

Meditation and Mindfulness Course

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SESSION 1

“[The degree of awareness and acceptance] we manifest determines the degree of spaciousness and freedom we can bring to life’s events. Imagine taking a very small glass of water and putting into it a teaspoon of salt. Because of the small size of the container, the teaspoon of salt is going to have a big effect on the water. However, if you approach a much larger body of water, such as a lake, and put into it the same teaspoonful of salt, it will not have the same intensity of impact, because of the vastness and openness of the vessel receiving it. Even when the salt remains the same, the spaciousness of the vessel receiving it changes everything.

We spend a lot of our lives looking for a feeling of safety or protection -- we try to alter the amount of salt that comes our way. Ironically, the salt is the very thing that we cannot do anything about, as life changes and offers us repeated ups and downs. Our true work is to create a container so immense that any amount of salt, even a truckload, can come into it without affecting our capacity to receive it.”

Sharon Salzberg

Introduction

According to the Buddhists, our mind is naturally spacious, open, clear and peaceful, and yet we often experience just the opposite in our lives, with stress, agitation, anger, impatience and frustration assailing us at every turn, it seems. These teachings tell us that these negative emotions are not our true birthright, and that they are more the result of ignorance and delusion, not unlike the situation when clouds block out the sun, and for a while it appears we are thrown into relative darkness - the truth is that the sun continues to shine.

Such is the human predicament, and these meditation and mindfulness practices can assist us to systematically remove the “clouds” that seem to be spoiling the sunny day of our true nature. It has taken us quite a while for these obscurations to become established and they will not be removed overnight, but if we stick with these practices we will see results as we relax into the natural state that has never actually left us.

The basic meditation practice

In many ways getting into a habit of meditation is like getting into a habit of exercise – often before we’re supposed to exercise we don’t feel like doing it and will put it off, sometimes it can feel tiresome but once we’ve finished we usually feel better, and the more we do it the more benefits we will see. Also, like exercise, is better to do a little bit regularly than, say, two hours at the gym every few weeks. There’s something about regular practice that helps train the mind more effectively even if we’re only doing 10 minutes a day. Essentially, we are looking to see if we can develop a new habit that will become part of our lives in due course.

While many of us may have the view of meditation as leading to relaxation and peace, and this is true, it will not usually happen overnight. As we develop our practice, and again very much like exercise, there will be plenty of sore backs, feet fallen asleep, boredom, irritation and other less than pleasant feelings and sensations. What we learn in these practices is that to achieve a more durable peace in our lives is less about picking and choosing what experiences we like and don’t like - life will *always* throw us curveballs of various kinds – but learning instead that the key to a calmer life is more like welcoming whatever comes, and this can sometimes be a difficult practice. I hope in these sessions to show why this might nonetheless be a better strategy than those we have tried in the past and how best to go about it.

My suggestion is to start at about 10 or 15 minutes and see how it feels. As you feel more comfortable doing the practice, it is fine to get up to 20 or even 30 minutes daily if that’s possible. While we are stressing the importance of regularity in our meditation practice, it is also very important not to be perfectionist either. They’re very few people who are able to settle down and meditate daily and uninterruptedly from the first day – if you’re able to manage a three times a week on a regular basis that is actually pretty good, and that’s what I recommend you aim for in the first weeks.

What often happens is that if we’re able to stick with the practice for a while, then we start to see the benefits and this encourages us to meditate more, and so on, a “virtuous” cycle is created.

At some point if we find that meditation is something that begins to grab us, we can consider going away for retreats which can be anything from a weekend to 10 days or more. This brings up an important point which is that if we join some sort of a group, whether a formal spiritual group or just a group of friends who get together and meditate this is one of the most effective ways to establish a regular practice. In the same way as it may be easier to exercise with a friend, it is often easier to

establish the discipline of regular practice if we're doing it with others. The encouragement and support of others can complement our practice at home.

One last point: while the method we will be learning here simple, effective and widely practiced, starting a practice at all will open us up to other methods of meditation that may prove more resonant to us as we move along our path. There are approaches that involve sound [like mantras], and practices that are more devotional [such as chanting] or analytic [like insight meditation]. While the greatest benefits in the long run will come from choosing an approach we like and sticking with it, it is perfectly fine to experiment and try different techniques, especially at the beginning.

This is the basic meditation practice that we will be working with:

Time and place

- It is a good idea to choose a regular time and place where you will meditate. It really doesn't matter where it is as long as it's quiet and you'll be undisturbed. Choose clothes that are comfortable and a time of day you feel will work best for you. It is said by many that meditating first thing in the morning is the best time of day as we are fresh, but really the most important thing is to choose a time that will work for you whether it is then or at lunchtime, early evening or before you go to bed at night.

Posture

- There are two basic postures, sitting on the floor in a cross-legged position or in a chair. You can experiment with both to see which is most comfortable, but it is fine to choose either one. If you're sitting on the floor it is a good idea or to use a meditation cushion which is designed to be firm and keep you upright, and which helps keep your knees below your hips. If you are flexible and can easily manage a full or half lotus position this is certainly very stable, but it is not necessary.
- You can sit in a simple cross-legged position, but if this is not possible you can put one leg folded in front of the other without crossing them. There's also the possibility of using a meditation bench or placing a cushion behind you between your thighs and calves.
- If you sit in a chair make sure to keep your feet on the floor. Whether you are on the floor or in a chair, it is very important to keep your back straight. Not rigid, which can lead to straining too hard and not slumping either, which can foster sleepiness. For the same reason, it is not a good idea in general to meditate lying down unless you have a back problem. A straight and firm posture can help us to stay alert and mindful.
- There are several options regarding what to do with our hands. We can put them face down on our thighs, or you can use the traditional Buddhist way of cupping your right hand in your left with the palms up and your two thumbs lightly touching.
- Once your spine is straight, and your eyes are looking straight ahead, let your chin dip very slightly to open up the back of your neck and close your eyes.

Mindfulness of breathing

- Once you've settled in and are about to begin the mindfulness of breathing which forms the core of the meditation proper, it may be helpful to remind yourself that while this practice does not in any way require any religious orientation, it was introduced by the Buddha 2500 years ago and has benefited many millions of people since then, whether by way of increased relaxation and peace of mind or getting in touch with a deeper spiritual insight and understanding.
- Begin by mindfully taking a few deep breaths into your abdomen. By 'mindfully' we simply mean paying attention to what's going on as you breathe. Notice how the breath feels as it comes into your body and begins to fill up your chest and then your abdomen, and then watch it as it leaves your body. Notice any feelings and sensations associated with the in breath and the out breath such as the expansion and contraction of your chest and the rising and falling of your belly, and any sensations associated with these movements such as fullness or tightness or relaxation, whatever is there.
- Most important of all you do not need to do anything to try and manipulate your breathing, to speed up or slow it down, you're simply letting it do its thing which of course it will do anyway!
- After a while notice where your attention is naturally drawn to in this process. You might find that your attention settles naturally in your belly as it rises and falls, or your chest as it expands and contracts or perhaps you find yourself watching the inflow and outflow of the breath where it enters and leaves your nostrils.
- There is no right answer here, just notice where your attention finds itself going, what you experience the most distinctly, and then decide to rest your attention on that spot going forward. When we say resting our attention on this spot we don't mean the idea or image of our belly or nostrils, but the actual sensations in that area that we find there - that is what our object of concentration becomes. So we might notice the actual feeling of air coming in and out of our nostrils and it may feel cool and subtle, or we might notice tightness as our belly rises and falls. It doesn't matter what is going on, only that we direct our attention to it, and even if there is not so much going on (which will happen after our mind begins to calm down a bit).
- The idea is simply to focus our breathing without interfering with it, watching the in breath and out breath as they naturally occur, and over time this will have a typically calming effect as we just allow this to happen in awareness and realize that we need do nothing more during this period. Note that I say 'over time' because the universal experience of all beginning meditators is far from calm! In fact, the phrase frequently invoked by meditation teachers is "monkey mind" which brings up the image of monkeys jumping from tree to tree making lots of noise; not at all a peaceful and calm situation.
- This is our first lesson in the nature of our mind that it is in fact very busy and endlessly distracted. You may find you are able to focus on your breath for a few moments but this will be rapidly overtaken by thoughts: whether they be planning for the evening meal, running over what happened yesterday at work or questions such as "this meditation stuff is weird, and I'm no good at it, why am I doing this again?"

