

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation

Notes from a five-week course by
Andrea Fella
April-May 2004

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Week One: Mindfulness of Breathing

Mindfulness Meditation

The heart of this form of meditation practice is mindfulness, which has two aspects: knowing what is happening while it is happening, and the cultivation of non-reactivity to what is happening. The quality of knowing what is happening while it is happening is a natural ability that we have as human beings; it is not an obscure or rarified state of consciousness. What is unusual for us, though, is to be able to sustain that awareness, rather than being pulled into our thoughts and reactions about what is happening.

When we sit down to practice mindfulness meditation, the mind falls into habitual patterns of thought and emotions. We may find ourselves planning, remembering, fantasizing, or replaying arguments. We start to see how powerful habitual patterns are when you try to stay in the present.

We begin our training in staying in the present by choosing an object to anchor our attention to, to come back to over and over again. The experience of breathing has several qualities that make it a good choice as a training anchor:

- The experience of breathing is always in the present moment.
- The breath is a relatively neutral object, so it doesn't inherently generate reactivity.
- The breath changes, which makes it easier to stay present with than something that is constant.
- It has a cyclic quality, each breath appears and disappears

But it is not easy! When we try to stay with the breath, what we initially see is how difficult it is to do. One of the first things we notice when we sit down to meditate is that the mind is out of control. The momentum of habit carries the mind away from the simple task of attending to the breathing.

We are at the mercy of these habits, and they are actually what cause a lot of the suffering of our lives. The practice of meditation helps to cut those habits by redirecting the mind to something more neutral, like the breathing. But, it is not necessary to judge yourself for those habits. They are deeply ingrained, and we all have them. In meditation, we allow ourselves compassion for these habits, we recognize the suffering that they cause us, and as best we can, we let go of them to return to the breathing.

So the first thing we learn about as we start to practice mindfulness meditation is what keeps us from being with the breath. We learn about the power and motivation of the mind, how quick it is to follow a fleeting thought, how quick it is to react. The way the mind works is highlighted because we are trying to do this simple thing of staying with the breath.

We cultivate some concentration, and we see the habitual tendencies of our mind. Over time the mindfulness becomes stronger and creates a space around our habits of mind, our reactivity our emotions, our thoughts, giving us the opportunity to choose how to relate to our habits.

Concentration and Mindfulness practices

Most forms of meditation fall into one of two categories: concentration practices or awareness practices.

Concentration practices use a one-pointed focus on a single object to calm and steady the mind. One of the most commonly used objects for concentration is the breath. Other objects that are sometimes used for concentration include mantras, or images that are formed and held in the mind. The mind becomes absorbed into the object; in deep states of concentration everything falls away but the object of concentration. Concentration is a very healing practice. It produces very wholesome mental and physical states. The body and mind can become relaxed, calm, joyful, and tranquil.

Mindfulness, or awareness practices cultivate a non-judgmental, open awareness on what is happening, while it is happening.

Most forms of meditation actually bring both mindfulness and concentration into play, but emphasize one over the other. Concentration practices use mindfulness to help us see when we slip from the object. Mindfulness practices use concentration to attend more carefully to the object.

So, while we do focus on mindfulness practice in this class, I also encourage you to develop your concentration, which we usually do by giving some preference to the breathing over other objects of meditation.

Instructions for Mindfulness of Breathing

Spend a minute or so carefully settling into a posture, try to find a posture that is relaxed but alert. Then gently close your eyes. It is often helpful to start a period of meditation with some “set up” exercises to remind you of your intention to stay in the present moment.

So, start by taking a few long slow deep breaths. On the in breath, connect to the body and to a sense of presence. On the out breath, let go and relax. Use these deep breaths as a reminder of your intention to train the mind to be in the same place as the body (which is always in the present moment.) Then, let breathing return to normal. Mindfulness meditation is not a breathing exercise. We simply try to watch the breath as it is.

As a second set up exercise, it can be helpful to spend a few minutes scanning through the body for any places of obvious tension, and letting go of that tension. Start at the top of the head and scan down through the body letting the attention briefly rest on each part of the body while you relax.

Now take a few moments to feel your body in its entirety, with a wide attention.

Within the body, as part of the body, become aware that you are breathing. Notice how your body feels the breathing. What sensations of your body tell you that you are breathing? Find the place that you feel the sensations of breathing most clearly, and let your attention rest with those sensations. Feel the rhythm of the sensations of breathing in and breathing out.

If you find that the mind wanders, relax, and simply return to the sensations of breathing. There is no need to judge yourself for wandering, or to become frustrated or angry. Just relax and let go. See if you can just let the mind open again to the experience of breathing, rather than trying to force the mind to “come back.”

Exercises for the Week

If you haven't meditated before, start with 15 to 20 min a day. Then if that works for you, try increasing your length of time by about 5 minutes a week, until you get to 30 minutes a day. I recommend sitting at the same time each day. In the morning the mind is usually pretty quiet, meditation can be very calm. In the evening, you might get to see more of the momentum of your mind! Choose the time that is easiest and most natural for you, choose the time you are most likely able to stick to. Sit whether you want to or not. Some people want to sit only when they feel good, others want to sit only when they feel bad. It is helpful to simply put your body there, and just see what comes up!

