

# Learn to listen to your body

Meditate on physical sensations in order to feel calm, grounded, and healthy. By Richard Miller, PhD

**HAVE YOU EVER** noticed feeling light and physically relaxed when you're happy? Or noticed sensations of unease in your heart, stomach, or gut when you're upset? These sensations are your body's way of getting your attention, so that you can respond to whatever life throws at you with deep inner feelings of wholeness, resilience, and well-being.

## Bodysensing

Meditation can help you tune in to your body as sensation, so that you can start to respond. One of the most effective meditative practices for refining your responses is something I call bodysensing—a practice to help you feel embodied, in which your physical sensations can inform and change your behaviors and mind. By regularly practicing “bodysensing,” you can calm your central nervous system so that you can achieve deep physical and mental relaxation, enhance your body's natural resiliency for dealing with stress, and grow your capacity to experience innate, unchanging feelings of health, wholeness, and well-being. (See my *Meditation* column in the August issue: No. 284, page 32.)

## Your body speaks

Practicing bodysensing teaches you how to scan, perceive, and attend to the subtle physical messages your body is constantly sending you about your health, emotions, thoughts, and well-being, before those messages become dramatic. What do I mean by this?

I once had a yoga teacher who began each class using a soft, soothing voice. As class progressed, his voice grew louder, until by the end he was often shouting. So I asked him, “Why do you talk so loudly?” He responded, “When I feel that you aren't listening, I turn up the volume.” Like this teacher, your body

turns up its volume to get your attention when you don't listen to its subtle messages. It's helpful to learn to detect your body's subtle cues so that you don't have to wait until it needs to shout for your attention. When you're able to respond to early stress symptoms, such as heaviness, tightness, discomfort, or irritation, you won't need to experience more distressing and possibly harmful conditions, such as anxiety, high blood pressure, low blood sugar, and fatigue, that could otherwise arise.

## The feeling of being

The simple exercises that follow are designed to reveal the powerful effect of sensing and feeling versus thinking. As you switch from thinking to feeling, you activate a natural relaxation response throughout your body. The longer you are able to simply feel a particular body sensation, the deeper this relaxation response will be. Research reveals that the regular practice of bodysensing, and the deep relaxation that results, grows brain-body connections through the creation and strengthening of neural pathways. Be patient with yourself as you find a seat and try the following practices.

*continued on page 26*



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### MEDITATION

continued from page 24

#### PRACTICE 1: SENSING YOUR HANDS

- » Think of your body as a field of energy that extends in all directions, beyond any boundary your mind can imagine.
- » With eyes closed, bring your attention to your left hand and notice any sensations that are present. Then let go of thinking about your hand: Thinking keeps you in your head, while sensing brings you into the actual sensations that are present as your hand. Notice and welcome sensations of heaviness, lightness, warmth, coolness, tingling, throbbing, pulsing, or shimmering. Can you sense how your hand is actually a field of radiant sensation? If so, how far out does this field extend? Keep feeling your hand as sensation, without going into judging or reacting to what you're sensing.
- » Next, feel yourself inside your right hand. As with your left hand, without going into thinking, experience the actual sensations that are present. Sense your right hand as a field of radiant sensation. How far out does this field extend?
- » Now, feel yourself inside both hands, as sensation, at the same time. Take your time. As much as possible, refrain from thinking or commenting about the sensation. Instead, keep feeling your two hands as a unified field of radiant sensation that extends into space.
- » Slowly open and close your eyes several times while continuing to feel your hands as radiant sensation.
- » Then, attune to and welcome sensations throughout the rest of your body. Feel your entire body as radiant sensation.

#### PRACTICE 2: COMPLETE BODYSENSING

- » First, affirm your intention during this practice of meditation to focus on sensation rather than thinking, just as you did in the exercise above. Then, feel the universal life force that's enlivening every atom, molecule, and cell of your body as vibrant sensation. (See my Meditation column in the June issue: No. 283, page 38.) As you do this, welcome feelings of peace, groundedness, security, ease, wholeness, and well-being. While breathing slowly through your nose, begin sensing your body, knowing that whatever you experience is perfect just as it is.
- » Be aware of sensations in your jaw, mouth, and tongue. Notice how, as one layer of sensation is experienced, it naturally dissolves and the next layer is revealed. As you welcome sensation, feel the relaxation response that deepens over time and migrates to other parts of your body.
- » Sense both ears at the same time as radiant sensation.
- » Sense your cheeks and nose and the sensation in both nostrils.
- » Give up thinking, and sense your eyes as radiant sensation.
- » Sense your forehead, cool and soft. And your scalp and the back of your head and neck.
- » Sense your shoulders, arms, hands, and fingers. Welcome both arms and hands simultaneously as radiant sensation.
- » Bring attention into your upper chest and back, and then your middle chest and back. Bring attention to your abdomen and

continued on page 28

## MEDITATION

continued from page 26

lower back. Feel your entire torso, front and back, as radiant sensation. Let go of thinking. Your entire torso is heavy and at ease.

- » Sense your pelvis, buttocks, and hips, and then your thighs, legs, feet, and toes. Welcome both legs and feet as radiant sensation. Both legs are heavy and at ease.
- » Sense the entire front of your body, and then the back. Next, sense the left side of your body, and then the right. Feel sensation inside your body and on the surface.
- » Feel yourself as spacious, open, and aware.
- » Focus on feeling your body as radiant sensation, while welcoming feelings of security, groundedness, peace, and well-being.
- » When you're ready, gently open and close your eyes several times. Move your body as you reorient yourself to your surroundings, continuing to feel your body as radiant sensation.
- » Affirm that sensations of deep relaxation, ease, peace, wholeness, and well-being are accompanying you in every moment.

» Feel grateful for the opportunity to enhance your health, resiliency, and well-being.

### Practice regularly

The more you practice bodysensing, the more you'll be able to feel deep relaxation and ease, both within yourself and during your daily interactions with others. You'll start to notice your ability to thoughtfully respond, rather than mindlessly react.

The guiding principle of meditation is: every day, a little and often. Practice bodysensing daily in small, frequent doses. Do quick scans while working at your computer, conversing, driving, or resting. You'll come to understand how sensations are always here to help you experience wholeness and well-being, no matter what comes your way. 🧘

Richard Miller, PhD, is the founding president of the Integrative Restoration Institute (*irest.us*) and co-founder of the International Association of Yoga Therapists. This is his fourth in a series of 10 columns designed to help you create a lasting and impactful meditation practice.



#### LISTEN IN

For an audio version of this bodysensing practice, visit [yogajournal.com/meditationpractice](http://yogajournal.com/meditationpractice)



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