- Once we notice that our mind has drifted away from our breath we gently and non-judgmentally bring it back to the breath, and at the beginning of our meditation this is likely to happen many times every session. The well-known meditation teacher Pema Chodron recounts the story that at her very first introduction to meditation she focused on her breath once or twice at the beginning and then forgot about it until the meditation bell went off 20 minutes later. Not to overuse the exercise analogy, but we are not going to get fit right away, whether it's mentally or physically, and the key is to be non-judgemental with ourselves, don't beat ourselves up, gently move our attention back to the practice.

Alternate mindfulness of breathing using words or mantra

Some people find that it is easier to follow the breath if they use words, sometimes called "mantra." A word or phrase can be chosen and then followed for the duration of the in breath and out breath. Examples include the phrase "I am" or the Indian translation "Soham" (pronounced "So – hum)." The idea is to mentally repeat the word "I" or "So" for the length of the in breath, and then "am" or "Hum" for the length of the out breath, and this becomes the focus of concentration. As with mindfulness of breathing, when the mind wanders we become aware of this, and gently place our attention back on the word. The possibilities are endless as to which words we choose; I think the most important thing is for it to be personally meaningful for us.

What will happen after a period of days or weeks of meditation—all of us are different and unique in this regard – is that at some point our mind begins to "get it," it begins to calm down and stay on the object for longer and longer and as this happens we will often notice a natural calmness and relaxation manifesting. This is so predictable that Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School has called this effect of meditation the "relaxation response," whereby the gains of meditation appeared to become cumulative and kick in earlier and earlier during the session and last longer.

That is not to say that this is a strictly linear development, and that we simply get better and better and never go back to monkey mind, it is more of an overall tendency. Indeed, some people can tap into a sense of calm and peace very early in their meditation but then lose it, and it is more than possible to experience a lot of mental agitation even if you are an experienced meditator depending on the circumstances.

It is very common to feel we have failed and are bad at meditation if we experience distraction at any stage. However, we do not measure success in meditation in this way; while experienced meditators certainly tend to be less distracted and to go to relaxed states more quickly, no meditation is ever a failure because we didn't get to the state we wanted.

In fact, this brings us to a very important aspect of the whole mindfulness and meditation approach that we will be emphasizing, which is *learning to be right where we are without judgment*.

Two metaphors

One way of looking at what we are starting to do with meditation is learning a new way to minimize our habitual responses and reactivity to our experience.

There is a metaphor commonly used in Eastern thought when describing the process of meditation. Imagine as you become a bit quieter and close your eyes that your thoughts and feelings are like clouds in the sky, and that if you watch and observe them come into view, cross your view and then leave your view, that there is no real need to react to them at all. There may be bright sunny days and thunderclouds, and you may prefer one to the other, but there is no need to do anything about it. That impulse we have to “do something” in response to particular thoughts and feelings can be very strong, but we can teach ourselves to allow whatever is there to simply be there - we don’t try to encourage any particular thoughts or feelings, nor do we reject any.

The more we do this, the more we learn not to react so much to our internal experience. We learn in fact that we have a choice. If the thought comes up, “This meditation is the dumbest most boring thing I’ve ever done, I’m uncomfortable, and I want to get up and leave...now.” We can watch this thought, and realize, though it may be hard, that we do not have to do anything about this thought, we can simply witness it, observe it. We don’t deny it or avoid it, in fact we are doing exactly the opposite of avoiding - we are allowing it completely without resistance. What is different is that our normal impulse (i.e. that since I am uncomfortable I usually automatically get up or change my position), is not acted on.

Something interesting can then begin to be seen. If I don’t react to particular thoughts and images, they seem to lose some or even all of their power over time. *It seems as if reacting to the thoughts is itself the fuel that powers the belief.* If I strongly react to a thought and get pulled into it, it seems to gain strength and ends up lasting longer than if I simply allow it to be. That which is paid attention to grows in importance; by contrast, that which is not strongly reacted to begins to lose its power over time.

If the thought, “I’m a failure,” crosses my mind in the midst of meditation, I may react to it by thinking, “Oh my God, I know I am, this is terrible. I’ve been feeling this way forever it seems, what’s wrong with me, I can’t believe I can’t get rid of this feeling, I shouldn’t have it!” As you can imagine, this strong negative reaction to these thoughts tend to bring them into stronger relief, and creates an internal disturbance above and beyond the initial thoughts themselves, and this tends to prolong and exaggerate the process. On the other hand, if we just notice the thought, and perhaps simply label it as a thought, we can watch it come into awareness, then watch it leave as well without further ado.

Experienced meditators can also begin to develop the general capacity increasingly to observe their internal life without reacting to it. In a sense they become, if only for a while, an observer self that is witnessing events, rather than being identified with the particular content, this or that thought or feeling. In many ways this is mostly a matter of degree, where we can be more or less invested in our mind contents, or correspondingly more or less able to observe it without being pulled into it. When the observing self becomes very well established, however, a sort of nonattachment to internal and external events occurs where all events are welcomed with open arms but none is attached to or rejected, and in spiritual literature this is often called the witness.

The trick is to leave things alone, as difficult as this may seem at first - which brings us to our second metaphor. Let's say I have stirred up the mud in a small pond with a stick but my daughter wants the water to clear so she can see the fish. Do I use my stick to clear the mud? No, it will make it worse. Same with our mind, if we keep trying to figure out or manipulate our experience so we can become more peaceful (say) we will just stir things up. But the pond will clarify and settle if we leave it alone, and the same is true of our mind. As we learn to not to be pulled into things so much, to allow them, to let them be and observe them, our minds will settle naturally. We are learning to leave ourselves alone!

Mindfulness in everyday life

While it is certainly true that meditation over time will tend to bring us to places that are more peaceful and stable, I want to encourage you not to think of meditation as one period and the rest of your life as something else. It is more like a spectrum where doing meditation allows us to set aside a time devoted to becoming more present and attentive, and to look at the rest of our life as the place where we can continue to bring that presence and calm.

What we will notice of course is that it is the same mind both on and off the cushion, with the main difference being the additional distractions and demands of everyday life. Is it possible for the gains we achieve during our formal meditation to begin to generalize into the rest of our lives? The short answer is yes through the practice of mindfulness, though it requires a bit of work and support, very much like the practice of meditation itself.

The word "attention" is starting to pop up quite a lot here, and this is what we will be working on with both meditation and mindfulness, and as we generally start to pay more conscious attention to our lives, to live consciously. As touched on briefly previously, though meditation and mindfulness (as they're being taught here) are not in any way religious, and have been adapted for all kinds of health and therapeutic purposes, awareness and attention does not belong to any tradition, it is the birthright of us all as humans.

In this connection it is worth pointing out that the name Buddha comes from the Sanskrit root "budh" which means to awake, enlighten or know. Famously the Buddha himself was asked at one point whether he was a man or God and he simply replied "I'm awake." So this is really what we are aiming for in this course, to become more awake, more aware and more alive. The main problem for almost all of us is that to the extent that we are not awake, we might say that we are asleep, and by that I mean that we are often on automatic pilot, pulled this way and that way by the distractions of monkey mind.

How our history affects us

Here is an exercise that can demonstrate how our history and conditioning continue to affect us, which may or may not surprise us, though it can highlight whether the various attempts we have made to "fix" ourselves have really worked.

Take a moment and write down one or two issues that are currently psychologically difficult for you. Use the left hand side of the space provided below. Do not write about purely external or situational events independent of your reactions to them. Some of your psychological issues will be clearly related to specific situations, others may not. For example “my boss” would not be a good example of a difficult issue you experience, but “feeling put down by my boss” might be. The left-hand column can include any of your thoughts, feelings, memories, urges, bodily sensations, habits, or behaviors that may distress you, either alone or in combination with external events. Don’t over think it, just write down what plagues you and causes you pain.

After you’ve completed your list, go back and think about how long these issues have been a problem for you and write that down as well. (Hayes & Smith, 2005)

Painful and difficult issues I experience

How long this has been the case

This is often a revelatory exercise for many of us, to see that we have been wrestling with the same issues for so long. The purpose of doing this exercise is to begin a process of pointing out that our previous strategies towards these problems, which often involved struggling with them and trying to figure them out, might not have worked as well as we would have liked.