Week Two: Mindfulness of the Body

Foreground/Background of Experience

As we bring other objects into our meditative awareness, it can be helpful to distinguish between what might be called the foreground and background of experience.

Most people are familiar with the idea of focusing their attention somewhere, but still being aware of other things in their environment. The same is true in meditation. What we focus our attention on is the foreground. Other sensations and experiences can be in the background. So, when we focus our attention on an object, like the breath, most likely we will still be aware of sounds, body sensations, perhaps thoughts or emotions. But often it is quite easy to let those other sensations be in the background of experience, and keep attending to the breath in the foreground of attention. There isn't any need to do anything about the other sensations as long as they stay in the background.

But sooner or later, some sensation will start to compete for our attention. Perhaps a body sensation will become quite strong, at which point it starts to be difficult to attend just to the breath. We could say that the sensation starts to push itself into the foreground of our attention. With mindfulness meditation, when something pushes itself into the foreground, rather than trying to bring our attention back to the breath, we let go of the breath, and let this new experience become the center of our attention, and the basis for the cultivation of mindfulness.

Being Embodied

A central part of mindfulness practice is learning to be embodied, to learn to actually feel the body, to understand and become familiar with the sensations of the body. As we practice mindfulness of the body, the mind and body learn to settle in the same place at the same time, and we become more comfortable in the body.

Many of us live in our thoughts and ideas. We recall the past, think about it and replay it, trying to figure out what we might have said or done differently. We contemplate the future, planning what we will do, what we will say, how we might react to someone if they say such and such a thing to us. Even our experience of the present is often lived through our thoughts and views about it, rather than actually experiencing it!

In mindfulness, the idea is to wake up to all aspects of our lives, instead of living in a virtual world of our thoughts. (We will also learn to bring mindfulness to our thoughts, but it is really helpful to get a firm grounding in our bodies first, since it is so easy to get carried away by our thoughts.)

Reactivity to sensations is different than the sensations

We often lose track of the fact that our thoughts and reactions about an experience are quite different than the experience. For example, if you experience an itch, first you might think about the itch itself, but soon, you might start wondering where the itch came from, and whether it came from a mosquito carrying West Nile virus! A whole world is created through our thoughts, and quite often we simply get carried along, and are many generations removed from the actual experience, which is simply itching.

So in meditation, we try to ground our attention in something that we know is real, rather than being pulled around by fears, projections, or fantasies. The physical sensations of the body are in the present moment, grounding our attention there helps us to see reality as it is.

The training in mindfulness is to come back to our actual experience over and over again, and to notice when we have been heisted onto our train of thought, to notice it as a reaction, and hopefully, let it go and come back, come back, over and over again.

It can be hard at first to trust the value of putting attention to the body in preference to following our thoughts, because we have been trained that thinking is the way to live our lives. But see if you can put aside the preference for following your thoughts during your meditation time. Instead, let the sensations of the breathing and the body be the center of gravity for your attention.

Working with Painful Sensations

One of the most common experiences for meditators is to find the experience of physical pain becomes strong, and pulls the attention from the breathing. Our knees hurt, our backs hurt... When we experience pain like this, the basic meditation instruction is the same as for any strong physical sensation, we let go of attending to the breathing, and bring our full attention to the pain.

It can be counter-intuitive to simply bring awareness to physical pain. Our culture emphasizes the avoidance of pain. Our immediate reaction is to do something to fix it, if at all possible. We are a fix-it culture, and have a range of drugs at our disposal that allows us to avoid a lot of the pain in our lives.

Bringing attention to pain can actually help us to see and understand some of the sources of our pain, the deeper patterns and habits in our lives that result in pain. Sometimes physical pain is a manifestation of long held tension, fear, stress, or anger. Often, mediation simply reveals the pain, when we slow down enough that we finally feel the effect that our life-style has been having on our body.

Reactivity to Pain

Another thing that we learn by simply attending to pain is how much of our physical pain is actually intensified by our reaction to it. The pain itself is an unpleasant (sometimes very unpleasant) sensation in the body or mind; we react to that pain with contraction and aversion, which can serve as a feedback loop to increase the unpleasant physical sensation. The reaction in our minds can make the physical pain worse.

We also respond to physical pain with very strong emotional reactions, for example, fear, anger, or bitterness, which compounds the suffering, because the emotions are so unpleasant. We can confuse the emotional suffering that we bring through reactivity with the physical suffering of the unpleasant sensations, and think that the physical pain is worse than it actually is.

Through bringing mindful attention to painful sensations in the body, we can learn how to not let our reactivity get the upper hand. We learn to see that the aversion to pain is different from the pain itself.

Looking Directly at the Pain

Through meditation we start to see the story about the pain and the pain are different. here is a gap between the direct experience of pain and the story that arises about the pain. In that gap, freedom is possible.

Beginning to look at the pain itself, we start to see some very interesting things.

- Concept of pain ≠ belief in the solidity of pain
- Feeling the particular sensations of pain: We discover a range of sensations – burning, throbbing, pulling, pressure, tearing, searing, stabbing.
- And we discover the sensations are ever changing.
- Pain is not actually a solid thing. It is a lively moving vibrating experience.

