

Mindfulness Meditation Introductory class

Week Two: Mindfulness of the Body

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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, meditation 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. There 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!