This is really where the approach of mindfulness - about which I’ll go into more detail in the next session - can be extremely helpful. Mindfulness is about beginning to take a less judgmental and more accepting approach to those things that we must reject about ourselves, those things that we find most uncomfortable or are most ashamed of, and how taking this somewhat counter-intuitive approach may prove more helpful in the long run. But in the meantime, when we review our history of attempts to fix ourselves, and whether these worked or not, this might make us more open to another approach - to at least give it a shot.

SESSION 2

Mindfulness

In this session we will go into more detail about what is nowadays being called ‘mindfulness’, which is really developing awareness of the present moment in all aspects of our lives. The value of living in the present can be seen on many levels, but one of the main advantages is that doing so can help combat many problems such as worry and low mood.

It is said that depression tends to involve thoughts and feelings about the past like sadness, regret and loss, and is often about events that we can’t change, whereas anxiety is more future oriented and is associated with worrying about what *might* happen, even it hasn’t happened yet, and may never happen - as Mark Twain famously said: “Most of the things I worried about in my life never happened.”

Clearly then, the more we are living our lives in the present, the less we are preoccupied by thoughts, memories and projections of the past and future. Well, that in a word is mindfulness, to become more and more aware of what is going on in our lives as it is happening, as we are actually living our lives; indeed living more in the moment is synonymous with living more fully. Mindfulness can be defined as the “awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to things as they are” (Williams, et al, 2007). The term “nonjudgmental” is of particular importance, because it is the habit we have of judging our experience, telling ourselves it (or we) should or must be different, which sets us up to struggle with our experience.

If we start to notice on a regular basis when we are present and when we aren’t, it may come as a bit of a shock. We have all had the experience of getting in our car, or taking a ride on the subway, then looking up to find we’ve arrived. Somehow we got there without really paying all that much attention to what was going on around us; instead, we were probably up in our heads, thinking about the future, that meeting we are about to attend or worrying about some interaction that happened last week, or last year. And even when we make the effort to pay more attention in a mindful way, we may find ourselves drawn again and again into old ways of being and reveries – the pull of old habits can be very strong.

The Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh explains mindfulness (or the lack of it) beautifully:

“There is a story in Zen circles about a man and a horse. The horse is galloping quickly, and it appears that the man on the horse is going somewhere important. Another man, standing alongside the road, shouts, 'Where are you going?' and the first man replies, I don't know! Ask the horse!" This is also our

story. We are riding a horse, we don't know where we are going, and we can't stop. The horse is our habit energy pulling us along, and we are powerless. We are always running, and it has become a habit. We struggle all the time, even during our sleep. We are at war within ourselves, and we can easily start a war with others.

We have to learn the art of stopping - stopping our thinking, our habit energies, our forgetfulness, the strong emotions that rule us. When an emotion rushes through us like a storm, we have no peace. We turn on the TV and then we turn it off. We pick up a book and then we put it down. How can we stop this state of agitation? How can we stop our fear, despair, anger, and craving? We can stop by practicing mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful smiling, and deep looking in order to understand. When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy.

But our habit energies are often stronger than our volition. We say and do things we don't want to and afterwards we regret it. We make ourselves and others suffer, and we bring about a lot of damage. We may vow not to do it again, but we do it again. Why? Because our habit energies push us.

We need the energy of mindfulness to recognize and be present with our habit energy in order to stop this course of destruction. With mindfulness, we have the capacity to recognize the habit energy every time it manifests. "Hello, my habit energy, I know you are there!" If we just smile to it, it will lose much of its strength. Mindfulness is the energy that allows us to recognize our habit energy and prevent it from dominating us.

Forgetfulness is the opposite. We drink a cup of tea, but do not know we are drinking a cup of tea. We sit with the person we love, but we don't know that she is there. We walk, but we are not really walking. We are someplace else, thinking about the past or the future. The horse of our habit energy is carrying

us along, and we are its captive. We need to stop our horse and reclaim our liberty. We need to shine the light of mindfulness on everything we do, so the darkness of forgetfulness will disappear. The first function of meditation and mindfulness is to stop.

The second function of meditation and mindfulness is calming. When we have a strong emotion, we know it can be dangerous to act, but we don't have the strength or clarity to refrain. We have to learn the art of breathing in and out, stopping our activities, and calming our emotions. We have to learn to become solid and stable like an oak tree, and not be blown from side to side by the storm.”

Benefits of mindfulness

The American Psychological Association recently posted on its website a review of the empirically accepted benefits of mindfulness, and it is worth quoting a good portion of it (Davis & Hayes, 2012):

“The term "mindfulness" has been used to refer to a psychological state of awareness, the practices that promote this awareness, a mode of processing information and a character trait. To be consistent with most of the research reviewed in this article, we define mindfulness as a moment-to-moment awareness of one's experience without judgment. In this sense, mindfulness is a state and not a trait. While it might be promoted by certain practices or activities, such as meditation, it is not equivalent to or synonymous with them.

Several disciplines and practices can cultivate mindfulness, such as yoga, tai chi and qigong, but most of the literature has focused on mindfulness that is developed through mindfulness meditation — those self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control and thereby foster general mental well-being and development and/or specific capacities such as calmness, clarity and concentration (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006)...

More specifically, research on mindfulness has identified these benefits:

Reduced rumination. Several studies have shown that mindfulness reduces rumination. In one study, for example, Chambers et al. (2008) asked 20 novice meditators to participate in a 10-day intensive mindfulness meditation retreat. After the retreat, the meditation group had significantly higher self-reported mindfulness and a decreased negative affect compared with a control group. They also experienced fewer depressive symptoms and less rumination...

Stress reduction. Many studies show that practicing mindfulness reduces stress. In 2010, Hoffman et al. conducted a meta-analysis of 39 studies that explored the use of mindfulness-based stress reduction

and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. The researchers concluded that mindfulness-based therapy may be useful in altering affective and cognitive processes that underlie multiple clinical issues.

Those findings are consistent with evidence that mindfulness meditation increases positive affect and decreases anxiety and negative affect. In one study, participants randomly assigned to an eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction group were compared with controls on self-reported measures of depression, anxiety and psychopathology, and on neural reactivity as measured by fMRI after watching sad films (Farb et al., 2010). The researchers found that the participants who experienced mindfulness-based stress reduction had significantly less anxiety, depression and somatic distress compared with the control group. In addition, the fMRI data indicated that the mindfulness group had less neural reactivity when they were exposed to the films than the control group, and they displayed distinctly different neural responses while watching the films than they did before their mindfulness training. These findings suggest that mindfulness meditation shifts people's ability to use emotion regulation strategies in a way that enables them to experience emotion selectively, and that the emotions they experience may be processed differently in the brain (Farb et al., 2010; Williams, 2010)...

Less emotional reactivity. Research also supports the notion that mindfulness meditation decreases emotional reactivity. In a study of people who had anywhere from one month to 29 years of mindfulness meditation practice, researchers found that mindfulness meditation practice helped people disengage from emotionally upsetting pictures and enabled them to focus better on a cognitive task as compared with people who saw the pictures but did not meditate (Ortner et al., 2007).

More cognitive flexibility. Another line of research suggests that in addition to helping people become less reactive, mindfulness meditation may also give them greater cognitive flexibility. One study found that people who practice mindfulness meditation appear to develop the skill of self-observation, which neurologically disengages the automatic pathways that were created by prior learning and enables present-moment input to be integrated in a new way (Siegel, 2007a). Meditation also activates the brain region associated with more adaptive responses to stressful or negative situations (Cahn & Polich, 2006; Davidson et al., 2003). Activation of this region corresponds with faster recovery to baseline after being negatively provoked (Davidson, 2000; Davidson, Jackson, & Kalin, 2000).

Relationship satisfaction. Several studies find that a person's ability to be mindful can help predict relationship satisfaction — the ability to respond well to relationship stress and the skill in communicating one's emotions to a partner. Empirical evidence suggests that mindfulness protects against the emotionally stressful effects of relationship conflict (Barnes et al., 2007), is positively associated with the ability to express oneself in various social situations (Dekeyser et al., 2008) and predicts relationship satisfaction (Barnes et al., 2007; Wachs & Cordova, 2007)."