- In deep states of meditation, one can actually experience very strong pain simply as strong vibration, and without any reaction – and one finds, quite surprisingly, that the vast majority of what we call pain does not lie in the physical sensations, but rather in our reaction to it.

Attending to our Pain Cultivates Compassion and Equanimity

Cultivating the ability to meet our pain with mindfulness cultivates some very wonderful qualities in the mind – like compassion and equanimity. As we allow ourselves to feel our own pain, we begin to recognize how universal pain is. When we can meet our own pain with acceptance, we naturally become more open to being with the pain that others experience. We develop compassion for ourselves, and compassion for others follows in its wake.

And as we meet our pain with mindfulness, as I said earlier we also learn to see the gap between the experience and the story, we can experience the non-reactivity to pain, which is quite delightful. It is actually possible to sit with quite a lot of physical pain, and yet have the mind be very peaceful. The cultivation of this non-reactive quality of mind leads us to greater equanimity.

Pain as a Signal

However, sometimes when we attend to pain, we get the clear signal that it is not useful to be with this particular pain. Sometimes we realize that something in the meditation posture might be damaging the body. In that case, we need to move, to adjust our posture.

This is an excellent time to practice mindfulness of movement. First, notice the thoughts that you are having about needing to move. Then when you decide to move, notice that you are going to move. (We'll talk more about this in a few weeks – there is an intention that precedes every action, and we can notice this intention when mindfulness is clear.) When you start to move, do so mindfully! This can be a great opportunity to bring our meditative awareness to movement. It is helpful to move slowly so we can bring mindfulness to the movement, and stay in a meditative state.

Skillfully Directing our Attention away from Pain

It is also possible that a particular pain might not be related to our posture, and no amount of movement would remove the pain (as in the case of some chronic pain), but it may be so intense that it simply overwhelms our ability to be mindful of it. In that case it may be skillful to see if we can place our attention elsewhere in the body, away from where the pain is located. To the breath, the hands, or feet for example. You can also open to the sense door of sound.

At some point we all will probably be in a painful situation that is completely beyond our control, where no amount of moving or changing or doing anything will affect the situation. The meditation helps us to develop the skill to work wisely with situations that are out of our control.

But being embodied does not just mean opening up to painful sensations. It also means opening up to wonderful pleasant sensations that can arise in the body and mind. Meditation can bring deep states of calm and concentration that result in very pleasant sensations. The body is the container for much of our emotional life, and it can be a powerful avenue for opening up to aspects of our psyche that are held below the level of our conscious awareness.

Noting (Naming)

One technique that can help you to stay with your experience is the technique of naming, or labeling your experience while it is happening. You might try labeling the breath “in/out” or “rising/falling.” You can do

the same thing with physical sensations, naming the sensation as it happens: e.g. pressure, vibration, tingling, burning, pain.

Try to keep the mental label a quiet whisper in the mind. Most of your attention rests with the actual experience. You can think of the label as being an acknowledgement of what is happening, or a recognition of what is happening while it is happening.

Labeling can help to get the thinking mind to participate in the meditation. It gives the part of your mind that wants to think something to do. The part of the mind that notes is also very close to the part of the mind that knows, or is aware.

The noting practice provides a good feedback mechanism for our meditation. It can let you know how present you are. (You might notice that you've stopped noting your experience, or that the labels don't match your experience, e.g. you are caught up in a painful sensation and still noting "in/out".) It can also help to key you into the mood of the mind, how it is relating to the experience, you can listen to the tone of voice that your mental label comes in: angry, frustrated, etc.

In mindfulness meditation, we can maintain a steady stream of noting experience, very simple, very matter of fact. This is especially helpful as we start to open our meditative awareness beyond the breath. It can help us to clearly recognize what is happening, as well as encourage us to maintain our presence of awareness.

The technique of labeling can sometimes feel clumsy or awkward at first, it is a technique, and does take some practice. I'd like to encourage you to try it for a while, and see what happens.

Mindfulness of Sounds

The awareness of body sensations includes all of the sense doors: seeing, smelling, tasting, touching and hearing. However, when we sit down meditate, we usually have our eyes closed, we are not eating, and we also often are not in a place where smells are predominant. So the sense doors of touch and hearing are the main body sensations that usually are predominant in meditation.

Opening up our awareness to sound can bring a lot of spaciousness in the practice. It opens our awareness up beyond the boundaries of our bodies. It can be helpful to cultivate this ability to be with sounds in an easy spacious way to give us a place to rest our attention when things in our bodies become too painful or difficult.

It also helps us to recognize that there aren't any distractions in mindfulness meditation. So, when you are meditating, and your neighbors' dog starts barking and won't stop, you don't have to resist or fight the sound, you can simply pay attention to it, and note "hearing, hearing."

Basic Meditation Instructions for this Week

So for this week, the basic instruction is to attend to the breathing. Give preference to the sensations of breathing. But, if a strong bodily sensation pulls your attention away from the breath, let go of the breath and bring your full attention to the bodily sensation. When the bodily sensation is no longer so compelling, or if it disappears, then return the attention to the breathing.

