



On Your Own Two Feet

AJAHN SUCITTO



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A GUIDE TO STANDING MEDITATION

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AMARAVATI
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DEDICATED TO GEORGE SHARP (1933-2022) CHAIR OF THE
ENGLISH SANGHA TRUST - UNDER WHOSE GUIDANCE THE
SANGHA OF VEN. AJAHN CHAH'S DISCIPLES WAS INVITED
TO BRITAIN, AND WHO UNDERTOOK THE PURCHASE OF THE
PROPERTY THAT BECAME CITTAVIVEKA MONASTERY.

Take a Stand



CAN YOU TAKE A FEW MINUTES
TO SIMPLY STAND HERE?

'Standing on your own two feet.' Think about it: stability, confidence, simple dignity. The phrase is used as a metaphor, but actually it's more than that. If you want to get a break from a scattered mind and stressful moods, it could be as easy as literally standing on your own two feet. Furthermore, if you'd like to meditate, but feel challenged by the idea of sitting still with nothing to do for more than five minutes ... some standing could be a manageable way to get started on the road to inner balance. It gets you grounded. And if you already *do* like to meditate, standing could be a way to relieve some bodily discomfort and widen your practice in unexpected but effective ways.

I'm certainly not against seated meditation – it's just that the seated form presents issues in terms of discomfort, and through its passivity. The discomfort in the knees and back for bodies that have become used to, and even shaped by, sitting in chairs commonly distracts attention from settling and clearing the mind. On the other hand, if you do get comfortable, it's easy then to drift into thoughts and daydreams. Then meditation becomes a tedious process of repeatedly trying to establish a focus. Also, with sitting, your weight rests on your bottom and your thighs – which are not designed to be sensitive to the ground, nor are they required to maintain balance.

When seated, the feet and the knees – those parts of your body that help you to feel grounded and balanced – are switched off. With standing however, the body automatically focuses on establishing groundedness and balance: your feet and legs come into alignment with the spine in a relaxed but alert way. And that of course affects your mind. It relaxes the mind while encouraging attentiveness to how the body stands as an interconnected system. Therefore, your mind comes out of its preoccupations and also isn't easily invaded by what's going on around you. Because of all this, fifteen minutes or more of standing can be a useful prelude to a period of sitting meditation, or a clarifying practice in its own right.

Because standing fast-tracks balance, connectivity and wholeness, it's useful to practise this in any 'pause moments' in the day. Waiting for someone? Cool the impatience by standing in a conscious and balanced way. Getting stressed in the office? Take a three-minute break from the desk, stand, let stress drain into the ground. Feeling nervous before addressing a group? Stand balanced sensing the soles of your feet for ten seconds. After all, you're going to stand up at some time – why not make it a useful skill?

The instructions below guide you through the process of establishing a good standing position and cultivating awareness of it. In so doing, a range of default restrictions are released and the body settles into something quiet and wonderful. This gives you the benefit of an unstricted mode of attention, and a handle on your nervous and emotional reflexes (*'saṅkhārā'* in Buddhist texts). By calming and insightfully penetrating these, standing meditation supports stability, ease – and liberation.

Establish Ground



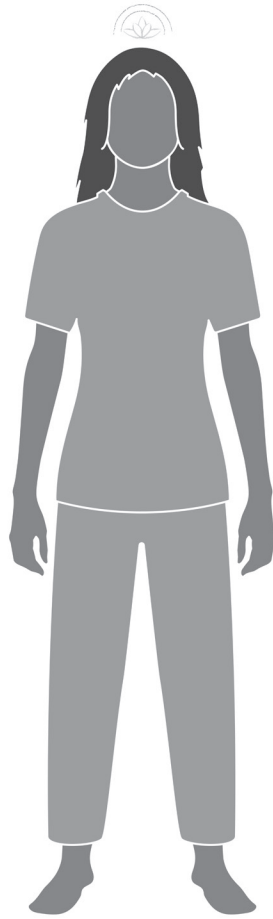
THE WORLD IS A WINDY PLACE
WE NEED STRONG ROOTS.

PRACTICE TIME: 5-10 MINUTES

With practice, standing can feel balanced, steady and comfortable; then you feel grounded but relaxed. That's essential when the winds of turmoil and trouble start blowing, but it's also a quietly pleasant way to get to know yourself in terms of body, heart and mind. This is the aim of meditation. And of all meditation postures, standing gives you the easiest way into a steady state, because it establishes a firm but easeful connection to the ground beneath you.

Here's how. Stand with the legs apart and coming straight down from the hips, so that the stance approximates to the width of your upper body – your chest, or, if you prefer a wider stand, your shoulders. The exact width isn't crucial, but the felt sense is that the stance is fully planted. Stand like a tree.

The feet are your roots. However, feet are generally encased in footwear, and accustomed to meeting a constantly flat surface. Because of this, they lose their flexibility. So your feet might benefit from a couple of minutes of flexing: standing on one leg, flex the toes of the other; standing on both feet, lift your heels off the floor and



raise your body with your toes; standing on both feet, lift your toes up and back. You might flex like this a few times. Imagine the toes spreading so that they are like monkey's feet, or like fingers. The toes should not be carrying weight; your feet are alive and aware. Then, as you feel your way into a stance, tip a little from side to side and back and forth until you find a settled and easeful balance.

Then, soften your knees and adjust your focus to include the entire vertical axis of your body, centred on an imagined line extending down your spine and into your feet. Ease your arms away from the sides on your body – just enough to slide your hand between your arm and your ribs. Keeping your eyes open or half-open, release awareness of what you don't need right now. For example, you don't need to hold on in your shoulders; relax. You don't need a face, so let that go. Let your fingers be free. Focus on that upright axis, and, as that becomes clearly felt, steadily extend your awareness out into the body around it – that soft and warm stuff. Keep going slowly with the intention to encompass any tense or uncomfortable places and let warm awareness embrace them. When you get to the edge of your body, extend awareness into the space, the open 'no-pressure' envelope immediately around you. Covering the entirety of the body in its space, linger and enjoy.

RELEASE TENSION

A balanced and aware stance helps to release tension or gripping in the upper body – particularly in the abdomen. This area of the body can be so chronically held that the clench is barely recognized; especially if we don't stand in a way that's planted on the ground. Normally people tend to fidget, or, by leaning on something, prop the tight belly and weak back on an unstable base for a few minutes – before shifting again. And of course, if you're conversing while standing, or using your phone, or watching a screen, your attention isn't even in your body. With these habits, the weight of the upper body is shunted around, and that stops the tightness becoming tense.

But then standing meditation bests that: you get support from a growing flexible firmness in your back and legs. That allows the body to release tightness and be experienced as an open and stable presence.

Please note that 'firm' doesn't mean 'stiff' or 'rigid'. When you stand with your aware feet planted on the ground, soften your knees a little, so the legs are slightly bent – just enough that the muscles in the thighs and the calves aren't locked into position. The standing then feels flexible and alert. It's as if you could jump at any moment – but you're relaxed. You might practise bending your knees a little to sense how the ankles take up a supportive role; then bob up and down a little to get familiar with the flexibility of the stance.

To extend the exercise in more detail: tune into the feel of that stance, and, as you get settled into your stance, encourage your upper body to sink just a little, so it feels like it's nestling into the cradle of the legs and the feet. It's as if your upper body is like a vase or a bag, settled into the supportive stand of the legs – which are connected to the firm base of the two feet planted on the ground. Fully rest in that support and feel a few easy cycles of breathing in and out.

Ensure that you're not sagging, or leaning the abdomen forward – so very slightly turn your tailbone under, as if between your legs. Your buttocks will relax, and your belly tuck in. The weight of the upper body will be carried by the legs rather than the lower abdomen. The arch between the legs, the perineum, should feel open.

Your thinking mind will probably chatter and want to get busy, but don't give it much attention. Instead, relax into your belly, and as you breathe out, extend your awareness to the soles of the feet. When the outbreath has completed itself, feel the inhalation come in by itself. As you sense the rising energy of your inhalation, follow the rise by extending awareness up your spine.

RELEASE TENSION: 2

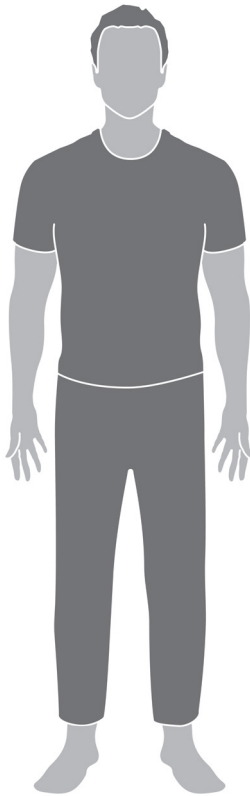
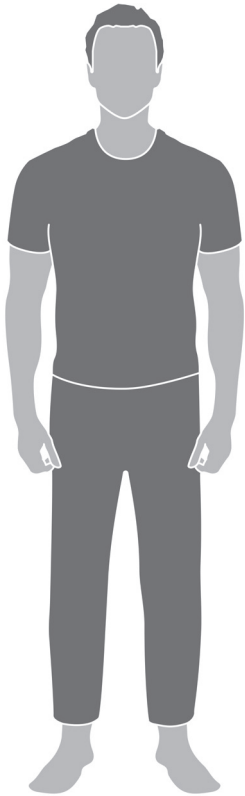
Over time, as you get to feel comfortable and natural in this position, you might like to take some further steps.

