

# **Mindfulness Meditation Introductory class**

## **Week Two: Mindfulness of the Body**

By Andrea Fella

### **Foreground/Background of Experience**

As we bring a variety of 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.

### **The Lived Experience of the Body**

A central part of mindfulness practice is connecting with the lived experience of the body, 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.)

### **Learning the “language” of the body**

Since so many of us live in the world of our thoughts, initially it might be a challenge to get in touch with the lived experience of the body. So we are going to take some time to explore the terrain, the texture of the sensations that our body feels, in the process we begin to learn how the body communicates with us: the “language” of the body.

The sensations felt in the body can be grouped into four kinds:

- Sensations of solidity, such as hardness, firmness, softness, weight, and density. You can perhaps feel this in the weight of body, the solidity of skeleton, or the hardness of your buttocks pressing against a chair.
- Sensations of movement, such as vibration, tingling, pulsing, pressure, pulling, or pushing. You might experience the movement of your breath with sensations like expansion, contraction, pulling, pushing, or pressure. You might feel an energetic field within your body of vibration, pulsing, or tingling.
- Sensations of temperature, all along the range from hot to cold. At times this kind of sensation is very obvious to us. You can often highlight this type of sensation by touching your hand to your cheek, since there is often a difference in temperature between them.
- Sensations of liquidity, such as moisture, flowing, or stickiness. This is obvious in the form of tears, saliva, and perspiration.

As we get familiar with these sensations, we begin to recognize the distinction between our physical experience and our mental response to it. When we experience unpleasant sensations, we often react with aversion, with emotions like anger hatred irritation, cruelty, or fear. When we experience pleasant sensations, we often want them to continue or to keep having them, and respond with feelings of desire, wanting, pride, vanity, excitement, or stinginess. When experiences are more neutral, we might experience boredom, dullness, or uncertainty. This aspect of our mental life is one of the main ways that we find ourselves struggling, disappointed, frustrated, fearful. So many of our difficulties come from reacting to our experience.

With mindfulness, we begin to recognize very clearly that the physical experience and mental response are two different things, and familiarizing ourselves with the basic types of sensations help us to notice this difference, and helps us to be much less reactive!

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 mindful attention to the painful sensation, noticing the different kinds of sensations the pain is composed of, perhaps pressure, pulling, burning, or aching.

One thing that we learn by simply attending to pain is how much of our physical pain is intensified by our reaction to it. The pain itself is an unpleasant (sometimes very unpleasant) sensation in the body; 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.

When there is a strong reaction to pain, it is usually not helpful to try to directly notice the sensations of pain. Instead see if you can recognize the reaction itself. Strong reactivity usually has a physical manifestation, so for now, see if you can notice how the reaction to pain is affecting your body. You might notice tightness or contraction in your body in places quite distant from the actual pain itself. Next week we will talk about noticing the reactivity itself.

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.

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. When you start to move, do so mindfully! It is helpful to move slowly so we can bring mindfulness to the movement, and stay in a meditative state.

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 your ability to be mindful of it. In that case it may be skilful to see if you can place our attention elsewhere in the body, away from where the pain is located. To the hands, or feet for example, or to the sense door of sound

(described below). You could also try returning to the sensations of breathing, also, but sometimes reactivity to pain impacts how we breathe, and it might not be the best experience with which to take our minds off the pain.

### **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, heat, coolness, hardness, or softness.

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.

The noting practice can provide a good feedback mechanism for our meditation. For instance, you might notice that you’ve stopped noting your experience, or that the labels don’t match your experience, for example, you might be caught up in a painful sensation and still noting “in/out”. Noting can also help you to recognize how the mind is relating to the experience, sometimes the mental label comes with a tone of voice that helps you to recognize that you are frustrated, or angry.

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 an ability to be with sounds in an easy spacious way to give us a place to rest our attention when experience 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!