Exercises for the Week

1. Continue your daily meditation practice. If you are so inspired, try adding 5 minutes to your daily sitting time.

2. Pick some event that happens regularly in your day to become aware of your whole body. You can use that event as a mindfulness cue. E.g. When the telephone rings, when you walk through a door, when you get up from your desk at work. Just take a few seconds to feel a breath, to check in with your posture, and any sensations you might feel in your body. Then let it go and continue your activity. This kind of exercise helps to begin to pull the mindful awareness throughout your day.
3. Eating meditation. Eating is one of those wonderful events when all six of our senses become engaged. There is the appearance of our food, the aromas that blend to entice the appetite, the taste and touch of the food on the tongue, the sounds of the chewing and swallowing, and the thoughts that arise about the food, and our reactions to the food, what we like and dislike, what we want and don't want. If we like the food we are eating, this can be a very enjoyable experience!

Week Three: Mindfulness of Emotions

In mindfulness practice, we take a middle way with respect to emotions. We neither repress them, nor do we express them. We don't try to deny them, nor do we act them out. We simply allow them to take their own course in our bodies and mind.

Starting to pay attention to emotions

One of the best ways to do this is to feel the emotion in the body, to pay attention to the immediacy of the emotion in the physical sensations of the present moment, and to disengage from the content of the emotion, or the story of the emotion. Emotions, especially strong emotions, often have a very compelling quality to them, and they exert a strong pull on our attention. It can feel like the emotion is saying "Pay attention to me!"

But the way that we have learned to pay attention to emotions usually involves going through the story of the emotion, over and over again. If we remain engaged with the story of the emotion, these thoughts tend to fuel the emotion, and hook us to it. Rather than paying attention to it, we are consumed by it. By learning to pay attention to the emotion in another way, we can give the emotion its due respect, but not succumb to it and not become taken over by it.

For example, if we are angry with someone, we usually focus on the person we are angry with, and the story of what they have done revolves in our mind. In mindfulness, we turn the attention away from the person or situation we are angry with, and instead pay attention to what the experience of anger feels like. Instead of focusing outward, we turn our attention inward.

Emotions want to be experienced, but staying with the object of the emotion, or the story of the emotion, fuels the emotion. It doesn't actually allow the emotion to be fully experienced. If you turn your attention to the emotion itself, to the sensations it produces in the body, and the effect it has on the mind, the emotion has a chance to live its own life, to flow through us in a natural way. It will naturally wind itself out, like a breath flowing out.

All things appear, stay for a while, and disappear. Emotions are no exception. Being mindful of our emotions allows them to unfold and process themselves, in their own natural and healthy way.

Components of Emotions

There are three basic components to an emotion:

- Thoughts (or the story)
- Physical sensations: how the emotion manifests itself in the body. All emotions have some physical correlate. This often clues us in that we are having an emotion.
- Emotional mood or tone in the mind. This can be subtle, or quite obvious. It can be likened to the mind putting on colored glasses, which tint our experience. Fear has one tint, joy another. Fear might feel like a sense of needing to be out of here, joy might have the sense of a lightness in the mind.

We can attend to any of these aspects of the emotion in mindfulness, but the thoughts or story that accompany the emotion often have a tendency to pull us in so that we lose our mindfulness. The story connected with the emotion almost always has to do with the past or the future – its actually quite fascinating to see that so much of our emotional life is bound up in reflections about the past, or anticipating the future, rather than what is actually happening for us right in the present moment.

We will talk about paying attention to thoughts themselves during the fourth week of the class. Just as a little preview, one clue about attending to thoughts is that we do not attend to the content of the thought, but rather to the *process* of thinking. In meditation practice, we really need to understand that paying attention to the *content* of our thoughts is not helpful. This is not to say that it is never helpful to pay attention to the content of the thought. But during meditation itself, we need to learn how to suspend our overwhelming preoccupation with our stories. I have sometimes used the simple reflection to just try it and see – try letting go of the thoughts and see what happens.

Practicing with Emotions: RAIN

There are four basic aspects to practicing with emotions, and one of my teachers, Michelle McDonald came up with an acronym to help remember these four: RAIN, for Recognition, Acceptance, Investigation, Non-identification.

Recognition

Recognizing what the emotion is and naming it can be quite helpful. Sometimes it is quite clear what we are experiencing, and it is easy to name: anger, happiness, loneliness, or fear. There can be a power to recognizing and naming the emotion. This idea is found in some fairy tales, which talk about “naming the dragon.” In these stories, when the dragon is faced with its name, it loses its power.

In mindfulness, when we clearly recognize and name an emotion, it can help to disentangle us from the emotion. When we name the emotion, the part of our minds that simply recognizes and knows is strengthened. We strengthen our capacity for non-reactivity.

Sometimes it can take some time to discover what the emotion is, and it is not clear what the emotion is, but we know we are experiencing something! Sometimes it feels like a mixture of emotions, without one being predominant. In these cases, it is not so helpful to try to analyze the emotion, or to figure out what it is. You can simply name it “emotion,” or “confusion,” or, one of my favorites: “chaos.”

Also, we sometimes meet emotions we aren’t so familiar with in our meditation practice. Michelle tells the story that when she first encountered calm in her meditation practice, her note was something like: Calm?? She was so unfamiliar with the experience of calm that she wasn’t sure of what it was, initially.