As you stand, sense the energy of the breathing process: how it arouses and brightens on the inhalation, relaxes and softens on the exhalation, opens and hovers in the pauses between the two. However, don't force attention onto the breathing; it's more a matter of receiving that rhythmic flow and noticing its effects on your body.

Notice how the torso swells and subsides – especially the front, but, to a lesser degree, the back. With your arms hanging freely by your sides and slightly away from the sides of your body, extend awareness around the sides of your torso, so that you cover the entirety of that swelling and subsiding section of your body.

Tilt the lower point of each shoulder blade into your back just a little, so that you remove the shoulder hunch. As you feel your chest open, relax your shoulder blades down your back as if you are slipping out of a coat. You'll become more aware of your spine; it will strengthen and act as the central axis for your upright stance.

Allow a few turns of the breathing cycle to fill out and integrate this upright position. Then extend your awareness down your arms and into your hands. Relax the fingers and focus on the palms, imagining them opening and listening to the space. You may keep your hands open by your sides, or bring them lightly together, with the fingertips touching for greater sensitivity and a sense of containment. You



might find that turning your hands a few degrees so that the palms are angled forwards helps to open and relax the band that runs across the top of your chest and beneath your throat.

When your hands feel open and alive, slowly draw your awareness up the spine, from the tail on up into the neck and the base of the skull, as if you are tracing the curvy line of the vertebrae with a finger. It's like the trunk of a tree, with the growing tip supporting the skull.

Get a feel for that support. Imagine that the head is settling on top of that spinal axis like a ball resting on a fountain of water. While attuned to the rhythmic flow of breathing, relax the neck muscles, the jaw, the forehead, temples and eye-sockets. Keeping your eyes open or half-open (releasing tension might make you feel a bit dizzy at first), let the entire ball of the head rest on that aware spine so that the muscles in your neck and face can ease up.

Let some breathing pass through as your body adjusts to this change and begins to enjoy it. Feel the firmness of your spinal axis and extend awareness down from the base of the skull down to the tail bone. It may not be complete; there may be dull patches or blocks in that line. However rather like a river clearing its blockages, this upright axis will clear itself over time as awareness spreads and is sustained. So, steadily extend your awareness until it's like an envelope covering your entire body in all directions.

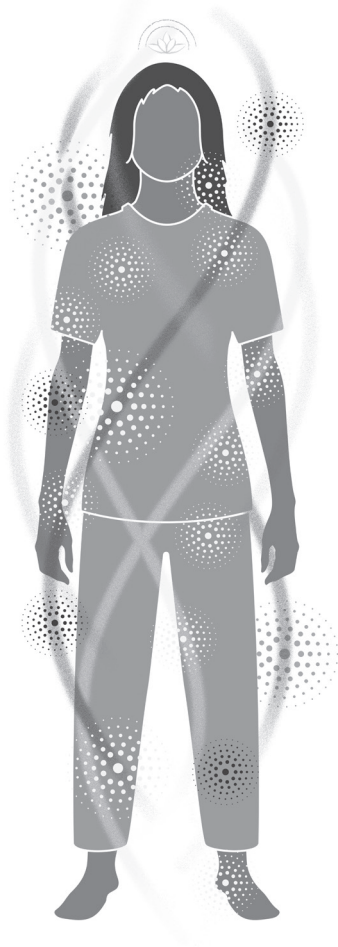
Linger in that, letting the breathing flow through the body in its envelope of space. If your body starts to tense up, bob up and down slightly or lightly swing from side to side. Otherwise, as you feel more and more stable, acknowledge and let go of discursive thought and any emotional turbulence.

BATHING IN ENERGY

To encourage deeper refreshment, sweep your awareness from the crown of your head downwards – as if you’re pouring oil, or something warm and fluid, over your head and letting it run down and over your entire body. Feel the softness of the tissues at the front relaxing; relax down your arms and into the palms of your hands.

If you’re feeling unsteady, it’s good to put more emphasis on the back, and sweep down from your shoulders into the soles of the feet. If you’re feeling too tight, bend the knees a little and encourage the abdomen to loosen and be held by the supple legs.

As the entire body consequently wakes up to itself, there is a sense of enjoyment. Simple, calm pleasure. Get used to that; what is your body now?



*Balance:
Upright Body, Upright Mind*



SETTING YOUR BODY STRAIGHT HELPS
TO SET YOUR MIND STRAIGHT.

PRACTICE TIME: 10 -20 MINUTES

In meditation, we can discover a medium in our body that is often neglected in daily life. This is the medium of energy – by which I mean vitality rather than speed or muscular strength. This vitality is natural to a clean nervous system. It is essential for metabolism and health, and it also affects our emotions – and through that, the impulses and the moods that come into play. It’s essential to understand that the body and heart are connected through energy: if the body is jittery, tense or stagnant, that affects how we feel, think and act.

By ‘heart’ I mean that quality of awareness that feels hurt and joy, bitterness, guilt and love. In meditation, we tune into it through directing our minds towards receptivity. This meditative attention or ‘awareness’ is like listening – with the occasional mental reminder to keep it on track.

When you take up a comfortable standing position, the posture provides a form within which bodily energies can unwind, relax and brighten. This doesn’t depend on a lot of mental activity: when there’s awareness, the body itself negotiates many of the finer points



of balance, brightening and release. Awareness lets the body's own intelligence read the signs of pressure or tightness, numbness or strain in the nervous system and adjust accordingly – if the thinking mind doesn't impatiently overrule it or drift off to find something more stimulating.

Body intelligence? The most obvious example of this is the ability to find and sustain balance when standing or walking. If you're aware in terms of body, when you stand you don't clench or waver. You don't stomp or scurry when you walk. The body moderates its energy to suit. Your thinking mind couldn't figure that out – in fact, it would probably have difficulty getting food into your mouth. Thank goodness for a body! So just consider: if you can let your body do the breathing – breathing meditation will be a lot less stressful.

The mind should be engaged, interested and receptive – while refraining from imperatives or judgments. This can be achieved through softening the focus – that is to get less intense about physical points and be more attuned to a steady and heartfelt awareness. Relying on mental effort alone produces a negative result – because that overrides the intelligences of body and heart. In fact, imbalance, tension and constriction in the body are largely due to unskilful mental energy. Non-stop urgency and stress leave their effects in the body's nervous system; as do their numbing antidotes

– escapist entertainment, or passive immersion in whatever a screen is presenting. There’s also the imbalance that comes around because of operating only one part of the body while the rest is left inert. For example, sitting for hours in a chair switches off the flow of energy in the legs and back. Instead, energy gathers and intensifies in the head, neck and shoulders. The result is that breathing is limited, and the coordinated flow of energy through the body is blocked.

Another negative bodily condition occurs through operating in artificial systems’ time rather than in natural embodied time. In the automated world in which we live, energy has to follow clock time; so it jumps and surges towards notional ends – then is suddenly arrested by the sound of a buzzer or the flash of a light. If we don’t find the time to return to a grounded and embodied state, the nervous system gets set to a hasty ‘on-off’ way of life. So we lose touch with the regulating effect of breathing, and how that helps the body to naturally relax and refresh.

In fact, when the mind gets tangled up by stress, the stressed aspects of the nervous system take over, with panicky reflexes or numbness affecting the way we breathe. This makes it difficult to feel the breathing in a comfortable way. Consequently, the mind loses the upright and open basis that keeps it well-oriented and clear. So it loses heart, and yet keeps on running in a stressed or drained

condition. And if you even *try* to meditate from that basis, you have to meet a tangled energy with an imbalanced mind that's not in touch with the body. Not good. So make a note: the energy of emotional/mental activity is based in the body. Get the body into balance first.

Standing, because it gets you grounded without requiring a high degree of focus, offers easy access to the embodied state in which bodily intelligence comes to the fore. With this, your body's energies return to the more natural flow, and that flow suffuses the fascia tissues that wrap around and connect all parts of the body. The body wakes up to being interconnected and balanced.

This interconnected balance is more than anatomical, it is neurological – and becomes psychological. Because we have a place to stand, we don't have to keep creating one via opinions and territory and beliefs. Instead, we gain heart. And that heart-based sensitivity aligns the mind to ethical integrity, goodwill and ease.

In this way, the upright, open and stable body supports an upright, open and stable mind. Both are necessary and one supports the other. An upright mind is balanced, receptive to self and others and non-obsessive; it is a beautiful flowering of human potential. That's what living in balance means.

But this is not about holding balance as an idea in your head. Neither can you be only half-balanced, or left-side balanced; it has

to be the whole thing. So balance brings wholeness, and wholeness helps the entire body-mind system to integrate. However, put aside imperatives and deadlines: in cultivating balance, awareness has to spread through the whole form naturally, at its own pace. Practising like this encourages patience and harmony.

