

The Body Scan

In the body scan (as in all formal practices) we bring full, non-judgmental attention to physical sensations. These sensations may be readily noticeable, such as sensations of pressure where the body is in contact with the mat, or may be quite subtle, such as the awareness of the position of the parts of the body with respect to the whole. There is no right way to feel, nothing to fix, just noticing and accepting whatever sensation (or lack of sensation) shows up. This practice begins to integrate our sense of the mind and the body, which are sometimes separate. As James Joyce wrote of Mr. Duffy (“A Painful Case”), “He lived a little distance from his body.” – something that can easily happen to any of us when we spend too much time dwelling on where we aren’t. Doing the body scan, we also notice our mental reactions to paying attention to various parts of the body, practicing non-judging with our thinking and emotions, and acceptance of the way things are with our body.

The body scan can be done in any position, but the recording assumes you are lying on your back. We first direct attention to the body as a whole, relaxing the body as much as possible. We then direct attention to specific regions of the body systematically, and finally return to awareness of the entire body. It’s that simple. Take your time scanning through toe to head (or head to toe) with attention. You can also scan the left and right limbs separately. If you only have a few minutes, you can just scan briefly through any noticeable sensations. In any formal practice, it is inevitable that at some point your awareness will wander off into thinking. This is not a problem; it is just the nature of the mind. Whenever you notice that your attention is elsewhere, simply recognize that you are thinking, gently let it go, and return the attention to the body. If this happens during a guided scan, just return to the guidance. If you are doing the scan on your own, return to the region you were last paying attention to. Losing focus is not a failure, it is simply another opportunity to cultivate the new habit of coming back to the present moment. It is not necessary to “finish” or “accomplish” the scan. If you are doing an unguided scan and you find that after 20 minutes you haven’t made it past the knees, that’s OK. Remember there is nowhere to go and nothing to strive for.

Coming back to paying attention to what is present in each moment, over and over, is the only “goal”.

N.B. It is not unusual to feel sleepy or to actually fall asleep when first trying this practice, especially if you have been sleep-deprived or stressed out. If this happens to you, your body is probably trying to tell you something. (Corollary- if you are having trouble getting to sleep, try a body scan!). However, when doing formal practice, the intention is to maintain a relaxed alertness. Sleepiness can be minimized by lying in the corpse pose, lying on the floor, not the bed, and if that isn't enough, by opening the eyes. Alternatively, try doing the body scan sitting.