Body Scan exercise

Though meditation is mindfulness training par excellence, there are any other ways of approaching becoming more present in our daily lives, and many people find it is easier to get in touch with their bodies which is a very good way of becoming mindful because - unlike your mind - your body can never be anywhere else than here right now!

You can do this exercise more slowly or less, depending on the time you have and how much you want to take, but say anywhere from 10 – 30 minutes. You can lie on the floor on a towel or mat with a cushion under your head in a comfortable way, making sure as much as possible that you will be undisturbed. You can also make a tape yourself that will guide you through the body scan rather than doing it mentally when you're on your own.

Please note, this is not a relaxation exercise, such as you might find in yoga, (though relaxation might result), it is a mindfulness exercise, aimed to bring you into relaxed present-moment, nonjudgmental awareness.

- Take a few slow, deep breaths into your abdomen, filling it up and slowly exhaling. Check in with your body as it is right now, and notice whatever you find, starting with feeling the contact the body is making with the floor.
- You then start to scan the body, bringing your awareness into different parts of the body, without judging what you are aware of, but as best you can bring attention to your experience moment to moment.
- You can then bring your awareness into your head as a whole. Starting with the crown of the head, notice any sensations here, tingling, energy, tightness whatever you find. Then feeling the weight of the head as it rests on the cushion, including in awareness the forehead, whether there is tightness or ease. Then including the eyes, the nose, jaw, mouth and tongue, being aware moment by moment of any changing patterns of sensations.
- As always throughout the exercise, you will notice your mind wandering from time to time, and as we do during meditation, gently bring your attention back to the part of the body you are focusing on without giving yourself a hard time.
- Then letting go of the head and face, breathe into your neck and shoulders, and become aware of the muscles in this part of the body, including any tension or holding in the neck and throat, but not judging what you find, just allowing what is there, noticing it.
- Move your awareness now to the shoulders, the places where there is contact between the shoulders and the floor, moving your awareness into the arms, elbows, wrists, hands and fingers, aware of what is here in each moment. If it helps your attention in this or any other area of your body, you can gently breathe into the area, but this is up to you, whatever allows you more relaxed attention.
- Shifting the focus now to the chest area, notice the rise and fall of the chest with the in and out breaths, as it rises and falls in the ribcage, front and back of the ribs, sides of the ribs, the upper back resting on the floor. Noticing any aches and pains here and seeing if you can bring a sense of gentleness and kindness to these areas.
- Turn your awareness now to the abdomen and stomach; notice your attitude to this part of your body, see if you can allow it to be as it is, whether it feels hard or soft here, taking a relaxed and accepting approach to this part of the body. Then move your awareness to the lower back, the lower spine, feeling the gentle pressure as the back meets the floor before moving your awareness to the area of your hips, the hip bones, and genitals, noticing any sensations or lack of sensations that are here.
- Now let go of the torso as the centre of your awareness and move your attention into the thighs of both legs, feel the weight of the legs, gently noticing what other sensations there are here, tuning into the skin, bone and muscle of the legs here. Again, breathe into these areas if you find this helpful as well.

- Next turning your attention gently towards the knees, bringing a friendly attention, notice if there is any discomfort here, and if there is none then noticing what is there.
- Move your attention into the calves of both legs, noticing how your muscles feel here, feeling this part of the legs from the inside out, the flesh and bone of the lower legs. And again checking in where your attention is from time to time and noticing the quality of your attention seeing if it is possible to bring a gentleness and kindness into your awareness, not forcing your self, bringing a lightness of touch to your attention in this part of the body.
- Finally move your attention into both feet, the heels of the feet, the instep the balls and soles of the feet, the tops of the feet, and finally the toes, see if it's possible to distinguish one toe from another. Notice whether there is tension here, sensations, numbness, tingling and allow any tension to soften as you bring a gentle attention to it.
- Now take one or two deeper breaths and widen your focus, filling the whole body with awareness, noticing whatever is present, sweeping the body with your awareness from top to bottom, experiencing the body from the inside out. Noticing whether there is any discomfort in any part of the body as you fill the body with a gentle awareness and seeing if you can simply allow any tensions or pain that might be present as and when you notice it. Feeling the energy of life flowing through you. And resting in awareness of this amazing body that you have with kind compassion for its pains and appreciation for its capacities and the wonder of it.

This practice can also be the basis of a good mindful touchstone throughout the day - if you find yourself distracted and up in your head, feel back into your full body briefly, as you learn to do in this exercise, and this can re-orient you back into the present, as can taking a few mindful breaths; whatever is going on, whether we like it or not, we can give ourselves some space and flexibility to be right where we are.

Mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT)

So how can mindfulness actually, concretely help us in our everyday life and how is it a different approach to what we have been doing? How can it help, for example, with those issues and problems we identified in the exercise at the end of the first session?

Through our practice of meditation, and some of our reading so far, we can see that some elements in common include learning to observe our experience and not be so judgmental, which in turn allows us not to get so pulled in and as hooked as has been the case in the past.

In their book *The Mindful Way Through Depression*, (while depression is focused on here, these principles apply to any negative feeling, anything at all we wish to reject), Mark Williams and colleagues tells us that: "At the earliest stages in which mood starts to spiral downwards it is not the mood that does the damage, but how we react to it, and it is our habitual efforts to extricate ourselves which, far from freeing us, that actually keeps us locked in the pain we're trying to escape." Through the practices of mindfulness, meditation and compassion (which will be addressed in the next session), we can begin to be a bit more gentle and accepting with ourselves.

According to Williams, the source of our harshness with ourselves and our experience comes from the way our brains are structured. Negative emotions such as fear and anxiety are meant to be

uncomfortable, to get our attention. “The signals are exquisitely designed to push us to act, to do something to rectify the situation.” Our ancestors would not have survived long if they did not react quickly and automatically when faced with a hungry wild animal on the plains of Africa; similarly, we react without thinking when we see a child of ours playing in the street, and so we should.

However, it is not coincidental that the examples used are of appropriate reactions to threats which are external, outside of us. But what of internal threats, threats such as the fear of panic or depression, or feeling inadequate or ashamed, how does the brain react to these which can seem just as scary and in need of a quick fix as any external threat? It turns out that typically the brain does *not* distinguish between internal and external threats, so when we notice that our mood has changed, that we’re feeling a bit more hopeless or helpless, or a bit more panicky, the mind will get out the same tool box it uses for any other problem, and it will try to figure it out.

But is this the best way forward with feelings and emotions? Obviously we can’t run away from our fear and sadness like we would a tiger, “nor can we eliminate unpleasant, oppressive, and threatening thoughts and feelings by fighting them and trying to annihilate them.” The brain circuitry so beautifully and effectively designed to avoid threats in the outside world does not seem so well suited to internal threats, even though the same internal apparatus, the “fight or flight” response has been activated, which leaves us with a clear dilemma.

There may be a particular feeling that we don’t like and want to get rid of it, except that our usual way of doing so, to fight it or escape from it, does not really apply to our own inner life. Moreover, this problem can be further complicated if we have a history of the kinds of unpleasant feelings and emotions and thoughts that are arising, because they may remind us of past episodes of depression or anxiety and reawaken past feelings of inadequacy or deficiency without us realizing it.

However, this is pretty much what we attempt to do with negative internal states. In short, we begin to struggle with our experience; we feel we shouldn’t be feeling this way, and that there must be something wrong with us not only for feeling the way we do, but also for constantly not being able to figure it out, to master it, and this can go on for a very long time! This can have the effect of making what might simply be, for example, a passing feeling of loneliness into more of a state or situation or judgment of unworthiness that desperately needs to be changed, which is exactly what we cannot seem to accomplish! We can end up in the “self-focused, self-critical frame of mind” known as rumination, trying but failing to “think our way out of our moods by working out what’s gone wrong.”

Fortunately, there is a way out as Williams and Teasdale tell us: “Evolution has bequeathed us an alternative to critical thinking, and we humans have only just begun to realize its power to transform us. It is called awareness.”