BALANCE AND WHOLENESS

You may experience imbalance in terms of the left and right sides of your body. One side may have a lot of energy running through it, and the other side considerably less. The contemplative response to this is to first span the entire width of your body with awareness, and holding that wide frame, attune to the breathing.

This step alone may allow the breath-energy to suffuse the entirety and restore balance. A further step would be to first discern the furthest edge of the strong energy – that is, if you're strong in the right, how far does that energized area extend? What is its edge? And beyond that edge how is the body? Then: can you detect the left side? Try sweeping your attention from the right side slowly towards the left, expanding your awareness as you cover the edge. Repeat this exercise carefully several times. Then connect

the exhalation with this movement of attention: it's as if you are breathing across your body. Practise also focusing on the left side, and, as you breathe in, extending your awareness to the right.

As you deepen the balance and connectivity of your body, the energy that flows along with breathing can spread through the entire bodily form. You can practise this sweeping through any isolated or restricted areas of your body – such as the throat or belly. Remember: don't demand anything to open or be other than it is; just maintain connective and empathic awareness. If there is empathy rather than a directive, awareness will meet the energy in an area of the body. Widening and softening will allow discordant energies to release into the wide field of the whole body in their own time.

As this occurs, the body gets to feel like a single homogenous form that is both soft and strong. No single part is carrying another part; nor are we unconsciously carrying our body around in a state of distracted stress. So as the body comes into unity, be receptive to that and let it moderate your attitudes and intentions. Through attunement to the aware and connected state, ease and goodwill come to the fore. Through accessing energies, awareness can meet, steady and release bodily or emotional conflict, and support positive qualities of body, heart and mind.

BALANCE THE HEAD

The most highly-energized part of our head is obviously the face. As we express ourselves through the face, there is generally a lot of energy there which keeps us thinking, even when it's not necessary to do so. Much of the time it's as if the head is separate from, and even oblivious to, the rest of the body.

Cultivating awareness of the head as an entirety and connecting it to the rest of the body will allow energy to unbind from the head, giving rise to a calmer, lighter sense, in which thinking is minimal.

In **Establish Ground**, I mentioned settling the head on the spine as if it were a ball resting on a fountain of water, in order to help the muscles of the neck and head to relax. Following on from this, soften around the eyes, forehead and jaw and smooth your awareness repeatedly around lines of restriction until the energies of the head flow easily into the rest of the body.

You can take this a step further by giving attention to the breath as it rises up the throat and into the back of the mouth. As you detect the flow of the breath, settle your attention on the area where the mouth and nasal passages meet, the 'swallow' zone above the back of the tongue. (It's not a point, so you don't have to be too precise.)

Relax your face, including the nostrils, and sense the air being lightly pulled through the nasal cavities and brushing that zone. With each inhalation, feel the air being drawn from the top of the nose (behind the bridge) and back to the top of the throat. This will help to relax the face muscles.

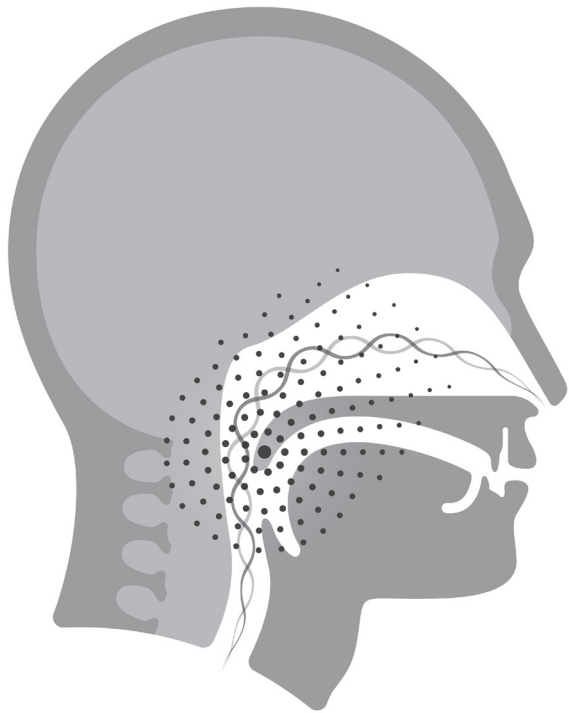
When that flow of energy feels unrestricted, widen your awareness of the entire interior of the head (sinuses, eye sockets, nasal chambers, inner ear and temple) to allow the energy to gradually suffuse the head. This will help to open the sinuses. Finally, you may also be able to sense the notch between the top neck bone and the cranium.

Imagine all these points to be holes through which breath energy can pass.

Don't force your breathing or increase its rate: in fact, if the inhalations and exhalations can be allowed to gradually drop to about five seconds each, the energy of the breathing will be more collected and brighter.

This exercise will reduce pressure in the head, clear its interconnected cavities, and calm the mind.

You can then extend awareness down through the throat and around the neck to release any other imbalance.



STRENGTHENING PURPOSE

Standing is a good form within which you can access and firm up your values, ethical orientation and aspirations. When you feel composed and steady, your energy is collected. With your heart and mind connected to that, silently bring to mind a short phrase that encompasses a value. Take harmlessness for example: *‘I undertake to avoid damaging creatures, human or otherwise - including myself.’* Resonate that with your heart until you get the sense of the patient strength that can restrain the impulse to lash out, seek revenge, or get rid of creatures and people you dislike. Get a feel for the energy of non-harming. As its meaning gets embodied and more deeply felt, linger in that felt sense; you can even visualize it: heart-energy has a real and palpable quality. Over time, if you give mindful attention to this felt quality of harmlessness, it gives you orientation, meaning and purpose. You don’t have to *achieve* it; it settles in through lingering and feeling, and it supports you. In this way, you can determine qualities such as honesty and patience – requisites for a healthy life. Using embodied energy backs up and fortifies your aspirations, so you can aspire, practise – and when life throws you off course, return, take a stand and come into balance again.

Vitality



A LIVING BODY FEELS ALIVE;
GET INTERESTED IN THAT.

PRACTICE TIME: 15-20 MINUTES

If you've got this far, and feel that a few minutes of standing has good effects, you can move on to applying conscious intention. In this practice, intention isn't about making anything happen, it's about taking an interest. Other mental habits – such as fixing problems, pushing difficulties away or getting busy with something else – tend to override the intelligences of body and heart and sap their vitality. The practice of standing however, with focus and attitude coming from the heart, will undo these driven energies and restore vitality. This entails sympathetic interest, rather than a passive onlooking, or a 'fix-it' mentality. The intention has to be of kindly receptivity; open-hearted and with no fixed idea of what should happen and when. In this state, the body's energies will be free to adjust themselves; the mind just has to invite, inquire – and listen.

As I mentioned before, the entire body beneath the skin is covered by a membrane of connective tissue through which the intelligence of the autonomic nervous system activates the reflexes of the body. All this is bound up with the energies of the mind and heart:

in this interconnected system, vitality or tension in any part has an effect on the whole. Accordingly, it is essential that awareness is based in the heart-quality of sympathy in order to tune in to the body's intelligence. This will encourage energy to spread through the body in a comfortable way. Properly cultivated, energy can dissolve the felt boundaries between areas of your body, so that overactive, stressed or numb areas benefit from the vitality of the system as a whole. Then your operating system, the thinking mind, gets moderated and refreshed.

LOCATE, AFFIRM, APPRECIATE

To facilitate this, I'll point to how a body is felt. We can experience hard features (such as bones), soft features (relaxed muscle and flesh) and open features (passages such as the throat, but also the palms of the hands). There is also a background vitality that warms the soft areas and passes through open passages. Although we don't feel always give it much attention, this vitality is an energy that feeds the entire system.

The practice is to bring awareness to all these features; locating, affirming and appreciating the particular qualities that the hard, the soft, the open and the vital bring to mind.

When you have established your basic stance, return again to the feet. Made alert by the standing position, the feet offer an opening into the energy system of the entire body. Each foot is an internally organized area of contrasting hard/supportive and soft/receptive zones. There is also an open zone – the under-arch of the foot – that can get overlooked. Awareness needs to cover these equally.

Begin with locating and affirming and appreciating the hard zones of the feet. Check that you're standing in a way whereby the pressure on the weight-bearing zones of the heels and the balls of the feet feels evenly distributed. Keep the weight off your toes; they negotiate the balance of the foot as a whole and should be flexible. Affirm the support of the hard areas of the feet, and, as they come to the fore of your attention, appreciate how they're carrying your entire body. Encourage it to rest on them.

Widen your awareness to include the toes and the softer areas of the feet with the understanding that their function is to be awake to any imbalance and firm up, relax or flex in order to incline your weight to the hard areas. The soft zones are the negotiators, and, as they wake up, there is an increase in vitality. This is because although the soft tissues lose sensitivity and vitality if they carry weight or are compressed (as, in shoes, they may be), if they are restored to their true function, they come alive.



Then locate the under-arch – the zone that doesn't touch the ground but is the centre of each foot's sensitivity. The under-arch is receptive, like the palm of the hand. Its function is to receive energy and offer passage. This open zone will support the flow of energy through your feet and into your legs. Therefore, as you focus on that open zone, affirm and appreciate its function; then widen your awareness to include the rest of the foot. You could imagine your feet are listening to the Earth.

