



Movement As Meditation

Part One

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We associate certain forms of movement – tai chi, qi gong, yoga – with meditation. We also seem to intuitively suspect, or know, that two people can do the same act—a particular yoga posture—and one is merely exercising, or looking good during exercise, while the other is engaging the experience in a different way that somehow transforms its meaning and significance. This implies what we're doing with our minds, not just our bodies, may account for this difference. A poem by Floyd Skloot captures this transformation:

Within a rushing stream of morning light
she stands still as a heron with one sole
held flush against the other inner thigh
and her long arms like bony wings folded
back so that when the motion of a breeze
passes through her body there is a deep

repose at its root and in an eye's blink
she has become this gently swaying tree
stirring in the wind of its breath while linked
to the ground by the slow flow of energy
that brings her limbs together now in prayer
and blessing for the peace she is finding there.

So what transforms movement from simply exercise, or the artistic expression of the body, into an act of mindfulness or meditative awareness?

We all have the inherent capacity to direct the mind, to pay attention to our experience. It's *how we pay attention*, and *the qualities of mind we bring to the way we pay attention* that determine the nature and quality of our experience.

In mindful or meditative movement, we pay attention in the same basic way that characterizes sitting meditation. We use the breath as a stabilizing anchor; experientially investigate sensation that arises in the body as *we move*; and develop and apply a number of important qualities of mind and heart to hold and shape our experience. A discussion follows of each of the three components:

The Breath As A Constant Stabilizing Anchor

First, we *connect* our attention, and *sustain the connection*, with the sensations of the movement of the breath in and out of the body. The *repeated* connecting, sustaining, and *reconnecting* with the sensations of the breath as they

change in shape, form, and intensity, begin to calm and stabilize the mind and body, and concentrate the mind. *We use the breath, in other words, to constantly anchor our awareness in direct experience.*

As the mind becomes concentrated, its ability to experience more deeply, fully, and richly develops. Because the mind can more easily stay with the sensations that are present in the body, rather than being easily distracted and jumping quickly from one experience to another, *experiential investigation* can begin.

Sensations In The Body As A Vehicle For Investigation

Second, we use the body, and sensations that arise in the body as the body moves, as vehicles for experiential investigation. As sensations arise in the body with movement, we *connect*, and *sustain the connection* with these sensations as they change in shape, form, and intensity as the body moves. This investigation involves the *nature, qualities, and characteristics* of what is being experienced. It takes place at the sensory, emotional, and cognitive levels as a series of open questions.

What is happening, right now, in my breath and body? How does the posture, movement or stretch change what is happening?

What is happening, right now, emotionally? How does the posture, movement or stretch change what is happening?

What is happening, right now, in the mind with thoughts and thinking? How does the posture, movement or stretch change what is happening?

We begin developing the habit of experiential investigation by holding these inquiries as open questions that inform our experience of sensation in the body during movement. These questions are *answered through an examination of experience itself*, rather than through intellectual analysis. Attention is placed in the sensation of movement and experienced directly.

While this exploration is taking place, we remember to constantly use our connection with the movement of the breath as a stabilizing anchor or reference point. This

allows us to experience what is happening in the body, mind, and emotions *without becoming lost in thought or carried away in the drama of any emotion or memory that appears.*

Attitudes That Hold and Shape Our Experience

Third, we bring a particular set of attitudes to the way we pay attention and investigate. These are the qualities of mind and heart that we develop and apply during all forms of meditation including movement. We:

- < turn towards rather than away from the experience that is present, even if the mind wants to escape by telling us that it is unpleasant or painful.
- < embrace and engage experience, and ourselves, with kindness, compassion and generosity, rather than judgement, blame and shame.
- < allow the experience to be present and undisturbed, just as it is, without trying to change, alter or modify it.
- < accept the experience, in the sense of acknowledging its reality and its presence in our life as the essential pre-condition to seeing into it, understanding it, and learning how to work skillfully with it, rather than denying, avoiding, or compensating.
- < settle back into the experience that is present, investigate its nature, and allow realization and insight to arise on its own, rather than trying to conceptualize, intellectualize, or think our way through experience. We go beyond the world of thoughts and concepts into direct experience.

Through this process, we can use movement, and all experience in our lives, as a meditative tool for self discovery and for entering into a new understanding and relationship with experience, ourselves and the world around us. This gradually leads us to the understanding that the quality and nature of our experience, and our life, depends primarily on the relationship we have with experience, not the outer circumstances of our lives.