What MBCT is telling us is that it is often not the feeling, pattern or event itself that is the problem, but our reaction to it, often based on past bad experiences that may not be relevant in this moment. For example, allowing a present feeling of sadness or loneliness arise without judgment may allow us to see that it is just that, a temporary feeling that can thus be allowed to naturally arise and fall, rather than beginning a futile attempt at rumination and control of the emotion that feeds a process of struggle and conflict with ourselves which we cannot win.

As alluded to above, meditation and mindfulness are not just about lessening the effects of painful thoughts and experiences, but are also – and perhaps more importantly - in the service of living a more vital and engaged life. We will get into this area of taking action in more detail in the last section.

Practicing mindfulness in everyday life

We can be mindful of both our inner and outer experience. As far as the external world is concerned, here are some practices we can bring to our lives:

- We can decide to notice whenever we engage in an activity we usually accomplish without paying much attention, such as brushing our teeth. Every time you pick up your toothbrush, try to remember to pay attention to the brushing, maybe slow it down and taste the toothpaste, feel the sensations in your mouth.
- Mindful eating is something we have the opportunity to do several times a day. Again, slow down and see if you can chew a few more times, feel the taste and texture of the food in your mouth, taste all the various flavors, feel the satisfaction from a good meal.
- Engage in a practice that is naturally mindful, like yoga or tai chi.
- Throughout the day, check into your body as we do with the body scan, briefly feeling into it will help you get out of your head.
- Walk or do your regular exercise in a more mindful way, watching and feeling into each step, bring a gentle awareness to what is going on, and if you are outside, look and listen, what do you see and hear around you?
- As you interact with your loved ones, pause and notice what is going on, do you find you are engaged in patterns that seem repetitive, and if so, can you just allow yourself to see this without judgment, or feeling you know that “right way” to interact? This pause can allow some new choices and psychological flexibility to become available.

Internally, we are developing a different relationship to our inner experience, especially with difficult thoughts, patterns and feelings. Rather than being identified or “fused” with our thoughts, we can take a step back in awareness and watch what is happening without being pulled in and pushed around - we can let things be.

- When we notice that our mood has changed, maybe for the worst, we can ask when did this start and *what has been going through my mind* since then? We can begin to see the connection between our thoughts and our moods, that maybe it is as much what we’re saying to ourselves about what happened that is causing us to feel a certain way, not the event itself. If so, we can also ask, are our thoughts true? Maybe they’re exaggerated, and we can begin to calm ourselves down a bit when see this, at least we are not just going along automatically with what is going through our minds.

- It may seem counter intuitive not to want to get rid of a “bad” or overwhelming feeling but what if we can say to ourselves that every feeling may be giving us a bit of useful information and that it is part of us, and to consider befriending the darker and more confused parts of ourselves as well as the parts we prefer. We can learn to breathe into the discomfort, and give it some space, expand and relax around it even. In addition (as we will go into more in the next session) we can be increasingly compassionate and welcoming toward all parts of ourselves as a mother would to a distressed child, welcoming and nonjudgmental.
- So mindfulness of thoughts and feelings is first about being aware of what is going on. This alone allows some choice, as we are not “on automatic” as events occur and we react without thinking, without awareness. We can observe what we are thinking and see if our thoughts and beliefs are exaggerated or not, and we can even welcome difficult and uncomfortable feelings rather than pushing them away, because this is a recipe for struggle with ourselves, and acceptance is a recipe for more peace - no matter what, feelings and thoughts will *always* change if we allow them, while struggling with them will more likely increase their presence and hold on us.

SESSION 3

Compassion is a kind of healing agent which helps us to tolerate the hurt of seeing the truth. The function of compassion in the work is not to reduce hurt; its function is to lead to the truth. Much of the time, the truth is painful or scary. Compassion makes it possible to tolerate that hurt and fear. It is on the side of truth, and helps us to persist in our search for truth. The truth will ultimately dissolve the hurt, but this is a by-product. In fact, it is only when compassion is present that people will allow themselves to see the truth. Where there is no compassion there is no trust.

A. H. Almaas

Avoidance, Acceptance and Compassion

This mindfulness thing may seem to make a lot of sense - that is until we experience some really difficult and painful experience, and then it can feel like maybe not such a hot idea after all! What's wrong with escaping from or avoiding what's unpleasant and uncomfortable anyway, is this 'being present' always such a great idea?

Avoidance

Avoidance is an absolutely natural instinctive reaction to events and emotions that we find painful, disturbing and scary - we shrink back and withdraw, and sometimes we need to do so to survive. Actually, there doesn't have to be overly painful experiences for us to try to escape our experience, the everyday hassles of life can also seem easier to deal with on automatic pilot.

But what can appear to be a viable short term solution to pain and discomfort can turn into a long term liability if it becomes habitual. We all develop an approach to our lives - to a greater or lesser extent - that allows us to avoid painful personal problems. To avoid dealing with painful feelings, thoughts, or memories, we can withdraw and settle for less aliveness and meaning in our life, it just seems easier to numb out and escape.

Some of these strategies obviously bring with them a whole raft of new (and sometime bigger problems) such as might happen when we drink too much or end up home-bound because we don't like the anxiety that socializing brings. Often our moves are more subtle, though, and most likely we're not even aware of them and then we can be surprised when we turn around later in life and discover that we are not feeling so alive and engaged, that something seems to be "missing" from our lives.

Another of the psychological therapies that has emerged in recent years that utilizes acceptance and mindfulness is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). A well known ACT book by Kirk Strosahl and

Patricia Robinson (2008) outlines three main ways we choose avoidance over mindfulness, and what effect this might have on us.

We have already been exploring their first category, “Acceptance vs. Rejection of Unwanted Internal Experiences” and tried to show that our natural tendency to try to avoid distressing internal events might not always work for us as well as we would like. Rejection may set us up for an ongoing internal struggle, trying to rid ourselves or minimize unpleasant emotions, thoughts and memories which may actually increase their persistence and intensity as we pay more and more attention to them and try to control them.

The second category, “Living Intentionally vs. Living on Autopilot,” points to the possibility of more freedom and flexibility to make choices in the moment, choices we may not even have been aware of. This can also help answer the question that comes up for many, which is “now that I’m more mindful, what do I do now, do I just sit here and pay attention?” Actually, moments when we slow down and reflect and are silent can be enormously valuable in themselves and can give us a sense of balance in today’s frantic world, but there is much more to this question and we will return to it in more depth in the last session.

Though we have mostly been emphasizing mindfulness as being more aware of and allowing of our inner life, it is important to note that inner avoidance is very connected to outer avoidance, which leads to the issue of “Approaching vs. Avoiding Difficult Situations.” In short, people who avoid distressing aspects of their own inner life will often avoid events in the world that might bring up these feelings. If I am spending a good deal of time and energy trying to escape from my inner feelings of inadequacy, for example, then I will be less likely to attend social events that I am scared will bring out these feelings.

The overall result may be living an increasingly constricted life, withdrawing from situations that are emotionally challenging, with a consequent loss of engagement and vitality in life. On the other hand, accepting unwanted experiences, living more intentionally and not isolating ourselves so much from potentially difficult situations can have the opposite effect: increasingly our vitality and participation in life and an approach to living that I will be calling “Mindful Engagement” in the last session.

Acceptance

And what of all this “accepting” we have been talking about, doesn’t this make it *less* likely that we will take action that might be necessary for change?

Strosahl & Robinson (2008) summarize very neatly what we are trying to say here:

“Most emotions are learned and automatically triggered responses to specific situations, interactions, or events. Since we’re programmed to emit emotional responses almost from the moment of birth, there’s no way to keep them from occurring in response to stressful or unpleasant situations. However, by using mindfulness and acceptance strategies, you can step back from your instantaneous emotions, rather than be consumed by them. Similarly, unpleasant thoughts, memories, and some physical sensations are based in learning, occur automatically, and cannot be willfully snuffed out of existence. When you learn to accept, rather than struggle with, aspects of your inner world over which you have no control, you can invest your time and energy in things you can control.”

Acceptance in the context of mindfulness thus applies in the first place to our inner experience, and not necessarily to situations. So for example, if I find I am angry at my spouse or boss, acceptance means acknowledging what I am feeling about this person in the moment, whether I like it or not, but it does not mean we must accept the situation that caused the anger. Actually, being aware of the emotion can let us know that it might be necessary to take action, because it has alerted us to the fact that something is wrong, which is its purpose - there is an innate intelligence to our emotions. There are certainly aspects of our lives that we have more control over, particularly in the area of our behaviors rather than our inner lives.