When you place and focus awareness, mindfulness is established. And when you bring mindfulness to the open state of the soles of the feet, there is a subtle tingle. Listen to that; it's the energy within that open state. So as you get a feel for that vitality within the open balanced state, place your mindfulness on it. Awareness will likewise become more open and receptive.

Vitality is generally detected in terms of an area feeling more present, or more alive; it may be tingling or warm or fluid. As you sense any of those signs occurring in your feet, slowly extend your awareness through the ankles and on up through the legs. You'll sense that a receptive energy follows it. In this way, places that are tight gradually relax, and points that feel tired receive energy from an adjacent zone or area. Give attention in particular to the joints – which act like

intersections and can be blocked, strained or open. Remember that the most important aspect of a joint is its space. Imagine if all of the joints between the toes and the head could feel open, how light and balanced the body would feel!

When your knees come into range, feel into any tension or stress there. Pause and listen. Include the flexing and soft supportive tissues behind each knee, and connect them to the soft zone of the inner calf and thigh. Be prepared to release the knees a little, or slightly adjust your posture if doing so gives you a clearer feeling for these zones. Lengthening the focus to include the inner sides of the legs brings more of the soft tissues into play, and that helps to de-stress the knee joint. Adjusting the stance so that your knee-caps are positioned over the centre of each foot will give them more support from the harder outer sides of the legs. The knees will open a little; this allows more energy to flow through, and this strengthens the knees.

In the upper legs, you can detect the soft and sensitive zone of the inner thigh, and the tougher and more resilient zone of the outer thigh. The outer thigh acts as the hard support, and if it is affirmed, it allows the inner thigh to relax and open. After a while you may sense the open vibrant quality of the upper legs.

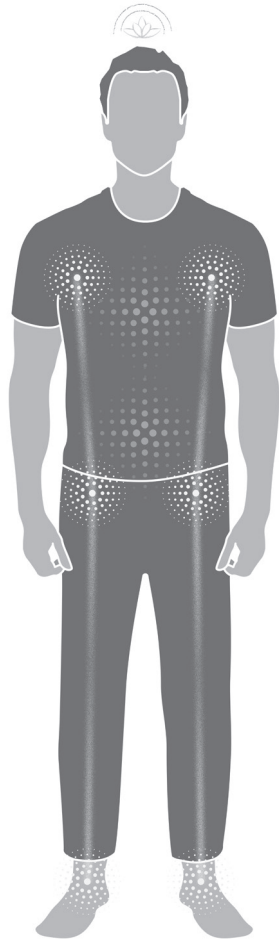
If you find blockages or resistances, pause and withdraw your awareness to the last open and steady place and extend again from there.

Where the leg joins the trunk and the hip, you're connecting to the pelvic structure. This links the upper body to the supportive legs and enables both uprightness and mobility. Get a feel for the strength of that bony structure.

As you give attention to the upper leg/lower abdominal intersection, sense the long grooves between each upper leg and the abdomen. Here many muscles and tissues connect the lower with the upper body; it's also a key intersection for energy channels. Get interested in those grooves and imagine each one opening, about half-way down the groove. Placing your attention on these two points, spread awareness across the entire zone in between them – the lower abdomen and upper inner thigh. Linger as before to allow the energy to slowly suffuse.

Fully sensing the supportive cradle of the legs, pelvis and lower spine allows the soft abdomen to settle and relax. As it does so, the energy of the out-breath can move through the legs. Great composure and firmness will arise.

Within that area as an entirety, explore the qualities of the abdomen. It is quite fluid, swelling and subsiding upwards, downwards,



forwards and behind. As this flexing 'ball' of the abdomen is held in open awareness, it too feels full and rich with energy. Can you feel the effects, slight pressures and releases, in directions other than forwards and upwards? Let the energy of breathing move down through the arch between the legs to deepen the connection to the ground. Notice any shifts in terms of mind-state or mood. Resonate some ease.

The midriff, the area above the navel and beneath the ribs, is a flexible area. It gets hardened by tension, and is made easeful and relaxed by connecting it to the weight-bearing spine. So begin by focusing on the vertebrae of this section of your body. Let the muscles adjust so that all weight is taken off your abdomen and given to the spine to transfer down to the ground. When the soft becomes soft, it allows openness, and breathing easily flows through and brings vitality up into the chest.

Tension in this area may be on account of locked-in willpower, either related to work, or to the personal insecurity that bids us to hold ourselves together. In standing, we're cultivating the balanced wholeness that will do the holding for us – without stress.

As you come into the chest, the quality of goodwill is absolutely necessary because the upper body knows a lot about defence from the

sign of ill-will – actual or potential – in the world around it. This sense gives rise to shielding; even making sure one’s appearance is ‘correct’ may be a sign of the potential for other people’s ill-will. So, it’s likely that there will be a degree of holding and tension present, and the chest may be unconsciously closed.

First affirm a full connection to the spine, and via that axis to the pelvis, legs and ground. This awakens the sign of ‘protected’. Linger in that. Feel the soft flexing of the belly that connects to the chest. Reflect that the space immediately in front of you right now is non-intrusive, non-obstructive and receptive. Behind you, it’s the same: safe, warm, and free. Resonate this theme time and time again until the body senses it. Patience is needed; undoing signs and patterns that have been embedded for decades may take some time.

As the chest connects to the spine, the abdomen, and the space around it, it’s flexible like a balloon, slowly opening in all directions. Can you feel that in your back, and in the sides of your body? if so, breath-energy will flow through the natural openness of this area.

Then bring your awareness into your upper chest – the band that runs from the tops of the arms laterally and crosses the collarbones and the throat notch. Locate and affirm the small cavities at the edge of

the chest where it connects to the arm. They're similar to the leg/abdomen grooves. As your mindfulness covers the entirety of that band – the bony boundaries, the soft flexible tissues and the open cavities – imagine these cavities opening. Again, this is an area where blocked emotions may be stored in the body's nervous system, so keep mindfulness extended to include the frame of the body, and let the breathing move through that to integrate the more open state.

In time, you can also extend mindfulness down into the hands. Hard bones, soft surfaces. By affirming the brace of the hand bones, relax the fingers. The palms will open. Then widen awareness to sense the open channel between the palms and the chest and throat.

In time you can move on to this neck-throat region. Supported by the upper spine, and mediated by soft muscles, the throat's natural function is to allow passage. So spread mindfulness around, and then inside, the throat, noticing any changes of mood. Linger to allow feelings to arise and settle.

As you continue moving up the throat, you enter the head internally from below in accordance with the support of the spine and the energy of the breathing. If you settle your attention in the zone where the nasal cavities and the mouth meet, your awareness doesn't go streaming out through the eyes into the thousand and

one details of the sensory world out there. Instead, you collect it where it can do you the most good. Here it can rest on the breathing as that energy suffuses the entire head. Support this by relaxing your nostrils, eyes, forehead and temples. You may sense a range of energies in this highly sensitive area; stay with the breathing to moderate these. As things settle and integrate, extend awareness into the sinuses, and throughout the head. Open from within the head into the space around it.

FULLY OCCUPY YOUR SPACE

In essence, we train to be supported by the hard structures of the body, mediated by the soft, and refreshed by the ensuing vitality that flows through the open channels. Then our heart and mind are fed with energy and awareness, rather than pushed by willpower and impulses.

Of course, psychological pressure, such as impatience, boredom or trying to make something happen, may well arise – but note any of these in terms of shifts of energy. Instead of following these habits, or reacting to them, steadily widen awareness over the entire body. In this way the energy is noted and allowed to unwind within that wider field. Through mindfully and patiently meeting it, the energy of

our ups and downs and stuck places transforms into clean embodied vitality, an energy that supports rather than distorts.

Attune to the signs of the process as it develops over time. One of the qualities that arises is the sense of strengthening. This strengthening is not hard; it is a sense of quiet, unshakable presence. It's accompanied by openness. Your back becomes a presence that stands with you like a guardian.

You also learn to appreciate open space. It's not a numb nothing. It can be felt as the absence of pressure or withdrawal or holding on; this spaciousness is alive with freedom and potential for movement. Practise asking yourself, *'How tall does this body want to be? How wide?'* You may be surprised to find that your body then more fully occupies its space, or even opens out of an unacknowledged contracted state. What a gift! So, take your time then to check out the space around – above, behind in front – any resistance there? As you steadily spread awareness over the contours and surfaces of the body, acknowledge and remind it *'Here I am free from intrusion, free from obstruction, open, safe.'*

That may be a good sign to linger on and then take into the seated position.

Open Stability



YOU DON'T NEED POWER TO FEEL STRONG.
THAT WHICH IS TRULY UNSHAKEABLE
SUSTAINS ITSELF BY LETTING GO.