Acceptance

The second aspect of mindfulness of emotions is acceptance. Know that in mindfulness meditation, any emotion is OK. You can give yourself unconditional permission to have any emotion at all, there is no need to censor or judge your emotions. Meditation practice is a very safe place to let yourself feel what is happening. Since you have a resolve to stay still during the meditation, you can let go of the idea of acting on the emotion, and simply let yourself be with it.

Sometimes it can feel quite unpleasant to be with difficult emotions like anger – that is one reason we tend to respond physically, so we don’t have to feel the unpleasantness. But if you try it a few times, you’ll find that with acceptance, the emotion and the unpleasantness will simply flow through you, and eventually it will fade and disappear. That experience is one of the most rewarding of meditation practice, and it gives us a very strong sense of the power of mindfulness practice.

Investigation

The third aspect of mindfulness of emotions is investigation. That is investigating what the present moment experience of the emotion is. Take an interest in exploring the emotion. How do you know you are feeling

a particular emotion? What tells you that you are feeling anger, or joy, or depression or surprise? One of the best places to do that is in the body. As I said earlier, all emotions have some kind of physical manifestation. Often the physical expression is what clues us in to the fact that we are having the emotion.

There are many sensations in the body that relate to emotions. Anger might result in tightness and heat, fear might result in a contraction in the stomach or the throat. Joy might produce delightful tingling sensations throughout the body.

The sensations in the body that are correlated with the emotion are not the story of the emotion. But they *are* present moment experience. Bringing attention to the physical sensations is one of the best ways to let go of the story, and bring ourselves into the present moment.

Non-identification

The fourth aspect of attending to emotions is non-identification. We tend to strongly identify with our emotions. We take them to be who we are: I am an angry person, a depressed person, a happy person, a fearful person. We somehow seem to feel that these moods, which are actually visitors, are somehow lurking in our being. When we are entangled with an emotion, there is almost always some aspect of identification with it, a feeling of “I, me, or mine”, or identification with the story that it is associated with.

The tools of recognition, acceptance and investigation all support the aspect of non-identification, by helping us to become less entangled with the story, by bringing the mind and the body together into the present moment, by grounding the attention in the body, by taking an interest in what it feels like to be a human being experiencing this emotion.

James Baraz tells a wonderful story about a technique that he used to help him in the non-identification aspect of working with emotions. He pretended that he was an alien, visiting on Earth, and having taken up residence in a human body. His job was simply to report back to the mother ship what humans experienced when they felt emotion: “this is what they feel when they feel anger,” “this is what they feel when they feel bliss.”

Attending to positive as well as negative emotions

Most of the emotions that cause us difficulty in our meditation practice are the afflictive emotions. But the meditation itself can bring about wonderful states of calm, peace, happiness, tranquility, bliss, and joy. We can also attend to these emotions. But in accepting these emotions, pay attention for the tendency to lean into them, to become entangled with them, and to identify with them.

There can be a subtle reactivity of clinging to the positive emotions: this is the way it’s supposed to be. Now I finally understand how to do this practice, I’m never going to be unhappy again... With pleasant emotions it is easy to get seduced, to not see so clearly that we are actually entangled with the emotion. This kind of reactivity can be a set up for later let down, when these emotions fade, as *everything* eventually does.

In my own experience, I have actually found that the experience of these positive emotions is actually more fulfilling when I’m not entangled with them. Something about the grasping or clinging to them actually prevents us from experience them fully.

Mindfulness instructions for attending to emotions

In terms of paying attention to emotion in our meditation, we don’t actively look for emotions in mindfulness practice. Instead, the basic instruction still is to attend to the breathing.

Give preference to the sensations of breathing. But, if a strong bodily sensation pulls your attention away from the breath, let go of the breath and bring your full attention to the bodily sensation. When the bodily sensation is no longer so compelling, or if it disappears, then return the attention to the breathing.

If a strong emotion arises that makes it difficult to stay with the breathing or the bodily sensation, bring your full attention to the emotion. See if you can recognize it and name it. Investigate it in the body; take an interest in how the emotion plays itself out in your body. When the emotion is no longer exerting a pull on you, or some other strong sensation or emotion pulls your attention, pay attention to that. When the things that pull your attention become less compelling, or they disappear, you can simply return the attention to the sensations of breathing.

Exercises for the third week

1. Continue your daily meditation practice. If you are so inspired, try adding 5 minutes to your daily sitting time.
2. At least once during the week "ride out an emotion." Sometime during the week when you are feeling a strong desire, aversion, fear, or other emotion, don't act on the feeling. Rather, bring your mindfulness to the feeling and observe the changes it undergoes while you are watching it. You might choose to sit, stand or walk around quietly while you do this study. Things to notice are the various body sensations and tensions, the changes in the feeling's intensity, the various attitudes and beliefs that you have concerning the presence of the emotion, and perhaps any more primary emotion triggering the feeling. If after a time the emotion goes away, spend some time noticing what its absence feels like.
3. The third exercise has to do with appreciating positive and wholesome feelings, such as gratitude, happiness, joy, generosity, kindness. The exercise is simply to notice and pay attention to what they feel like. Appreciating these wholesome feelings is part of cultivating the path. But appreciation does not mean getting lost in thought over them! Simply feel them in your mind and body for as long as they last. They will wane, eventually, don't try to extend their life, simply appreciate them. Sometimes these feelings quickly lead us into a tide of thoughts. See if you can simply feel and appreciate these feelings.