A neat summary of our approach here is provided by the Serenity prayer:

“Grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change what I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

So acceptance does not mean approval or resignation, it is about seeing what is actually going on. What we are accepting is what is going on right now, so it is happening already, but that does not mean we are assuming the situation need stay this way in the future. In fact, as discussed above, getting in touch with an emotion might give us important information about a particular circumstance or individual that we might not have if we were avoiding looking too closely at what is going on, and maybe too the motivation to do something about it.

We might say that through acceptance we are interrupting the whole process of judging ourselves that keeps so many of our old patterns in place. If every time a familiar negative feeling or experience comes up I say to myself: “there it is again I can’t stand this, what’s wrong with me, I can’t seem to change this after all this time,” this action may actually have the effect of keeping this pattern frozen in place. We judge this event instantaneously which means there is no space to allow and actually feel the emotions, so in a way they never got processed, never get looked at freshly and understood.

What if instead we were to pause and inquire in an open hearted and non judgmental way into this phenomenon that we think we know so well, but may not really understand at all? As A. H. Almaas puts it: “The problem here is not that you want to change but do not change. The problem is that you are not allowing the change because you want it in a certain way.” If through gentleness and compassionate non-judgmental awareness we can increasingly allow our feelings and inner process to unfold *in their own way*, we may find new ways out of old dilemmas: we may even begin to realize that sometimes the goal is not in fact to “change” anything at all, but to simply be curious and understand – but this will not happen if we believe we already “know” what is best for us, even if this has not worked for us for as long as we can remember!

Loving kindness and compassion practice

Hopefully the discussion so far has shown that our myriad ways of escape are not always our friend; and yet when we are in pain, it seems to make perfect sense. One of the practices that can be most helpful

during difficult times, and that I think is most needed in our culture today, is the practice of compassion, both for others and also for ourselves. Sometimes it is just too plain hard to stay present, we just don't want to do it, and compassion can make it possible and can actually revolutionize our attitude towards inner events that may have bothered us for as long as we can remember.

One way of seeing the benefit of compassion is to imagine a child who has been bullied at school. If that child is able to come home to an understanding and welcoming mother or parent, who unconditionally accepts the child and her feelings, then this can revolutionize how the child feels towards what has happened. In the same way, if we are unconditionally accepting, empathetic and loving towards ourselves regardless of what has happened (or is still happening) it can really help us to be with what is arising and we can know that everything is really "all right" even if the feeling itself is still very much with us.

This can be easier said than done and one of the main obstacles that come up is that we may feel we don't deserve such compassion, or that we need to earn it. If we are disappointed about not getting a promotion at work, we may not feel that the right response is not compassion but to work harder. Well, we can work harder and also have compassion for ourselves, but I think this highlights an important issue for many of us, which is a kind of conditional self-acceptance. I'll be nice to myself, I'll be OK when I've reached this goal or dealt with that bad habit. In other words, my inner worth depends on some confluence of external events to line up, then I'll be happy, then I can accept myself.

But does it actually work that way? Take a moment and remember a time when you achieved some valued goal and the aftermath. Did you feel good about yourself for a while before feeling the need to move on, and has this pattern been repeated many times since - are we allowed contentment only for a while, and then we need to start working again? There is most certainly nothing wrong with challenging oneself, indeed it is part of what we are calling mindful engagement, but what if we could live such a life and also be content with ourselves because the contentment is coming from within, and not dependent on gaining (or not losing) something from the outside?

The cognitive psychologist Albert Ellis talks of the ideal of "Unconditional Self Acceptance" (with the useful acronym USA), and just looking at it this way can help us see where we're prepared to accept ourselves unconditionally, and where we're not.

In her book *"Loving Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness"*, Sharon Salzberg distinguishes between love as sentimentality and love as passion. Passion is "enmeshed in feelings of desire, or of owning and possessing. Passion gets entangled with needing things to be a certain way, with having our expectations met" while sentimentality "is a facsimile of caring that limits itself only to experiences of pleasure." Loving-kindness on the other hand, is "unconditional, open and unobstructed." While compassion is sympathetic awareness of the suffering of others, and ourselves, Tulku Thondup defines loving kindness as "the thought of wishing joy for all beings and the whole universe – without limits and conditions – and putting that wish into practice." Typically, for the reasons already discussed, we often find it just as hard to wish ourselves to be happy and joyful as we do to accept our negative emotions without resistance.

Metta (Compassion) meditation instructions

The Buddhist tradition has a special place for the development of loving-kindness. Jack Kornfield in his book “*A Path with Heart*” sets out the ancient practice of *metta* or loving-kindness/compassion. Like the other meditative practices outlined in this book, it is best to choose a regular time in a quiet place each day during which to do this meditation, starting perhaps at 10-15 minutes and working up to 30 minutes if this feels right. It is also quite all right to use metta meditation for 5-10 minutes as a preparation to the mindfulness of breathing; in fact doing so can ease out some of the jagged edges of the day and allow the mind to settle a bit, which naturally will help our concentration. If this meditation is done regularly it can have tremendous affect on both the person herself and her relations with those around her, especially those she might be angry at or resentful of.

Think of a time when you felt really loved and appreciated and accepted. It can be from your childhood, perhaps from your mother, but it can be more recent such as towards a child, or anytime at all. It doesn't have to be a big event you are recalling, and the memory can involve anyone/thing at all, such as a beloved pet. Summon up how this felt, emotionally, and feel it in your body and make it as vivid as possible. This may be difficult to begin with, but persist, the more you do this practice, the easier it will get. Then direct these feelings and thoughts of goodwill and friendliness towards yourself, and recite the following inwardly:

May I be filled with loving-kindness

May I be well

May I be peaceful and at ease

May I be happy

I encourage people to be creative here: whatever images, words and forms it may take for a person to get in touch with loving kindness are encouraged. More so than in other meditative practices, it's what works for you. Recite the phrases again and again, letting the feelings permeate your body and mind. If it feels odd or dry, gently continue, because as with all the practices, we get better at them.

When you feel ready, begin expanding the focus of your loving-kindness to others. Begin with a friend, and repeat the phrases above, saying to yourself

May _____ be filled with loving-kindness

May _____ be well

May _____ *be peaceful and at ease*

May _____ *be happy*

Not surprisingly perhaps, it is often easier to contact genuine feelings of compassion towards a loved one than oneself. When you feel ready, take some of these warm feelings and extend the practice next to someone who you regard neutrally, such as a receptionist you walk by every day or a bus driver on the route you take, someone who may feel indifferent towards and not given any thought to until this moment.

Next, when you feel ready to do so, see if you can extend it to someone who you don't like so much, even someone who you may dislike, or worse. One of the interesting things that comes up for many people at this point is to see that our usual ability to love is quite conditional, that there are some who may "deserve" it, or some who don't (not unlike our attitude towards ourselves perhaps). This is not to say that we should extend this meditation to people who have abused us - unless we wish to do so, perhaps to forgive them at some point if this is one's choice - but it can be revelatory to put oneself in the position of another person we feel negative towards in this way. To see that they too want the same things we do - love, to be safe and happy and healthy, and are trying their best to achieve this, most likely with mixed results (like us)!

Then see if you can visualize together in front of you all the people you've included so far in the meditation, including yourself, imagining extending loving kindness to them all at the same time as a group, quite a motley crew it may turn out!

Lastly, expand your loving kindness from this small group to your community, then your country, the world and the Universe itself, wishing the best for all beings unconditionally.

It goes without saying that all or part of this may be difficult, and can feel forced to say the least, certainly to begin with, but it may also touch us deeply and feel very freeing, as the boundaries that separate us from others can seem to dissolve in openness and love, at least for a while. This experience can make us wonder if the typical separation we feel from others is really there, or is in some way created and projected by our mind.

Just do your best, and you may be surprised by how you feel if you are able to stick with this practice for a few weeks, or even decide to make it a permanent part of your spiritual life. Paradoxically, sending loving kindness to those we feel at odds or angry with can help us deal better with these relationships and maybe help us look differently at the same old ways we have been interacting with these people.

