensate experience that makes up our lived experience, rather than just being lost in a less conscious and habitually reactive relationship to all of it, driven by our conditioning. So, instead of being on autopilot with a mechanical, habituated relationship with our lives, we become more conscious of our moment-to-moment experience and how we're responding to what's going on within ourselves and with others.



This development of the witness mind is an incredibly powerful development. It's almost an enlightenment in and of itself. Nevertheless, with the witness mind, there can still be a strong sense of dualism. There's a sense of "I" observing my experience. Let's think about that in terms of mindfulness of body. When I'm noticing my rib cage expanding and contracting as I breathe, I am witnessing this experience. And it feels relatively present and awake because I'm here and I know what's going on. I know I'm breathing in, I know I'm breathing out, because I can feel it.

There is, however, this sense of a "me" or an "I" that is observing that. Sometimes, that experience is called the watcher. It's the sense of noticing or witnessing our experience as a subject, an observer. However, as our attention stabilizes further and our awareness deepens, we can gradually move beyond that, relax the sense of a separate observer and begin to dissolve the subject-object duality, so as to move into direct, nondual experiencing, and even further into pure presence, pure beingness.



FROM WITNESS TO PURE BEING

The process of bringing our mind back and exploring the lived, direct experience of the body stabilizes our attention. At first, we might be using our will and directing our attention to focus on our present experience. There is a sense of agency. But, as the body learns to self-regulate into attention stabilization, we don't really need to direct it so much anymore. We begin to trust that the whole body-mind spectrum knows how to do this.

Let's say I'm working with mindfulness of breathing. The idea is to know that I'm breathing in and know that I'm breathing out. Sometimes, mindfulness is called "presently knowing." In other words, I actually know what's going on, in the moment. How do I know that? Because I can feel my breath. I can feel my ribcage opening and closing. I can feel the belly rising and falling. I can feel the action of the diaphragm muscle, the intercostal muscles, and so forth. I can feel the passage of air across the nostrils or parted lips. I can feel that and I'm observing those sensations.

As the attention stabilizes, we notice our mind quieting down. It becomes easier and easier to stay present with the experience of body and breath, and to have less separation, naturally relaxing that sense of the personified witness. We find ourselves letting go of the observer. And maybe, then, there's just "observing." There's just noticing without a need to have an implied subject, a "me" or an "I." And then, we may even be able to relax further, from observing into just direct experiencing, direct feeling. There is only sensation. It doesn't really require noticing. You could say that it is noticing itself. But in fact, it really doesn't require noticing. It just is. In a sense, sensations are self-aware.



In this way, we can relax into a more non-dual way of practicing mindfulness and awareness, and experience the body and breath directly, without the need for a personified watcher or witness, and without even that dynamic of witnessing. It's more just: breath is happening, body is happening. Direct tactile experience just is, in the moment.

The more vivid and compelling our direct experience becomes, the more clearly we can see the added, conceptual layers of imagined dualistic perception, and the more all these extra layers begin to naturally fall away. We go from observing the breath with a strong sense of observer, to observing the breath with very little sense of an observer, to direct experience of the breath without any sense of observing. And beyond that, into being the breath, being the body. And then, even beyond that, into pure being itself. So, this is this pathway.

This depth of beingness, in itself, is like an attractor. It magnetizes us out of the chaos and confusion of discursiveness and emotional upheavals into profound equanimity and peace. It is sometimes called restorative, embodied self-awareness because, when we drop into the depth of pure being, unmediated, unelaborated, nonconceptual, pure being, it has a profound capacity for healing. Our nervous system is able to untangle itself. And we develop greater confidence in the innate wholeness and goodness of our being, not in a conceptual way, but in a directly-experienced way.