It can be as simple as appreciating the texture of a doorknob or a flash of ease in your eyes as you notice the blue sky after the fog has burned off. This is not an exercise for manufacturing positive states but rather discovering that these may be much more a part of your life than your preoccupations allow you to notice.

Week Four: Mindfulness of Thoughts

Instructions for Mindfulness of Thinking

The basic instruction for mindfulness practice is to be clearly aware of what is happening in the present moment, whether it is body sensation, emotion, thought. But for most of us, the mind is a bit too busy to simply sit down and immediately be able to bring full conscious awareness with our present experience. So, we cultivate an anchor for our attention. For most of us, the breath works well as an anchor. We practice with a dedicated intention to stay with that one object in order to settle and quiet the mind.

Other experiences may arise in the background of our experience. That is, we may be aware of other things happening, but they don't necessarily pull our attention away from our primary object, our anchor. In that case, it is fine to leave them in the background, and continue with the breath in the foreground.

But eventually, something will push itself into the foreground of attention. When something becomes more compelling than the breathing, we let go of the breathing, and bring our full mindful attention to that thing, whether it is a body sensation, an emotion, or thinking.

Sometimes, random thoughts pull us away from the breath, suddenly we find we are not with the breath. Much of the time, all that is necessary is to clearly notice that we are now thinking, and then to consciously direct the attention back to the breathing. At other times, our minds are not so easily directed. In that case, we bring our attention to the thinking process.

In mindfulness meditation, there is no need to look for thoughts. Instead, as we have been doing for the past few weeks, stay with the breathing until something makes it difficult to stay with the breathing. Then bring your full attention to that, be it body sensations, emotions, or thoughts.

Thoughts and Reactivity to Thoughts

One function of the mind is to produce thoughts. Another of its functions is to experience them. Much as the eye receives sight, and the ear receives sound, so the mind receives thoughts.

Thoughts happen in our mind. Thoughts arise based on causes and conditions. They arise based on what we have done in the past hour, day, or year. They arise based on who we have met. They arise based on our mood, they arise because we are experiencing something similar to something we've experienced before.

Much of our life, however, results from a reaction to thoughts; sometimes we aren't even conscious of them. We have a tendency to believe our thoughts, or at least believe they say something about us. If a strange thought appears, we might think, "I must be a bad person to think such a thought." If a novel, interesting thought appears, we might think, "I must be a creative person to have such a thought."

Our work in mindfulness is not necessarily to still the mind, to stop thinking, though at times this can happen in meditation. Rather, mindfulness helps to make our thoughts conscious. Mindfulness can bring fleeting thoughts into our awareness, and we begin to see that we do have a choice in whether or how we react to them. Unseen, the thoughts may generate habitual reactions, patterns of thought or behavior.

Contents of thinking vs. the process of thinking

The *contents* of thinking is the actual story, e.g. what he said, what she said, what I did, what I'm going to do, what I'd like to do.

The *process* of thinking is how thinking happens in the mind. Thoughts are often perceived as visual or auditory images in the mind.

Our auditory thoughts may manifest as a sense of hearing the thought, or perhaps of speaking the thought (talking to ourselves). It can sometime feel like listening to a radio – where there doesn't seem to be much connection between us and the thought. Our visual thoughts may be like photographs, or silent movies, or even talking movies. Occasionally I've seen the words like reading a book.

We can notice how thoughts appear, persist, change and disappear. We can notice how observing thoughts affects them.

Sometimes, a very simple attention to the content can help us to understand how the mind functions, and to disengage from the thoughts. It might be helpful to notice the tone of the "voice." Whose voice it is, male or female? It can also be helpful to notice the associative nature of thoughts, seeing how thoughts chain off of one another based on a simple aspect of the thought.

With the sharpening of mindfulness to see thoughts themselves, we begin to see just how ephemeral they are. They are practically nothing, light. Yet when we don't see their true nature, we believe them and we perceive them with a weight and reality they don't actually possess.

Attending to Thoughts

In meditation, thoughts often come as a drifting away from our experience. We simply find we are thinking about something, and didn't notice when our awareness drifted from our object of attention. In these cases, it is probably enough to clearly recognize that thinking is happening: noting "drifting, or wandering, or thinking" and simply let it go, and come back to the breath. This is using mindfulness – you clearly recognize the mind is thinking, and name it. There is no need to sustain the thinking simply to pay attention to it!

Sometimes we are able to catch the first moment of a thought – if you pay very close attention to the breath, you might find that you notice just at the moment when the mind leaves the breath and starts to think a thought. (You might even notice the intention to think.) It is especially helpful to use the noting in this situation. Our habit of mind is to follow thoughts when they appear, so if we don't clearly note them with mindfulness, we're likely to end up on the train of thought that began with this thought.

At other times, thoughts are more compelling. We find ourselves lost in them. We let go a couple of times, and find the same theme keeps re-appearing in our mind. It can be helpful to note the type of thinking that is happening: the overall theme. For example: planning, remembering, arguing, judging, fantasizing, or describing.