Sometimes too, the other meditations can seem a bit dry after a while and bringing more love and compassion into our meditations can be very invigorating and a good balance to the concentration and insight meditations. In general the Buddhists say that practice involves two aspects, wisdom and compassion, and we need them both.

SESSION 4

“Move a muscle, change a thought”

12 Step saying

Bringing the practice into everyday life

As you’re probably well aware of by now, it is hard enough to stay in contact with our breath for 15 minutes, let alone being mindful for a whole day! This is a good time to re-emphasize two points: everyone becomes more mindful gradually and over time, and no-one does it perfectly. At the same time, as we see progress and change, we can come to experience life in way we didn’t think possible, by being both more aware and alive, and also more relaxed because we are not struggling with ourselves quite as much – it is well and truly about the journey, rather than “getting somewhere.” Indeed, one of the common understandings that can come about through regular practice is the sense that here in the present moment is our home which in a way we have never left.

We might think of meditation and mindfulness as conferring three types of benefits: the intrinsic value of being more present in our lives, the psychological benefits outlined in session 2, and the benefits I will be going into in more detail in this chapter, of minimizing inner obstacles to living a life more in conformity with our values.

What these practices of acceptance and mindfulness allow us to do - as set forth in the first quote in the first session - is to cultivate our ability to hold the underlying energy of the moment by increasing the ‘container’ of awareness and spaciousness. Often we want to do anything but feel what’s happening energetically and our usual escape mechanism is to go up into our heads and try to ‘figure it out.’ Pema Chodron (2008) has a wonderfully pithy summary of this whole approach in two instructions:

- Drop the storyline
- Stay with the underlying energy of the moment

We are learning to stay in the moment even when it might be uncomfortable, and this allows us (gradually) to increase our capacity to hold our emotions without reacting in the usual ways, including our habitual evasions and escapes.

- Don’t repress
- Don’t act out
- Stay with the energy of the moment.

As is the case with much of mindfulness training, these instructions are simple but not easy. They help us become aware of our habit energy and give us the strength to interrupt our negative patterns of

thinking and acting, and also to befriend them, to be more accepting and compassionate of ourselves, and less rejecting. Sooner or later, we are typically brought in these practices to what is commonly known as “non-identification.” which is no longer identifying ourselves so much with this or that passing thought, emotion or self-image, and more with the awareness itself, which is always with us, always witnessing what is going on.

Making choices and taking action

You may be wondering, with all this emphasis on slowing down a bit and become more mindful and less “busy” and distracted, why would we introduce a focus on action now?

Mindfulness has two components, the act of being aware of what is going on right now, and closely implied, the act of moving consciously towards life, which is not at all the same thing as losing ourselves in busyness. There is an element of action that is intertwined with coming into the present - coming into the present is not an abstract concept or experience, it is landing where we are right now, it is dynamic reality. So the issue that naturally comes up for many at this point is, if we are not so identified with this or that passing experience, and not so much on automatic, how can we live more intentionally?

You may remember the exercise we did at the end of the first session, looking to see what was bothering us in our lives, and how long that had been hanging around. One of the reasons for this exercise was to see not only how long the pattern had been with us but also (as the past sessions have unfolded), to introduce us to some new ways of approaching old problems, notably by becoming more aware and allowing rather than jumping in to try to control and change ourselves.

We are now moving more into the realm of taking action and the practical issues involved in bringing our lessons in mindfulness and meditation into our everyday life, and to see how this might help us live our lives more fully and vitally.

To this end, here is another exercise that builds on the previous one. Whatever you wrote down in the first exercise, you can insert here as well, or you can put in something else if you prefer.

Perhaps using the results of the first exercise make a short list of some of the difficult issues you experience in your life, and then using some of the issues you have just identified, fill in the blank lines of this exercise:

1. If _____, weren't such a problem, then I would

2. If I didn't have _____, then I would

To give you some ideas, this is how the exercise could be done:

1. If _____ ***My Anger*** _____ weren't such a problem, then I would have
_____ ***Closer Relationships*** _____

2. If I didn't have _____ ***So much anxiety*** _____ then I would _____
_____ ***Have more friends*** _____

As Steven Hayes says (2004) of this exercise: "You have just discovered that all your problems provide you with two sources of pain. It is not just your [bad feelings] that create pain. Your pain is also holding you back from living the life you want to lead. There are activities you would be engaged in if it weren't for your pain and the role it plays in your life."

Often we act on the assumption that only when I have sorted out my social anxiety (for example) will it be possible for me to become more social, and not before. If I can solve my problem then I can really start to live my life, but probably not before. This chapter is about using the skills and lesson from our mindfulness and meditation in furtherance of living a fuller life. Can we start to move towards the life we desire even though all our problems have yet to be resolved, and if so, how?

One of the paradoxical things we may have discovered in our work so far is that giving our negative emotions some space as we become aware of them can act to "defuse" them, so to speak. It's not as if mindfulness gets rid of them so much as reduce their power over us, their charge and ability to deflect and destabilize us as we go about our daily life. Practicing mindfulness therefore is not just about coming into the present moment for its own sake - though this is true too - it can also act to reduce the hold that our old feelings, memories and emotions have over us (including inhibiting ourselves or engaging in dysfunctional behaviors) and if that hold is lessened, we will be better able to pursue what is of value to us in life without getting so hooked by disturbing thoughts and feelings along the way.

In other words we don't need to change all kinds of things about ourselves before we can fashion more of the life we want – unlike our inner life, our behaviors are more amenable to our voluntary choices, and we can start right now, right where we are!

Values and goals

Though identifying values and goals has not usually been part of meditation and mindfulness work I have found that it has been very helpful for many people I have worked with. Perhaps that is because meditation and mindfulness in the West are not just about spiritual enlightenment as has traditionally been the case in the East (though it can be if we wish, as one of the values we choose to pursue), but also about living a fuller life, less impeded by our personal habits and histories. To this end, the values identification exercises of ACT have proven very helpful for many trying to live a more present centered and “intentional” life (Hayes & Smith, 2005).

Values can be looked at as what it is we want our life to *stand for*, which is not some project or goal that at some point gets accomplished, but more of an ongoing expression of our being and what is most important to us. An example would be valuing being a good parent or valuing living a healthy life. Generally speaking, the pursuit of our values never ends because they are an ongoing expression of how we wish to live our lives, we are not a good parent this week and then done with it!

Goals enter the picture when we wish to make our values more concrete - my value of being a good parent may be expressed by making sure I turn up for all my son’s soccer games whether or not this is convenient from the point of view of my work. A goal associated with the value of living a healthy life could be to exercise three times a week, and there are of course other ways to express this value as well. The two are clearly related, but not identical; an important difference is that I cannot “fail” at my values; they just are what they are without any justification needed and while we do the best we can to put them into effect through various goals and projects, the values remain just what they are.

Another important point about values is that they are freely chosen expressions of what is most important to us in life not (it must be stated) chosen because this is what our parents or our spouse or the culture at large regards as important - rather, it is truly what is most important to us personally. This choice really should come from the heart and not the head; often we can get caught up in giving reasons and justifications for choosing this value over that value, and while it is fine to have thought things through in this way, it is critically important to realize that no justification is required or necessary.

To give a simple example: if I ask you if you prefer Italian or Japanese food, you may be quite clear that you prefer Italian. If I ask you why that is you may give any number of reasons including “it tastes better.” If I were to ask why Italian cuisine tastes better than Japanese, you might end up saying “it just does” - in other words it is not ultimately about reason giving. And while it may be true that there are subordinate reasons, such as the presentation of the food or the healthiness of the Mediterranean diet, ultimately no justification is needed for your choice, and so it is with choosing your values.

Value in various domains of life

Values can usefully be identified in various significant areas, which ACT usually lists as follows. Take some time to think about each of these domains and make a copy of the form below and write down a

short narrative about your values in the boxes provided below. We are talking about values, not goals here - though we will discuss goals later – so remember that what you put here does not have a completion date, though values may of course naturally evolve over time. The boxes have been filled in by way of guidance for that specific domain.