PRACTICE TIME: TWENTY MINUTES (OR MORE)

An important theme in mind cultivation and in life in general, is ease, the relief from stress. By ‘stress’, I mean the scenario whereby emotions and mind-states are agitating, constricting and weighing down on you. You feel overwhelmed. Heart and mind consequently harden and struggle to overcome the pressure, or seek a way out through distraction. Reactivity sets in – it’s natural: when you lose stability or get overwhelmed, reactivity happens. And if you follow your reactions, they can set a cascade of turbulent effects in motion; effects that come back on you and weigh you down with regret. We can of course suppress our reactions, but that increases emotional turmoil and its intensity. And if there’s no resolution to the inner conflict, this puts a strain on both heart and mind. Too much of that, and at some point, we collapse. We might feel stuck and hopeless, and then distract into entertainment, bingeing, and so on. This can get addictive: TV, social media, food, computer games, alcohol, etc., etc. start pulling the strings. This can get pretty disheartening.

As an added reflection: doesn't the pattern of the pressure, the reaction, the escapism and the collapse feel familiar? Feels like 'me', right? Yes, the process becomes established and internalized – and whatever becomes established and internalized gets programmed as 'me', 'my self'. So our identity begins to depend on it; we get to feel disoriented and restless without our familiar compulsions. And those reactions and reflexes jump in when a wave of depression or anxiety or some other challenging emotion starts welling up. These reactions form a coping strategy against a pressure that threatens to overwhelm the mind. It may be scary to think of not having one. So how then does this weight of stress get released, without numbing out or going weird?

SIDE-STEP THE TOPIC, MEET ITS ENERGY

Let's go into that slowly. First of all, we do need to cultivate a release of pressure and of the destabilizing emotions that bring it around. A sane and healthy life depends on it. And in meditation, this release comes through skilful means, rather than through escapism. It comes through cultivating clear embodiment and an empathic heart. Through these there arises a state that I'll call 'open stability.'

The first point is to **stabilize**; to experience the stability that doesn't get overwhelmed. You can touch into that by standing and feeling grounded. This allows certain 'signs' to arise (as I'll explain later): these are direct embodied experiences that you can turn to when life feels disorienting and tense.

The second point is to **refer to the energy** of the current of thought or emotion. Find that sense of push or weight or agitation, rather than refer to the story and images of self and other that it carries. For example, review a few simple occurrences of psychological pressure: such as the experience of having so much to do; or of being confronted with difficult people who you have to deal with; or of being late. The first step is to not go into the narrative but instead to get the simple felt sense that sums it up – in this case 'pressure'. Although the energy feels uncomfortable, if you sustain mindfulness of the standing form with a willingness to be present with what arises, that basic sympathy will open the door for the energy and its accompanying emotion to change.

Put a pause on reactions such as getting busy or running away, and instead feel the embodied energy of that psychological pressure.

There may be tightening around the eyes and forehead, a buzzy head, closure in the chest, gripping in the abdomen, and tension in the

hands and feet. But for a moment, drop the topic and the reactions as to who and why and how to get over it – and recognize how the body best receives pressure. It does so through standing; with this, you take the pressure off your upper body by letting it descend to the soles of the feet. So, sense the soles of your feet, and, in the same way as you would open the palm of a hand, relax in the zone of contact with the ground. Let the ground take the pressure; and let your upright body feel that support. As it does so, the pressure begins to release from your heart: that's the sign of *ground*.

The third point is **balance**. As you sense some release in pressure, and feel more confident, give attention to a gradual refinement of balance – through softening the knees, loosening in the belly, and relaxing in the head so that it is resting poised on the neck. With good balance you let the bones carry the weight, rather than the muscles or the mind. Rather than holding on with willpower, or pushing back, you release the pressure with your body and the sign, the felt sense, of *spaciousness* arises.

As your stability is established, you'll be more aware of another sign, that of *rhythm* – as it manifests in the rhythmic quality of the body's breathing. Breathing in, there is a relaxed expansion that relieves any tightness or urgency. Breathing out, the stress

gently discharges. There is also an important restful pause between inbreaths and outbreaths. So, breathing moves through these four phases – inhalation and brightening; pausing and opening; exhalation and relaxing; pausing and letting go. Acknowledge that when you're not pushing, stagnant or rigid, breathing flows in accord with the natural rhythm of embodiment. Appreciate it. This is not a rhythm that you can force, but it clears the tangles and stagnation in the autonomic nervous system.

As you sense a degree of this clearance and ease, bring your entire body into an attunement to it. Sense the openness in the soles of the feet and the palms of the hands; relax in the face. Linger in that openness. Then when the heart feels ready, spread the sense of openness through the body. As the body unlocks, it breathes easily and in a refreshing way. Body and heart feel light but stable. Linger in that. This is open stability.

With the consequent abating of the energy of an afflictive mood, you can review the situation that triggered it without getting into an emotional tangle.

As you gain familiarity with this, you can deal with other felt senses, such as 'jangled' or 'uncertain' (among others). Note what it's like if you recall and stand with 'trusted', or another stabilizing sign.

When things seem settled, it's good to linger in that open stability, savouring the quality of your awareness until you choose to sit quietly or move.

RESET YOUR INTIMATE ENVIRONMENT

This is a synopsis of how the process goes. It is of course simplistic, as the restrictions that bind the heart are complex, chronic and a matter of reflex. No one decides to create them, so no one can release or let go of them. But embodied awareness can. This is because these reflexes, reactions and strategies get established not by a person but by an environment; that is, by the messages (or interpretations) of the social environment that get printed on your reflexive nervous system. This 'intimate environment' isn't the same as the physical or sensorial environment that the body is standing, walking or sitting in right now. It is an environment that is woven from the signs of welcome or inadequacy (etc.) that one has received and integrated. As you operate in accord with that environment in terms of how you perceive yourself and others, your personal world of interests, phobias, friends and habits gets formed.

You can't reason with your intimate environment. Clearing and resetting it hinges upon the natural ability of the aware heart to pick

up and mirror a balanced embodied state. So, begin by establishing the firm but relaxed uprightiness of the entire body, and linger in that until the heart picks that up. Make it a base for mindfulness. Then acknowledge the embodied sense of the energy of any mood that arises. Soften the attitude, widen awareness to include the entire form, and let the energy unwind through the practice I've outlined.

We use these embodied exercises to establish signs that can reset your intimate environment to one of open stability. Note that you can't directly create them, the three signs – of **ground**, **spaciousness**, and **rhythm** – depend on the relaxation of the will. So, your will can't access them, but your body can. This is significant because the personal will is generally what we use, but by its nature it's a form that is restricted to short-term and individual goals and these are established by how you read the situation you're in. And that reading is moderated by your intimate environment.

That environment can't integrate into something larger without opening out of personal will and receiving life in an open but steady way. But when you access groundedness and spaciousness, the rhythm of life breathes through you naturally – and you're part of something boundless and clear. You're open, and present; available,

but not compelled to make things go one way or another. Instead your actions are guided by wisdom.

Sounds like a lot? Yes, but it's the wholeness of embodied awareness that does the work. Much of your personal doing has to step back; as you'll probably recognize, it's part of the problem.

WALK IN OPENNESS

Standing naturally opens into walking, so after twenty minutes or so, you might like to take the essence of this exercise into a moving form. For this, keep centered on the spinal axis while allowing your awareness to extend through your body and meet the space that you're walking through. Whatever colours, shapes or movements arise in that space, stay centred. Rather like a waiter moving through the crowded tables of a restaurant while carrying a stack of dishes, one notices what's going on, but doesn't get involved in it. Detect such signs as 'delight', 'nervous' or 'get busy' that may arise and release them by referring to the embodied signs: groundedness, spaciousness and rhythm.

Harmony



WHEN THERE'S HARMONY,
ENERGY FEELS VIBRANT BUT DOESN'T RUN OUT.
IT'S LIKE STILLNESS FLOWING.

PRACTICE TIME: THIRTY MINUTES (OR MORE)

Harmony is a guiding principle and aim in meditation. It comes to the fore through the practice of mindfulness, a dispassionate attention that bears a sensation or a mind-state in mind in order to let it arise and pass. In the case of mind-states, this helps them to release rather than get stuck and obsessive. How? Well, if mindfulness is immersed in the body, the body comes into harmony; then the body's energy will begin to work on the energy underpinning the mental state, and cause it to ease or brighten and settle. In this way, a harmonious body brings around a harmonious mind, and as the energies of body and mind meet and merge, *samādhi* – 'unification', or 'meditative concentration' – occurs. The effect is both nourishing and clarifying.

How do we work on harmony? Often, we live in a state of disharmony – with our bodies, with other people, and, as is painfully evident, with the rest of planetary life. As this discord runs through their lives, people become overwhelmed with anxiety, depression and other afflictive emotions. As without, so within. So in this guide, I'm addressing the complex topic at its root – in the intimate domain of embodied presence. Here we realize that harmony doesn't come around through the rule of law, but through undoing afflictive

emotional reactions and psychological reflexes, such as frustration, controlling, craving and anxiety. It's this undoing that brings harmony: rather than impose an ideal, we learn to find peace through undoing any imbalance in terms of our own body and mind.

ELEMENTS

You can follow a fine-detailed way into this state of harmony by referring to very basic qualities that determine how things, internal and external, appear. They're called 'elements' (*dhātu*). There are four primary elements and two secondary or mediating elements.

