

Relaxing Effort

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There are perhaps two extremes in doing meditation. One extreme is trying too hard. Pushing. The other is trying too little. After all, meditation is about being easygoing and relaxed and accepting things. So, you know, you don't want to try too hard. Maybe you shouldn't try at all.

Let's just chill with whatever's going on. So those two extremes are not helpful for meditation. What's the middle way? Where's some place in the middle? And one idea I'd like to offer today is that there isn't just one way to do it. There isn't just like one effort to hold.

It's actually sometimes more useful to have the idea that effort in meditation is a little bit more like a massage. If you just hold your finger on someone, you know, pushing all the time, that's not the massage. Massage is you alternate between, you know, kind of pushing a little bit, squeezing a little bit, and then releasing, squeezing and then releasing. So the idea, for example, with mindfulness is to be mindful of something, say the breathing. So you're aware of breathing in. And so for a moment there, you're aware, just clearly aware, oh, this is the in-breath.

That's the effort. This is the in-breath. And then relax and experience the benefit of that awareness. It's kind of like a coast for a moment. Just relax. Don't hold the effort.

Don't kind of like be racing to the next thing. The way I meditated for a while was by the time I was half finished with being mindful of one thing, I was chasing the next thing to be mindful of. And because I was always kind of ahead of myself, I was like in a hurry or like, you know, I had the checklist approach to mindfulness. As soon as I checked it off, like, okay, Notice the in-breath. What's next? What's next?

But rather, give yourself time. Don't be in a hurry. And so, to be aware. And then relax and kind of open to it. Kind of let go of effort and see what kind of awareness of the situation

remains for a few seconds. There's a momentum to each act of awareness, to each act of mindfulness.

It kind of opens up a space for attention and then cruise on that for a few seconds or for longer, however long it's there. And the analogy that I like to use for this is pushing a scooter. If you're standing on a scooter, a push scooter, and you get yourself going by taking one foot to push against the ground. If you get yourself a really good push, then the scooter will roll for a while, and you put your other foot on the platform of the scooter, And you just let it coast until the momentum begins going. And then you push again.

So the same thing with mindfulness. You try to have a clear, definitive, full, engaged moment of really being present for something. But then don't try to hold it that way forever. Just really appreciate that moment, relax, and let the awareness that follows coast on that for a few moments. And then pick up the next thing. Coast for a while.

And coasting here means staying present and aware in the way that follows in the wake of a clear moment of recognition, a clear moment of present moment awareness. There's momentum there. We'll have a little life in it that's beyond the simple act of knowing, recognition. The mind, the heart, wants to be attentive, wants to be present, wants to kind of register this life that we're living. So the idea is with choice, with what you offer, is you offer choicefully, let's be present for this now. And once I'm present, let me relax for a moment.

And so there's this rhythm of massage, this rhythm of applying yourself and then relaxing, applying and relaxing. And so at some point the applying has qualities of being relaxed itself. The relaxing has qualities of staying aware itself until these two are not so different from each other. But you might find it interesting to experiment with this kind of way of being mindful. It's not all or nothing. But it's a little bit of both.

Making effort and relaxing. Making an effort and relaxing. Riding the tail or the momentum of the effort you make that you made in two seconds or three seconds. Okay, here I am. So, for example, I might be sitting, meditating, and I notice that I'm thinking a lot. And so then I turn my mind to recognize thinking.

This is what a mind is like, thinking. And it takes a little bit for me sometimes to kind of step away from the thinking clearly enough so I can observe it or kind of really acknowledge it without being caught in it. Oh, this is thinking. And when I've done that, then OK, let's relax and make space to feel this more fully. How does this, in this relaxed state, how do I take in the experience of thinking? And it doesn't take long before the thinking begins again to grab me.

And then I have thinking. Thinking. And then, OK, what's this like now? What's it like to recognize this? What's it like to make space for this? It used to be that if I was thinking, I'd be upset with myself.

And I've got to stop thinking. And I was in there trying to navigate and negotiate and figure out what to do to kind of make it stop. But I don't do that anymore. Now I just know it and make space to feel what's happening, to register the event. What's happened now? and then do it again.

And in doing that, over time I get to recognize the dynamics of thinking, the emotions underlying it, the agitation, the sensations, the impulses that are operating there. But not because I was analyzing, because in that knowing what's there and then making space to feel it in a relaxed way, something slowly gets revealed and something begins to settle. If there is pain in my body, Notice the pain. And I've had plenty of situations where I thought I have to, you know, if the pain was predominant, I was supposed to just really be mindful of it. And if I just bore into it or go really deep into it, I'll find some solution to it. It'll blast it away.

I used to have the blasting it away approach to mindfulness. I'll just blast the pain away if I just go into it. And generally that wasn't a very good way of practicing. But I said, okay, there's the pain. Let's feel the pain. Let's know it.

This is what pain is like. And then let's relax. And in that relaxed state, whatever awareness is left, let me register that experience of the pain. And then I start reacting to it again. Okay, let's open to the pain. Let's be mindful of the pain and open to it.

Mindful of this massage with the pain. And with time, what I've become more and more aware of is that how reactive I am, the aversion, the tightening, the resistance, that begins to stand out and highlight. But I don't fight it. I don't try to fix it. But now I start noticing, oh, resistance. That's what the act of mindfulness, the clear effort, this is resistance.

And then I make space to feel that resistance in a relaxed way. This is resistance and it's like this. This is resistance and it's like... And that kind of massage. then with time probably the resistance either fades away or the resistance stops becoming a problem. It stops becoming the director of the show.

It's just resistance. And it becomes simpler and easier. So if what I'm saying is interesting for you or makes sense to you, you might try it. This idea of how you make the effort, that you make a certain kind of effort to be mindful, and then you let that effort kind of be the push on the scooter. And then just coast a little bit to see what else comes into awareness. And then do it again.

Coast for what comes to you. So it's not always you making self-centered or self-directed effort non-stop. You're allowing something else to operate besides your own effort. Your efforts are important, but there's much more that can happen in mindfulness than can happen if you're not always making the effort. So you make the effort and then you make space to see what comes now. Make the effort and see.

And if this doesn't make any sense for you, then I recommend you leave it here at IMC when you leave today. So, thank you.