DOMAIN	VALUE NARRATIVE
FAMILY LIFE (NOT COUPLES OR PARENTING)	What sort of sibling, or son/daughter do I wish to be?
MARRIAGE & INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS	Do you want a marriage or intimate relationship, what sort of person would you like to be in the relationship?
PARENTING	Do you want children, how would you like to act as parent, now or when you become a parent?
CAREER & EMPLOYMENT	This is about the kind of work you would like to do, as well as how you would do it, e.g. how would you treat your co-workers?
FRIENDSHIPS & SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS	What does it mean to you to be a good friend?
EDUCATION & PERSONAL GROWTH	What level of education would you like to achieve? Remember it's never too late for some sort of ongoing education and training. How would you like to act towards your fellow students, now or in the future?
RECREATION & FUN	We are all too serious, how can you enjoy yourself more, what sorts of activities would you like to pursue?
SPIRITUALITY & RELIGION	For some this may mean formal religious practice, for others sitting meditation at home or on retreat, for others artistic pursuits or appreciation, or experiences in nature.
COMMUNITY LIFE	Do you wish to become more involved in your community, how do you see yourself and how can you get involved?
HEALTH & PHYSICAL SELF CARE	Is physical and mental health a value for you? How do you see this? Are you looking after everyone else but overlooking yourself? How might you value your own needs more?

For many people, this can be a revelatory exercise. They may never, or only in a piecemeal way, have sat down and pondered what is important to them in such a comprehensive fashion, and the results can be surprising.

The next step is to see which of these areas are most important in your life, how your current life reflects this, and what might constitute some steps to move your life more in the direction of that value, through the identification of goals.

In the box for current importance, write down how much you are able to devote yourself to this value in your life right now (all scoring here is out of 10, with 10 the highest). This can be contrasted with the

box for overall importance, which means how you would ideally like it to look. With the proposed actions, try to be as specific as possible. Some common responses have been added to give a sense of how this could be filled this out; and you will see that often how much we are able to devote ourselves to a particular domain may be less than ideal. This is common – we are all busy and not everything is possible - but at least we can begin to see where we would like to make changes in our lives, and where we are actually pretty happy with things as they are.

DOMAIN	CURRENT IMPORTANCE	OVERALL IMPORTANCE	PROPOSED ACTIONS/GOALS
FAMILY LIFE (NOT COUPLES OR PARENTING)	5	8	Not spending as much time with Mom as I would like, I plan to schedule in more time, at least once a week going forward
MARRIAGE & INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS	7	10	I think I could be more helpful around the house with housework to help my wife out. I will start doing the grocery shopping every week with her, as she has asked.
PARENTING	8	10	I will cut back on my travel for work so I can go to my son's weekly soccer match.
CAREER & EMPLOYMENT	4	8	I think I need to look for a new job in my area of expertise. I will start looking very day in the employment section of the paper and online.
FRIENDSHIPS & SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS			
EDUCATION & PERSONAL GROWTH			
RECREATION & FUN	8	8	I'm enjoying myself right now and make sure I take time off
SPIRITUALITY & RELIGION	4	7	It might be interesting to explore a spiritual retreat at some point
COMMUNITY LIFE	3	3	I'm a private person and don't feel the need to get too involved in the community beyond what I do now, donating money to various charities.
HEALTH & PHYSICAL SELF CARE			

Putting it all together: Mindful Engagement

There may seem to have been a lot of ideas presented so far in this course, but I think they can be simplified by looking at them through the lens of three ideas: awareness, acceptance and action. Awareness is about becoming more aware of where we are at a particular moment, which is a necessary precondition for taking effective action of any kind. Acceptance shows us a way to stop struggling with

our experience, and also how to develop some emotional tolerance and gentleness towards ourselves (and others), to see that we can have and fully experience our feelings without harsh self-judgment. This section on action is about developing the ability to self-activate and take healthy action, even if we don't feel like it!

The overall approach taken so far can perhaps be simplified even further, using the term *Mindful Engagement* – that is, to live our lives with as much awareness as possible, being mindful of our thoughts and feelings (and our avoidance), and choosing to engage more fully in our lives in a valued way: in short to live in a way that is **aware, open and active**.

Living a life of mindful engagement is not just aimed at greater present moment awareness and compassion, but can also help answer the question: how shall I best live my life as I am becoming more mindful?

The use of the words “develop” and “practice” above mean exactly that: we need to take responsibility for ourselves and work on these skills, because they will not happen by themselves. But we should also remember our kindness to ourselves and watch out for our success/failure judgments, and not be discouraged when we don't practice as much as we feel we should, or things progress slower than we would like.

So while an approach of mindful engagement can be a helpful way to look at how to live our life going forward, we are of course also faced with more acute problems and crises that can - and seemingly often do - emerge without warning, what should we do then?

I suggest the acronym **BOLD** can be a quick way to guide us in what to do, or not to do, when we are faced with something sudden and possibly overwhelming.

B – Just **be** right where you are and **breathe**, this is a guaranteed way to come into the present and also calm yourself down a bit. It is a physiological fact that slow, deep breathing from our belly for a few minutes can effectively reduce anxiety which contributes to a clearer view of what is occurring.

O – **Observe** what is going on, internally and externally, without judgment and with as much gentleness and compassion as possible.

L – **Listen** to what you hear, to what is happening, **Let Be** whatever it is that is presenting itself, don't assume you know what is going on because it “feels like the same old stuff” or you don't like it - be open to what you see and hear and sense as something new might present itself.

D – **Decide** to make a healthy and life affirming choice to take action in accordance with your values, all the while being gently aware of the pull of old habits and avoidance strategies, though if these happen, to remain non-judgmentally aware as they do. Often avoidance is about numbing out and not feeling, so staying aware and not losing touch with ourselves can itself be one of the healthiest ‘actions’ we can take.

Returning to our oft quoted example of a person with social anxiety, we can utilize BOLD as follows. Let's say that despite discomfort in many social situations, a person has a value to be more social, to make more connections with others, and yet still feels overwhelmed with anxiety as he approached a social event. In the past, he might have felt he needed to eliminate the anxiety – to fix himself - before he reached out to others, but hopefully the course so far has shown a different possibility. Mindfulness and compassion towards his experience can help “defuse” the discomfort and help him to tolerate being with it and not get hooked by it so much, which then allows the space to make the valued choice to attend the event. Feelings will go up and down, as they always do, but it needn't stop us going after the life we value in full awareness.

As The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche (2013) puts it, we can begin to live in and from this place of ongoing awareness, allowing us to live a calmer, less reactive – though no less engaged - life.

“The goal of [mindfulness and meditation] is to become aware of awareness. Awareness is the basis, or what you might call the “support,” of the mind. It is steady and unchanging, like the pole to which the flag of ordinary consciousness is attached. When we recognize and become grounded in awareness of awareness, the “wind” of emotion may still blow. But instead of being carried away by the wind, we turn our attention inward, watching the shifts and changes with the intention of becoming familiar with that aspect of consciousness that recognizes "Oh, this is what I'm feeling, this is what I'm thinking." As we do so, a bit of space opens up within us. With practice, that space—which is the mind's natural clarity—begins to expand and settle. We can begin to watch our thoughts and emotions without necessarily being affected by them quite as powerfully or vividly as we're used to. We can still feel our feelings, think our thoughts, but slowly our identity shifts from a person who defines him- or herself as lonely, ashamed, frightened, or hobbled by low self-esteem to a person who can look at loneliness, shame, and low self-esteem as movements of the mind.”

As the Buddhists tell us, one of the defining characteristics of life is that everything changes, and we can make ourselves miserable by trying desperately to hold on to what we want and trying to avoid what we don't; as the writer Bryon Katie tell us, when we argue with reality, we lose - but only 100% of the time! But the good news is that it is very much our response to things that causes problems, not the things themselves, and that's what this course has been about, working on our responses to life and learning to respond in a way that we have consciously chosen, rather than going down the old roads and being completely taken over by automatic reactive patterns.

Good luck on your journey, which can be a great adventure, and don't be afraid to reach out for some help and support if ever you need it; you may be responsible for your life, but that doesn't mean you have to do everything on your own!

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For more information:

ACT

<http://contextualpsychology.org/>

BUDDHIST MEDITATION & RESOURCES

<http://dharmaseed.org/>

<http://www.dharma.org/>

COGNITIVE THERAPY

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Cognitive-behavioural-therapy/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

<http://www.rebtnetwork.org/>

<http://mbct.com/>