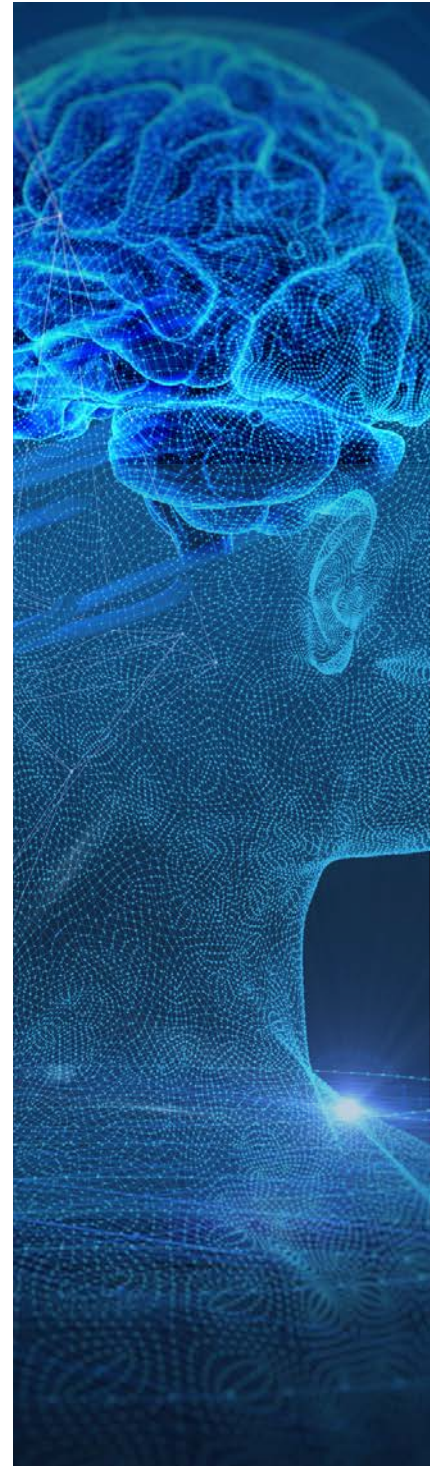
So, this is the journey of neurosomatic mindfulness, developing this deeply-embodied approach to mindfulness and awareness meditation, which focuses, to begin with, on tactile physical sensation, the sensation of touch. As we develop it further, we can work with all the sense perceptions, as well as with our emotional experience and our cognitive experience, the totality of our experience. The portal, however, is going deeper and deeper into the body.



TO REVIEW...

SOME OF THE IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS:

1. We're working to activate both interoceptive and exteroceptive awareness of tactile, physical sensation and direct experience, in the moment, which is based on the fact that the entire body is sensory, all the way down to the bones and including the bones.
2. We talked about the distinction between psychosomatic or conceptual body and what Trungpa Rinpoche called body-body, and how to connect with that direct, lived experience of body, rather than our concepts about it. It requires gentle and persistent intentionality, if not effort. We eventually move from intentional effort, into subtler and subtler, effortless effort. Always being curious about whether we are still elaborating or manufacturing experience rather than simply connecting with and relaxing into things as they are, in the most direct way possible.
3. We are activating the body's innate capacity for auto-regulation. This innate, organic, internal neuro biofeedback system is already in place within the body, and we can activate it and make it conscious. The body itself can then guide our meditation practice. The more the body learns to do it, the less that sense of a separate "me" has to direct it, and we can then relax further and further, ultimately into pure awareness. pure presence, and pure being.



RESOURCES

NEURO-SOMATIC MINDFULNESS GUIDED MEDITATION

[CLICK HERE](#)

to access a free downloadable audio recording of Fleet leading a guided meditation



NEURO-SOMATIC MINDFULNESS THE ONLINE COURSE

A deeply embodied, heart-centered, and trauma-informed approach to the practice of mindfulness-awareness meditation, grounded in current neuroscience and the advanced practices of eastern, nondual meditation traditions,

The course includes monthly practice and Q&A sessions with Fleet Maull, Ph.D.

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About the Author

Fleet Maull, PhD, is an author, meditation teacher, social entrepreneur, business consultant, executive coach and trainer.

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