

Introduction to Mindfulness (2 of 5)

Body

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Hello and welcome to this five-part series that's an introduction to mindfulness.

As I said yesterday, I thought it was very nice to, after most of the year going through a kind of wide, open, rich path of samadhi and insight, to go back to basics, with the idea that it's always good to be a beginner, even for the most experienced practitioners, and offer you the simplest way that we offer the instructions here at IMC.

We begin with offering meditation on breathing, and some people find that it's invaluable to just keep the meditation simple and just stay with breathing. Whole schools of Buddhism, meditation, are involved with just deepening meditation through attention to breathing.

The idea in the kind of vipassana we do, is that we're trying to develop a capacity to be aware, that supports us, that is beneficial, that is freeing, that can bring a meditative or a mindful attention to all aspects of our life: no part left out.

Certainly to our bodily experiences: some people use meditation to leave behind their bodily experiences, to go into some kind of pure area of consciousness. To use mindfulness to become aware of emotions: some people use meditation to avoid their emotions, their difficult ones. To become mindful of thinking: some people have a kind of adversarial relationship to thinking, thinking that thinking is a problem for meditation.

In the kind of awareness practice we do here, we're learning how to become aware, in an effective way, to all aspects like this, so certainly to breathing, to the body, to our emotions, and to thinking. Once we get the basics of how to include each of those parts, then on Friday, we will bring them all together into one whole.

With a foundation in mindfulness or breathing, the next step in our instructions is to be mindful of the body. There are two ways of doing that – many ways, but – two ways that are part of the instruction here.

One is, if there's some strong sensation in the body that's more compelling than your ability to kind of just hang out with the breathing, then it's fine. If it's strong, then it could set up a tension between the effort to be with breathing and this strong sensation, and that tension is not necessary. What we can do is, either let go of the breathing entirely or let the mindfulness be cultivated and be developed on that strong sensation.

Again, it's not so much the need to penetrate or understand or see something special in the sensation as it is our ability to be present for it in a simple, non-reactive way.

Because we're learning to free the awareness, we're learning to free our mental ability to pay attention, from being reactive or judgmental or caught in preferences: just be very simple, and in that simplicity, finding a way that something very deep inside of us can settle and relax.

So if there's a strong sensation in the body, turn the attention to it and hold that simply. It's hard to hold something in attention in a fixed way, to just to hold it there unwaveringly, so in the same rhythm as breathing in and breathing out, it's possible to let your attention gently move around or roam around in that strong sensation, in the body.

Feel it. It might be, even if it's just a small little spot, the square centimeter or something, you could feel the edges of it, feel the inside of it. Gently let the attention move in and out, maybe pull back a little bit and see it globally, breathe in, go closer to feel it intimately.

If it's really hard to be there, some people find helpful to back off and watch it, as if watching it from a distance. Some people find it easier to dip into the heart of it and really almost become it. Then if it's painful, some people find it's easier to be with it if you're sitting right in the middle of it and feeling it.

Kind of look around, get to know it. Notice the quality of the relationship you have to it: Is it simple or is it complicated? Is it reactive or is it very allowing? One way is just simply to be there for a little bit. It might only be for three breaths. Some people find that they can, for three breaths, can have a very simple, matter-of-fact relationship without trying to do anything to it, without trying to get rid of it, and then come back to the breathing.

Maybe that happens a few times. Three breaths with a sensation, come back to the breathing. Sometimes when a sensation is strong, it doesn't have to be painfully strong. It can be pleasantly strong. Sometimes it's nice, it can be longer that we stay with it. It can become the primary focus of attention for some time.

To make that a little bit easier, there's a second way of being with strong sensations that involves doing so with the support of breathing. It's feeling like we're breathing with the sensation or breathing through it. There's a rhythm of breathing in and breathing out where there's a kind of oscillation, alternation, of kind of touching it, being with it, pulling back from it, going through it, kind of like waves maybe.

Then it might be easier for the attention to stay with the strong sensation in a very easy way. Slowly over time, we're learning how to be with strong sensations in a non-reactive, non-attached way. Sometimes, oddly enough, it's easier with unpleasant sensations because we don't want to be caught in it. It's painful. And so we can learn how to be at ease with discomfort, how to be non-reactive, how to be not caught in its grip.

Some people find it harder with strong pleasant sensations because "there can't be anything wrong with being attached to that or caught up in that", because it's pleasant. But in this practice of mindfulness, we're trying to find a way to be with all things in a non-reactive, non-attached, non-interfering way to discover the simplicity of a kind of an open awareness, open sensitivity, that feels and knows without needing it to be different.

That goes against the grain for many ways in which the mind often works, where it's navigating and negotiating life and changing things, trying to plan things, figure things out. Mostly attention is involved with objects of attention, with what it's concerned with, and trying to do something with it.

With mindfulness, there's a radical shift from being concerned with the object of attention, where attention is directed, to being interested in caring for how attention operates itself, and the strong sensations in the body are just one more thing in which to train or to learn how to have a present moment awareness that has a kind of a contemplative, relaxed, open, mindful way of being so that we could learn to do that more in our life in general: calm awareness.

So the way we do this with mindfulness of the body is we continue – mindfulness of breathing is the foundation of the practice here at IMC, that's where we cultivate some concentration, some mindfulness with the sensations of breathing – but if there's a pull to any kind of strong sensation in the body, then we can let go of breathing and attend to that, at first, maybe just for three breaths.

That limit of three breaths keeps it relaxed, keeps it from getting entangled, making an engineering project or analytical project, just to feel it, then back to the breathing. If the strong sensation persists for some time, then there can be a longer attention to it, and letting attention roam around, feel it, remembering that it's an exploration for how to be aware, simply.

But also a way of the awareness becoming stable or settled or getting a little bit more unified or concentrated around the sensation, just gathered there. That gathering of attention can be supported, if you'd like, if it's not too complicated, by breathing with the strong sensations so that breathing, attention, maybe even slightly your

thinking, your interest, it's all gathering around this sensation that's there.

Once it feels acknowledged enough, it doesn't have to have gone away, but it feels like you've gotten to know it and acknowledged it, then go back to the breathing. In this practice that we teach, breathing keeps being the default. Keep coming back there, where we're cultivating being settled, being unified, gathering ourselves around the breathing, but always ready to let go of it for some stronger sensation.

For today, before we get to the emotions tomorrow, you might want to try this with your body. So two assignments, if you would like, if you have time. Yesterday I suggested that you add a ten-minute meditation sometime later in the day today. If you're in some evening time zone right now, maybe tomorrow before our YouTube broadcast, but today I'd like to suggest you add five minutes. So try to sit fifteen minutes more later today, at least. And now, experiment with this movement of going from breathing to body sensations and see if that can be done in a very calming, settling way. You're experimenting with how simple it could be without getting caught and reactive to the body sensations that you might have.

Just gently... emphasize breathing, but for this exercise, experiment a little bit with what it's like to go and touch into different parts of your body, different sensations, and then coming back to your breathing, so you develop a little bit of familiarity to this kind of instruction.

Then in the rest of your life, it's invaluable to keep checking into your embodied experience, checking into how your body feels in the different circumstances of your life activity, in driving and working and using an electronic device, looking at a screen, talking with a friend, talking with a challenging person: What's happening in your body?

For this one day in daily life, get curious how your body experiences your life.

Thank you, and tomorrow we'll do emotions and continue on these instructions.

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