The primary elements are **earth**, **water**, **fire** and **air**. Earth refers to anything that feels solid, holds a form, is static and resists pressure. Water is the element that is experienced as fluid, and changeable, has no fixed boundaries, and merges with whatever it contacts. It dissolves differences. Fire is the quality of heat and vitality; it lights things up. Air is the element associated with movement; it penetrates and pushes. You can experience these qualities in the land, rivers, sunlight and wind. And you can also experience these in the firmness, fluidity, vitality and breathing of your body.

At a psychological level, we have the same qualities: we can be firm, flexible, bright, and breezy. Ideally, these elements balance each

other; then the result is harmony. On the other hand, when harmony is lost, our firm earth gets rigid, or we get watery and indecisive, hot-headed, or blustery. In this case, one element dominates and isn't balanced by the other three. Air loses contact with earth and we get blown away. The fire of our enthusiasm isn't moderated by the cool water of including the whole picture (and other people), and so on. Worse still, personality habits develop around that imbalance: we may err towards being fiery and righteous, or stodgy and inflexible. You might know people in whom the water element is so dominant that decision-making is difficult; and there are those who blow this way and that and never settle. A balanced person, however, isn't distinctly any of these; in them, the elements blend into unity.

As I've suggested, in terms of energy, body, heart and mind are not separate: a fiery heart inflames the body; a depressed mental state muddies and constricts bodily energy. But when the elements are in balance, they correct these conditions. Accordingly, in standing meditation we detect and work on these elements, through mediating them in the presence of the secondary elements of **space** and **consciousness**.

I've mentioned space before; it's a quality that, although essential, is easily overlooked. When we are fully aware of it, it's the openness

that allows experience. Space reduces pressure and allows stuck energy to settle and flow. If we detect this open absence of pressure and extend awareness from it to any other element, space moderates the imbalance that makes earth rigid, water abysmal, fire blazing and air restless. When this effect is felt and transfers to the heart, then the reflexes of defensiveness, apathy, aggression/frustration and agitation are transmuted into more balanced emotional forms.

Consciousness is equally crucial. In this respect, ‘consciousness’ is the location of awareness at any given moment. By default, it locates awareness within a field of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and ideas, with its mental aspect stitching the varying sense-impressions together to form a known object. Obviously seeing an apple is nothing like tasting an apple (and perhaps not quite as we imagine it would be), but mental consciousness spreads over and combines these impressions to make up the knowable ‘apple’, then taps the ‘agreeable/disagreeable’ button on the heart. Thus aroused, heart-energy shifts, recoils or (rarely) suffuses awareness – and we experience an apple that we like the look of, and eat (or not)*. Although there are plenty of instances when we get deceived by appearance, that’s how it goes: trial and error and a learning curve.

* The only feeling that occurs independent of this mental activity is body-based, although the mind generally adds a mental feeling to that too.

Mental consciousness can be trained to reflect on this process of feeling and response. Its reflective function doesn't add any feeling or response, but instead allows the heart to open, feel how it's being affected and motivate a change. This means that the heart learns to be more careful about what to grab – and, best of all, to not grab. Reflecting on this process, we notice the energies that arise with feeling and impulse; notice that these energies don't jump the same way on a regular basis and that the feeling loses its lustre. Then we can turn the reflective mind back on the heart with some inquiry: *How does feeling happen? How much satisfaction is there in this? What do I really need?*

This kind of inquiry offers a deep learning. It is the heart's impulses that direct the mind and they aim for whatever we find interesting, important or annoying. Then as the heart-energy shifts, phenomena get labelled and internalized. That is, a micro-memory, image or impression of the phenomenon is retained. We then bear that agreeable or disagreeable impression in mind, and refer to it to decide how to act.

Unfortunately, the heart is not always very wise – it doesn't notice that the agreeable or disagreeable feeling isn't really about what's 'out there', but is bound up with the shift of its energies and by the impressions it consequently retains. Through not realizing this, heart-

impressions of the world get made into a fixed reality. Then passions, phobias, and habits take over – along with blurring and arousal, and reactions such as grabbing, resisting, or rushing on to something else.

In meditation then, we put a pause on this process and reset mental consciousness to attend to the impressions that strike the heart in terms of embodied elements. The heart can feel lit up and on fire, or flattened like a rock. These elemental impressions can be managed by the stable energy of the body – instead of through the diverse impressions and reactions of the senses. Carried through with empathy and patience, this practice attunes the heart to stable embodied energy. And the heart finds that the harmony that ensues is more agreeable than the stimulation of sense-contact. Consciousness can then rest as a more balanced, calm awareness. This awareness is reflective: it directly knows and contemplates impulsive habits rather than reacts to them.

Direct knowing is non-conceptual; it's like a mirror that can reflect on experience rather than comment on it. It's particularly useful to turn it towards the body's reflexes, because the problem of afflictive emotions is based at that reflexive level. You can't just decide to not get annoyed. You can't relinquish depression through an act of the will. Phobias and traumas are beyond the reach of words. But through accessing the non-rational embodied reflexes, the

energies that support these states and more can be detected, soothed and find release.

Direct knowing presents our thoughts, emotions and reflexes as conditions rather than as ‘me’ and ‘mine’. It also shifts our awareness of being embodied from that of something encased in flesh and bones to one of a subtle flow of energies.

SUPPORTING HARMONY

Here are some practical points to bear in mind:

- 1** Settle and detect. Come into your body and detect the elements. This may be all that’s needed to stabilize and clarify the receptive heart. But make sure that you cover the entire body.
- 2** Balance and heal. Where you find irregularity or imbalance – say an area feels overactive or numb or cut off – cover it with mindful awareness and sense the mental tone in elemental terms. With your awareness riding on the breathing, attend that area with goodwill and interest. Widen the focus to contact a nearby balanced area. Stay grounded and offer space.
- 3** Release and relinquish mental judgments and pressures. Let any discord speak to you. Just listen. When there is harmony, listen to that too.

While standing, acknowledge and accept your current bodily condition. It may not feel that good or strong. Begin then by giving the body the time to strengthen itself around balance. This balance means the muscles come alive, but are soft, not gripping or pushing. Give time and attention to sense bodily vitality and connections: sinews, ligaments and spaces in the joints; energies running or suffusing through the tissues. You can sense aspects of a connected web of energies that cover the entire anatomy and form a subtle ‘inner body’. Acknowledge, affirm and appreciate that. By settling in an interested but not intense way, your bodily condition will feel energized.

Begin to locate the elements in the feet, bringing awareness to the structures of each foot and into the ankles. In directing awareness, name what arises (such as ‘bony’, ‘firm’, ‘earth’) and linger on that part. (You can also name the experience as ‘toe’ or ‘instep’; this is useful in order to check that you’re not missing out on any pieces!) Continue moving through the body in this manner, detecting the felt experience in terms of elements: ‘hard’/‘accepts weight’; ‘warm’/‘feels alive’; ‘fluid’/‘flexible’; ‘breath-like’/‘brushing’. Notice also ‘space’ – where there is openness and no pressure: like the cavity of your mouth or the armpits, or where pressure ceases in terms of the immediate environment at the edge of your skin.

Rather than get too concerned about points, as you give attention, explore an area of the body – that is, a region that has a lot of internal relationship. Take a hand for example: it extends into the wrist, but is internally organized around fingers, palm and bones. The fingers can poke or twiddle, the knuckles can punch – but as a totality that brings all these features into harmony, the hand orients around the space in the palm. So, feel the element of space in the palm and attune to that.

Similarly, the lower abdomen can harden into a wall of muscle, but in its harmonious state it is fluid in a rhythmic way. Water is its basic element, so sense how that is experienced. In this way, you contemplate what is most natural to an area in accordance with its primary quality, and check whether that's how you experience it. Furthermore, when an area is in harmony, it will always have an openness to it that allows energy to flow through.

Don't work too hard on this, or think about it too much; at times you just guess what it feels like. More useful is to notice when some bodily part feels different from its natural function. For example, the lower abdomen should feel flexible, not like a rock. The palms of the hands should feel warm and as if they're cradling a ball of space. The chest should open easily in the air of the breathing. The face

should feel bright, like soft fire. If not, there is an imbalance. This may be just a degree: the face should feel bright, but not fiery; the back should feel firm, but not like a shell.

EXPLORE, WIDEN, AND CONNECT

The practice is one of a slow exploration in terms of elements and their balance – for instance, in terms of earth: is this area firm, or does it feel too solid, rigid and locked? Fire: is this vibrant and warm – or hot and intense?

When it's discordant, an area may feel 'dead', 'sore' or 'overactive'. What most clearly tells you that things aren't right is the tonality of heart: you may sense an agitated or intense mood when you rest your awareness over an area of your body. If so, review any heart-tones in elemental rather than abstract terms; for example - 'hot', rather than 'angry'; 'pressing', rather than 'tense'; 'stirring', rather than 'restless'. This is because the abstract words carry a negative emotional nuance that hinders the process.