When thoughts are strong, and they have a powerful hold on our mind, we can use mindfulness to investigate the thinking. This means seeing what is happening in the body and the mind in the present moment, while the thinking is occurring. It does not mean to investigate the contents of the thoughts, to analyze the story, or think about why you might be having this thought. It means turning our attention to our present moment experience.

As with emotions, when thoughts are strong, there is often an energetic expression of them in the body. Centering attention in the body can be a very helpful way to disengage from the story. You might experience pulsing or buzzing in the head, a contraction in the abdomen, or tightness in your limbs, tension around the eyes or in the forehead. Attending to the physical sensations serves two purposes. It helps you to see the link between the mind and the body, and it also helps to cut the momentum of being caught in the content of the thoughts.

Another approach when thoughts are strong, or when a theme keeps recurring, is to see if there is an emotion associated with those thoughts, such as fear, anger, or even happiness. If an emotion is present, even if it is not seen, it can trigger thoughts.

For example planning thoughts may be based in anxiety. Judgmental thoughts can be based in many kinds of emotions. For example, they might be based in feelings of unworthiness (I'm no good, every one else is better) or superiority (I'm better than everyone else.).

If you can find an emotion that underlies the thoughts, ground your attention in the emotion. The emotion wants attention, and thoughts are one way an emotion tries to grab your attention. Bring your full attention to the emotion, often the stream of thinking associated with it will stop once the emotion is fully felt. Practice with the emotion, grounding your attention in the bodily sensations that accompany the emotion.

Exercises for the week

1. Continue daily sitting. Focus on breathing in a concentrated manner (letting go even of compelling things) to settle and quiet the mind initially, then after 5-10 minutes, switch to a more open form of awareness, in which you remained focused on the breathing, but shifting the attention if something else becomes more compelling. If things seem complicated, stick with the breath and the body. Our emotions and thoughts can both be experienced through bodily sensations.
2. Once or twice during the week, pay attention to your intention to end the meditation. Jack Kornfield suggests an excellent practice for this:

From Jack Kornfield's *A Path with a Heart* p.100:

In your daily meditation practice, make a resolve that for one week you will not get up until a strong impulse to do so arises three times. Sit as you usually would, being mindful of your breath, body and mind. But do not set a fixed time for the end of your meditation. Instead, sit until a strong impulse tells you to get up. Notice its quality. It may arise from restlessness, from hunger, from knee pain, from thinking about how much you have to do, or the need to go to the bathroom. Softly name the energy that has arisen, and with it sense the impulse to move. Feel it carefully in your body, naming, "wanting to get up, wanting to get up," staying with it for as long as it lasts. (This is rarely more than a minute.) Then after this impulse has passed, notice what it feels like now, and if your meditation had deepened from sitting through the whole impulse process. Continue to sit until a second impulse to arise pulls you strongly. Notice the whole process in the same way as before. Finally after a third time of carefully being with the whole impulse process, allow yourself to get up. The depth of your attention and centeredness will gradually grow through this practice.

If you wish, you can extend your observation to other strong impulses, noting the whole process of wanting to scratch an itch, or to move while sitting...

Week Five: Mindfulness in Our Daily Lives

Bringing Practice into Daily Life

Joko Beck, a Zen teacher in Los Angeles, suggests in one of her books to choose some “projects” in our daily lives to bring mindfulness to. She said that if we try to bring mindfulness to our whole day all at once, we are setting ourselves up to fail.

After reading this, I picked two projects, and each became a mindfulness “bell” for me, one was a difficult emotion that felt out of control at that point in my life, the other was a very neutral event that happened regularly throughout my day: the first was anger, the second was when I switched between DOS and Windows on my computer.

When we choosing specific things to vow to wake up for, sometimes we will remember right away, and sometimes we wont.

I found with anger that early on it would take me a while, and I would be in a full-blown rage before I remembered that I was supposed to pay attention. Slowly, over time, thought I caught the anger earlier and earlier, until I began to see the inclination to anger, before I actually became angry.

With the more neutral event, initially, I often found I remembered after the event had passed. But even that late recognition was a sign that mindfulness was beginning. Over time, we find we catch these mindfulness “bells” more and more often.

There are many things you might choose as a mindfulness project. You might try

- Noticing getting up from your desk at work (the act of standing)
- Waiting three rings of the telephone before answering it
- The whole several-minute process of going to the rest room
- An emotion that is strong or difficult for you
- Any chore

Another way I helped myself to pay attention was by putting mindfulness reminders around my house, choosing strategic places to put a small note about a particular quality of mind: Truthfulness on the telephone, giving on the door to the outside, patience at my bathroom sink, equanimity on the computer.

Intention and Motivation

Intention is a subtle shift of the mind that precedes any act of body, speech or mind. We can know we are going to move before we move. e can know we are going to speak before we speak. Even more subtly, we can even know we are going to think before we think, or know we are inclining towards an emotion before it appears

In and of itself, intention is a neutral event – it is simply an energetic impulse, sometimes felt in the body, sometimes felt as a thought or leaning in the mind – it is the sense of knowing something is going to happen. Sometimes teachers call it the “about to” moment. We know something is about to happen. Accompanying that about to moment, there is always a reason for the action: the motivation behind the action.

In that place of knowing that something is going to happen before it actually occurs, we have a chance to see what our motivation is. We may be motivated out of compassion, or anger or greed, or perhaps out of simply necessity.

One of the most powerful places to practice with this is in the area of speech. Paying attention to speech can be a very challenging practice. Much of the time, we speak automatically, without noticing first what we are

going to say, or even that we are going to speak. And much less often do we take a moment to contemplate the effect our speech will have on the person we are talking to.

A great exercise to try is to simply pause before you speak. Just pause. Even remembering to pause can be hard! But that pause allows you to recollect that you are going to say something, that there is an intention to speak, and if you pay attention in that pause, you have the possibility of noticing, first, what you are going to say, and second, what the motivation is behind saying it.

Seeing how often our intentions and motivations are less than skillful can be distressing, at times. This is not intended to be a practice that you judge your self over, but rather one that helps you to learn from your experience.

When you find that particular motivations lead to pain and suffering, for yourself or for others, you have the choice to let go *before* you take action, if you are keeping track of your motivations.

The present moment is the only place where we can act, where we can choose how to respond to what life presents us with. The past is gone, it doesn't exist, except as memories in our mind in the present moment. The future doesn't exist, except as thoughts, in the present moment, about what might happen. All that exists is this very moment, brought about by a whole mix of causes and conditions, most of which were out of our control. How we respond to this very moment is our choice, it is actually the only thing we have a choice about, ever.

The Buddha taught that this choice point is the key to happiness. If we can see this choice point, we have a higher likelihood of choosing to respond in ways that will lead to happiness. One of the aspects of this teaching, though, is that while we have some control over our choice in the present moment, the results of our actions are out of our control. We need to let go of needing specific outcomes from our actions. We can't control the way others will respond to our actions, be they skillful or unskillful.

But we can take refuge in knowing that we are responding to the world in the most skillful way that we can. When the Dalai Lama was asked about how he felt when his decisions led to unfortunate outcomes, he responded, "My pure intention is my refuge."

Sila – Ethics

One way to look at our motivation is to use the Buddha's teaching on Sila, or ethics. This teaching is about looking at our relationship to others.

For lay people, the Buddha suggested five basic guidelines, or precepts, for ethical conduct. (Monastics have more!) They are: to refrain from killing, to refrain from stealing, to refrain from sexual misconduct, to refrain from lying, and to refrain from intoxication.

These guidelines are taken on as practices, not to judge ourselves for right and wrong, but rather to help us examine our motivation. We might consider these to be a set of five mindfulness "bells," as I was speaking about earlier. If we find ourselves about to do one of these things, the instruction is "Wake up! Pay attention! What is the motivation behind this action?"

These five precepts are stated in the negative, as actions to avoid. But they each have a positive aspect, a wholesome quality of mind that is cultivated along with the action we are avoiding. Each of the precepts is paired with a positive mental quality that is cultivated. Refraining from killing is paired with compassion; refraining from stealing, honesty; refraining from sexual misconduct, fidelity; refraining from lying, truthfulness; and refraining from intoxication, clarity of mind.

There is a mutual interconnection between our body and our mind. Making changes in our mind can result in changes to our actions, and likewise, making changes to our actions can result in lasting and deep changes to our minds. The place where that interconnection happens is at the point of intention.

A question sometime arises about why the precepts are stated in the negative as actions to avoid, rather than in the more positive way, of “I vow to cultivate compassion,” for example.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, an American monk trained in Sri Lanka, has an excellent response to this. I will simply read it, since I think he states it so beautifully:

From *Going for Refuge, Taking the Precepts* by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

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The answer to this is twofold. First, in order to develop the positive virtues we have to begin by abstaining from the negative qualities opposed to them. The growth of the positive virtues will only be stunted or deformed as long as the defilements are allowed to reign unchecked. We cannot cultivate compassion while at the same time indulging in killing, or cultivate honesty while stealing and cheating. At the start we have to abandon the unwholesome through the aspect of avoidance. Only when we have secured a foundation in avoiding the unwholesome can we expect to succeed in cultivating the factors of positive performance. The process of purifying virtue can be compared to growing a flower garden on a plot of uncultivated land. We don't begin by planting the seeds in expectation of a bountiful yield. We have to start with the duller work of weeding out the garden and preparing the beds. Only after we have uprooted the weeds and nourished the soil can we plant the seeds in the confidence that the flowers will grow healthily.

Another reason why the precepts are worded in terms of abstinence is that the development of positive virtues cannot be prescribed by rules. Rules of training can govern what we have to avoid and perform in our outer actions but only ideals of aspiration, not rules, can govern what develops within ourselves. Thus we cannot take up a training rule to always be loving towards others. To impose such a rule is to place ourselves in a double bind since inner attitudes are just simply not so docile that they can be determined by command. Love and compassion are the fruits of the work we do on ourselves inwardly, not of assenting to a precept. What we can do is to undertake a precept to abstain from destroying life and from injuring other beings. Then we can make a resolution, preferably without much fanfare, to develop loving-kindness, and apply ourselves to the mental training designed to nourish its growth.