Harmony arises through connecting and listening. You might amplify the empathy by silently 'asking' what is needed or how it feels. Incline the focus to one of widening and softening: you're not trying to fix, understand or even release anything. Span an

area rather than focus into it. If you go into it – either through fascination, through determination to understand or deal with it, or through resisting it – you intensify the elemental property. Therefore, disengage, and relax the time pressure so that the embodied energy can arise and adjust in its own time.

The general advice is to keep your attention wide and breathe through any area you're focusing on. Breathing is the natural moderator of the process. Breath-energy travels in subtler and more extensive ways than via the respiratory tract. It can be felt extending through the entire body and beyond. It moves through the inner body like air, is bright like fire, dissolves boundaries like water, and has a firm and grounding track. As it contains all the elements, and can carry the energy of a positive heart, breathing through the entire body will often be enough to bring the system into harmony.

However, you may also benefit from contacting an element that acts as a counterbalance. As a rule of thumb, space is generally the most useful element to contact; it releases the pressure and hence the intensity of the other elements. But you could also refer to water (as in the fluidity of the entire body – how the arm flows into the chest for example) or earth (as in the skeletal structure or a firm stance) to counter fire, and so on.

If on the other hand, things seem too fuzzy or foggy, stabilize through awareness of the upright axis. You can even deliberately trace down the spine feeling that firmness; down the back into the feet. Connect to the Earth and the earth-element. That connection then becomes the axis around which the rest of the body can come into harmony. As the axis firms up, the periphery softens and becomes more unified around it. Energy feels vibrant but doesn't run out: it's like stillness flowing.

Some energies and tones can flow freely, discharge and result in harmony. Others tighten up into 'me' or 'myself' and carry a push, a resistance and a sense of discord. That tightening becomes 'I' as doer. This 'I' may be a fighter, a victim, or someone numbing out in the face of turbulence. So, review the sense of self in terms of heart-tones; these will be mirrored by somatic energies. Your practice then has to be embodied, equanimous and clear.

Overall, the practice is about encouraging direct knowing and full awareness. The quality of that awareness is then sensed. It has open energy. Open, yet not invaded by anything; grounded and stable, yet vibrant like subtle fire, suffusive like breath, and fluid like water. Just as white light includes all colours of the spectrum, so the open energy of awareness includes all the elements in harmony.

Before you come out of the meditation, in the closing moments, incline your awareness to the physicality – as distinct from the energies – of the body. Locate the spinal axis and the feet, then the head resting on that axis. Linger in that. Expand awareness to the peripheries of the physical form, the skin boundary and the space around it. Breathe through that. Stand as an embodied presence, containing shifting elements, but essentially unmoved. Neither adopting nor resisting. When that balance is established, slowly open your eyes and take a few small movements. Move in a way that has no function or time-frame: slow, quiet play. Feel the energy of that.

You can then move into walking or seated meditation. Wisely attended, psychological states and bodily energies come into harmony.



A Body of Wisdom



THE ENVIRONMENT THAT SUPPORTS YOUR ASPIRATION,
GOODWILL AND INTELLIGENCE
IS YOUR OWN LIVING BODY.

If you cultivate standing, you might choose to maintain this posture for half an hour or even an hour. However, what standing brings to the forefront of attention are themes of embodied meditation that, once established, can be accessed in the other bodily postures. I would add that, although I've given a lot of attention to the bodily and energetic aspects of meditation (essential assets for health and well-being), the ultimate aim of the practice is to free the heart. In this respect, we cultivate energy in order to release stuck emotive reflexes that are proliferated on and acted out by the conceiving mind. Accordingly, however you meditate, the standard is always to step back from, moderate and skilfully direct that thinking mind. This process is facilitated by an attentive heart.

For its part, the sensitive body is more than a workshop; because of the connection between its reflexes and feelings and those of the heart, it's a partner. Therefore, if we meditate in a way that's guided by that connectivity, the practice can dissolve the psychological attachments and neurological stress that impair our lives. Then the body feels spacious and balanced, and the the heart rests in pure awareness.

Commenting on the value of this embodied practice, the Buddha said:

‘Just as anyone who extends their awareness over the great ocean includes within it all the rivers that flow into that ocean; so too, anyone who has developed and cultivated mindfulness of the body includes in that all the skilful states that lead into realization.’

MIDDLE LENGTH DISCOURSES: 119.22

In this section I’d like to elaborate on some key points in this practice.

ENVIRONMENT

The first theme that I’d like to enlarge upon is that of the environment of meditation practice. Although a quiet place is the standard location, by ‘environment’, I mean something more inclusive.

In practising mindfulness of body, the full environment is the body in a living connection with the ground beneath and the space around it. The obvious reason for this is that whether one is in a room or in a forest, this connection keeps you stable, unhurried and open. In meditation, this foundation gives you perspective on your inner, intimate environment. Furthermore, after a period of meditation, we will arise within this full living environment, so it’s good to have

established an orientation that is more truly connected to your heart than a point on a map – or the ongoing array of sights and sounds – can ever be. And finally, as your practice clears the turbulences and blind spots in your inner environment, benevolent energies, attitudes and behaviour can come forth to benefit the larger world you live in. So for good or for bad, the inner and outer environments are connected. Directly knowing that gives you an aware and responsive life.

The first factor of your environment – ground – speaks for itself. Without having a firm ground, there's no baseline and no way of steadying and contemplating energies and moods. This need for ground is so fundamental that people will attempt to find ground in a belief, an ideology, an opinion or even a football team in order to give an orientation to their lives. However, in embodied meditation you can find a stable base for orientation in a way that doesn't conflict with that of others, doesn't have to be sustained by desire or belief, and is right beneath your feet.

This is also the case with sitting meditation – but in that posture, it's possible to disconnect and drift down the corridors of the mind. With standing, you definitely are somewhere, and yet it's universal: wherever you are, there's something firm beneath you. It's a given, and it's essential. When you get in touch

with that, your need to hold on to fidgety distractions, or ideas about yourself and others drops away. And with deeper reflection that, you get interested in bringing your personal world into harmony with the shared Earth that you're alive in.

As for space; more than having physical room, it's a felt sense, a sign of non-intrusion and non-obstruction. This is a fundamental need. Because of this need, people purchase large houses surrounded by fences and gates. Others live in caves. However, it takes embodied space to remove the pressure of time, of the need to be busy, and of your own doubts and concerns. You don't get away from all that by living in a mansion – and a cave only gives you a respite at best.

Embodied space is always here: without it you'd be crushed and unable to feel. Like ground, it's a gift. But our hearts and minds disconnect from it, and in the absence of spaciousness we get overwhelmed, tense, unreceptive, and resort to opinions, routines and plans to feel secure. Then whenever there's an afflictive mood, the common reflex is to either act upon it, or cut off the feeling, get thinking, and get busy. None of these reflex strategies enable us to step back from our mind-states, release their pressure and consider a suitable course of action. This is because there's no space within which to operate.

What is needed then is to be aware of space as a sense of absence of pressure and compulsion. Space doesn't even hold onto itself; qualities can arise and move through it, and it is refreshed by natural rhythms such as breathing. This is connected space; it's not the dissociated space of not feeling anything.

In connected space, our entire body feels that openness, and it can drop any sense of being on guard or unwelcome. The connection occurs through responding to that reflex of 'stuck, oppressed, compelled' with a focus on the embodied experience of space and openness. When you can sense space, linger on it, and let the heart pick up that sign. A spacious heart feels it has some ground; there's trust and an allowance to make mistakes and work things out as you go along. Accordingly, the mind feels there's time to reflect deeply and not jump to conclusions. Bringing that into the world is a blessing for any living being you meet.

Why do we cut off this sense of connectivity? In brief, we give up our ground and space. Our emotional conditioning may well carry aspects of a non-welcoming, insensitive or even abusive social dynamic. We don't always get the encouragement to feel our own ground and be spacious – sometimes it's quite the opposite. If we grew up involved in such situations, we incline to one or both of two things:

one is to develop a shield, and the other is to compulsively conform to others' wishes.

The shield strategy develops a casing of constricted energy around the body and heart as a defence, and as a way of not feeling. Goodbye, space! It then becomes natural to compensate for that loss of sensitivity and joy by spending much of the time going into one's head with media saturation, planning, theorizing, fantasizing – and so on.

Compulsive conformity, or habitual acquiescence, sets the heart to orient around what it imagines other people would like one to do or be. One's sense of worth is then dependent on other people's approval. And much of the time, we imagine that they could, or do, disapprove! So we drop ground and space and get compulsively active to win that approval. Without that we feel lost, empty, and ungrounded. We imagine this disconnected state to be our basic state, even our self, and so we criticize ourselves for being like that – so we feel agitated and distract ourselves. (And criticize ourselves for that.)

This state of isolation can be so habitual that it denies that we have or deserve the gift of ground. Instead, we feel we have to win it or hang on. The heart may also resist spacious openness because that reveals the discomfort that the closed state was shutting off. Openness therefore needs support; the support of being grounded. Of course,

openness has to be moderated: a specific situation may not be safe, and you should protect your boundaries. But boundaries need to be established and mediated by careful attention, not as a default closure, day and night, that cuts off living connectivity.

This process of establishing a living connection to ground and space is therefore a crucial one. Obviously, there is an ongoing need for a non-judgmental and heart-based awareness – but to awaken the heart and bring it into play takes some skill. What encourages this process and helps one to move through these boundaries is an embodied and soothing rhythm – of breathing, or walking (or embodied voice, i.e. chanting). Rhythm is what keeps the connection to ground and space alive and intimate. Breathing in particular can take us through the boundaries of defence, or of the inferred lack of worth and lack of welcome that instigated those boundaries in the first place. Attuned to this, one can extend awareness through the body and heart and into a warm and open stability. As you integrate that, remember you're not inside a body; even though you can detect energy there, like awareness, that warm energy can spread through the world around and within you.

Make a point of enriching the environment!

Inquire, Learn and Integrate



YOU WON'T FIND PEACE IN THE WORLD;
BUT IF YOU PRACTISE PEACE,
YOU'LL BE ABLE TO BRING IT INTO EVERYTHING YOU MEET.

LIFE WORKS BEST AS AN OFFERING

Meditation practice requires the bodily, conceptual, and heart-based intelligences to work together. As a standard, the advice is to simplify the activity of conceptual intelligence to that of placing a thoughtful listening onto an aspect of body or heart. And to then sense how that feels, or what response arises.

Some details to consider are:

With what attitude and energy do you place your attention?

Where do you place it?

How carefully do you linger and listen?

What do you do with the feeling or response that arises?

These points, if carefully addressed, will lead to the wisdom of realization, the liberation of heart. Meanwhile they instigate the development of wisdom in terms of practice: you get insight through reviewing what these questions are pointing to. These two aspects of wisdom work together: every insight furthers or reveals the Path.

We need right attitude and energy in order to direct and sustain wisdom. Here, the attitude is to attend deeply to how things are with no aim other than that; no *'How do I get this?'* or *'And next'*. If those attitudes arise, attend deeply to how they feel and affect

you. No judgment, just let your awareness cover and settle into the energies of these attitudes. In order to do this, energy has to be sustained but not intense. That is, *any* mental drive has to be moderated by the steadying effect of the breathing body. This process also increases the listening skill of the heart, and gives it time to learn and integrate.

TIPS ON LEARNING

As to where you place attention: the simple answer is to place it where you can get a steady focus, one that brings forth skill. Here again the body provides many easy-access points; unfortunately, some of these are painful feelings! Struggling with pain isn't going to encourage persistence, so the pragmatic advice is to widen attention to cover the entire body – because then the uncomfortable parts will only occupy a percentage of the total input. It's likely that as you do that, the firm and balanced embodiment that this sets up first eases discomfort, and subsequently allows one's attention to dwell upon the interconnected energies that run through the body.

When the heart senses that network, it bonds to it – because this is its home base. Then, just as when you're absorbed in a movie, you

don't notice the stiffness in your legs, so, when the heart absorbs into embodied energy, it doesn't notice physical discomfort. Either that, or it begins to spread easeful energy through uncomfortable areas.

Linger and listen. This implies an open steady receptivity – energy can be calmed and tracked by mindful awareness. As you sense the energy in an area – that is, the foot, leg, hand or throat (etc.) feels fuller and livelier – give attention to that, and span the area with awareness, detecting the edge of the area. That edge may extend. If it does, follow where the energy goes. It may not correspond to your idea of where you want it to go or even your idea of your body's anatomy. That is, you might detect energy shifting in your leg and moving down into your foot – at the same time as there is a warming, easing effect in your abdomen. You may find that some release in your jaw sends energy down your arm into your fingers. These shifts are generally not volcanic; they may be like whispers and echoes, tiny twitches or slow trickles. They may have warming or cooling effects, they may move around a point or they may spread and span an area. Over time, the felt boundaries within the body dissolve and the entire form becomes subtle and spacious; your body becomes a stream of qualities that arise and pass.

In the course of this, afflictive emotions, doubts, worries and difficult states may arise; they can be released by meeting their energies and connecting them to more spacious areas. Herein a full and compassionate awareness has to preside over your response. Not all states want to be released at first; they need to be felt and accepted.

What supports this is the relinquishment of the sense of identity that opposes or interferes with what's happening. This felt identity – one that doesn't want, or is ashamed and tired of, the negative state – can be detected in terms of attitudes. These may be: *'I shouldn't be this way'*, or, *'I'm stuck with this; it's because of that.'* Their heart-tones carry intensity and pressure. The first step then, is to sense these psychological forms and meet the energies that they bring in an open and interested way. Then one's awareness will enter the afflictive state with right attitude and open energy. So: listen beneath the voices of the mind and meet the energies; then extend that listening awareness to include body and heart.

What supports difficult memories, restless moods and obsessive thoughts is a constricted state of awareness. However, if that constricted awareness, or resistance, is directly and openly met as a tight energy rather than wrangled with or brooded over, it finds release.

Understanding follows – all of this stress was a tangle not an identity. Stress gets released into openness.

INTEGRATE

What occurs then isn't really a matter of doing, it's of undoing. And yet a transformation takes place. Where before one was held by anxiety, there is confidence; where there was the pressure to perform, there is joy in action; where there was the need to suppress anger and irritation, there is the space to let disappointing experiences pass through.

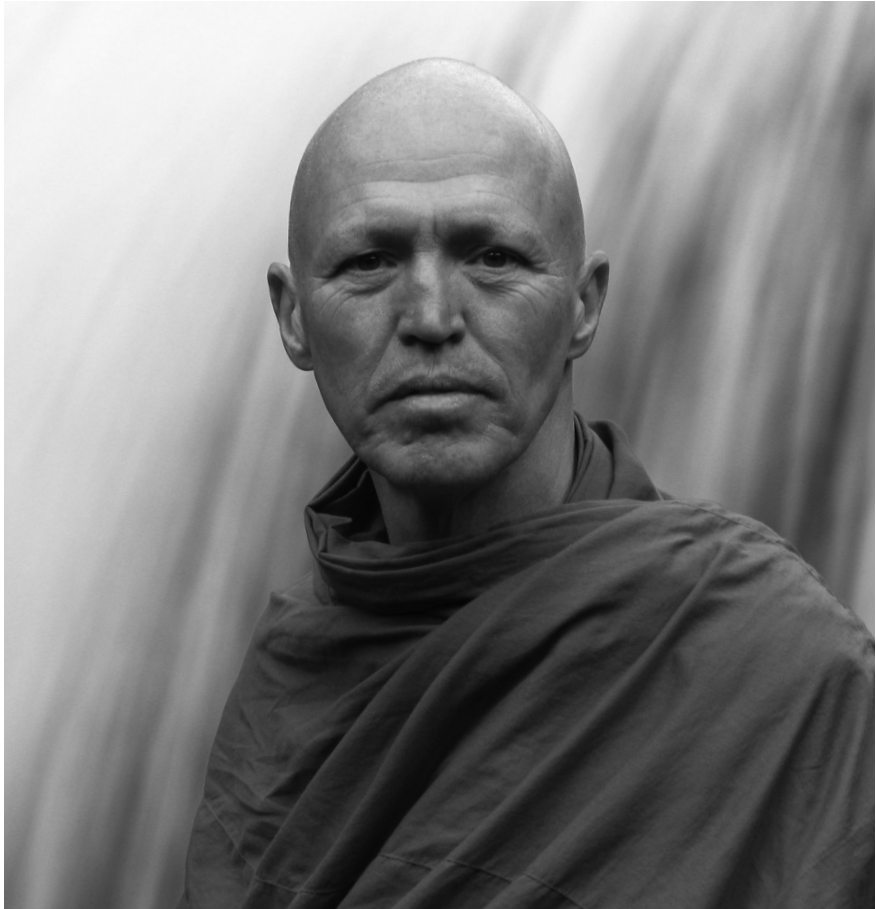
This enables you to live with integrity. You learn to bring your awareness to meet the world as it arises in your awareness; to make your aware presence an offering rather than a need to find something. Then you will act and speak (or refrain) with great heart. Unlike 'myself', great heart/aware presence is a living experience, not an object stuck in one's mind; therefore, one's actions and speech will be freed from the shadow of self-consciousness. In this way, aware presence becomes the basis for never-departing benevolence.



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A note on the Author

Ajahn Sucitto was born in London, England, in 1949 and became a bhikkhu in Thailand in 1976. He returned to Britain in 1978 and trained under Ajahn Sumedho at Cittaviveka and Amaravati Monasteries. He was abbot of Cittaviveka from 1992 until 2014, and still resides there. His website, ajahnsucitto.org, has links to his free-distribution books, articles, and talks, as well as news of upcoming teaching engagements.

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A GUIDE TO STANDING MEDITATION

As standing is something that we do, why not do it with full awareness? After all, standing was one of the positions that the Buddha recommended as a proper basis for mindfulness. Wisely cultivated, it takes strain out of the body, encourages balance and inner stability – and is a support for full liberation.

In this guide, Ajahn Sucitto adds practical details to the establishment and development of this practice. It is for beginners and experienced meditators alike.