

Guided Meditation: Mindfulness of Suffering

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Hello and welcome to this period where morning meditation is exploring compassion, one of the great human capacities of caring for self and others that is kind of integral, I think, to our ability to contribute to the welfare and happiness of our world. And it's a wonderful thing that we can celebrate and appreciate our capacity for compassion. And part of learning, developing our compassion, because it can be developed, is to simply assume you're supposed to have compassion. And the level of compassion, the mixture of compassion and other reactions we have, can make it very difficult to be with the suffering of the world, the suffering of others. And so to learn about ourselves, to develop a capacity for a kind of clean, beautiful form of care, is the task of meditating, meditation, and cultivation of compassion.

And one of the key elements of this is to combine mindfulness with compassion, to have compassion arise out of a strong foundation in mindfulness, and to have our compassion for others based on a wise and caring and clear understanding of our own suffering. To avoid our own suffering, to have compassion for others, to think that our suffering doesn't count, that we're supposed to just focus on others, limits how full and useful our compassion can be for others. We need to understand our own suffering. Buddhism, Buddhist practice, kind of depends on our ability to really stop, be still, be non-reactive, be willing to stop and really see our own suffering. We don't necessarily have to understand it, but we have to feel it and recognize it's there and learn how to hold it caringly, learn how to hold it openly in a certain kind of willingness to feel and be present and accompany our own suffering. And that will be the skill that we learn to do that for others.

So, to begin with a simple practice of mindfulness, to be mindful now of your body, just as it is, without moving, to feel and sense what your body is like at this moment, the position it's in. Maybe you're already in your meditation posture. Maybe you're getting ready to do so.

Mindfulness often begins with mindfulness of the body. And that can begin with mindfulness of your posture. And is there a posture you can assume, some way to adjust your posture, whether you're lying down, sitting, standing, even walking?

The four dignified postures, they're called. To have your body posture be a posture of attention, a posture of being alert in your body, as if your body wakes up a little bit of intentional posture, adjusting your shoulders, the small of your back. Maybe the shoulders can roll back. Maybe the chest can be a little bit more open. Maybe if you slowly let your attention travel up your spine from the base, one vertebra at a time, you can adjust the spine slightly. So the whole spine maybe feels like it's participating in the meditation, a little bit more alert, awake.

Then to soften the belly. And how is it that's softening the belly, even briefly? What kind of attention, awareness of that place in your belly? If on the exhale you relax your shoulders, how does that shift and change the sensitivity and awareness in the area of your shoulders? And as you exhale, to soften and relax the face. And what happens? What changing sensitivity appears in the face as you soften around the eyes, the jaws, the cheeks?

Maybe there's a way of relaxing the hands and the arms. When we hold tension in our body, a little bit like we're resisting the pull of gravity, to relax the arms and elbows, hands. Does it make us a little bit more sensitive to the gentle pull, gravity inviting us to relax more? On the inhale, having a very, as wide as possible, awareness of your body, broad, panoramic. And as you exhale, relaxing the body, softening the whole body, and then centering yourself on your breathing.

Aware of how the exhale is a kind of release, a letting go. Perhaps the exhale is a relaxing, a relaxing into a deeper sensitivity, sensing the body breathing, feeling whatever softness, gentleness there might be with breathing. Maybe on the edges of it, maybe in the heart of it. Mindfulness can have a simplicity to it. A bit of stillness or spaciousness. Mindfulness of breathing, simple, a kind of stillness, gentle stillness, softness of attending to breathing.

And then with the same stillness and simplicity, softness, let your awareness open to the thinking mind, feeling that tension, energy, pressure that might be there. Sometimes thinking is an expression of a deeper level of stress, tension, suffering that we carry. And don't try to fix anything, but see if the soft, still mindfulness can be aware of the underlying stress or tension, suffering, that might be part of thinking. Hold it simply so you can know it better, more familiar, not to analyze or figure anything out, but the simplest, most immediate aspect, breathing with any underlying tension or suffering, so you're accompanying it, knowing it, as if simple knowing and accompaniment is all that is needed.

And in your heart, in your emotional life, maybe you're calm and peaceful. And if so, take time feeling the goodness, the healthiness of whatever is good, meditating. And if you carry any suffering or stress, tension, sadness, or anger, disappointment, or some form of emotional suffering, hold that all caringly. Hold that with mindfulness, the warmth of mindfulness that neither tries to change nor hold on, but simply holds and feels and senses even the mildest forms of suffering. Maybe breathing gently accompanying the suffering.

And one of the advantages, one of the possibilities, of feeling one's own suffering mindfully, carefully, calmly, is that then it might awaken our compassion, our care, kindness, and to meet the suffering with kindness, compassion, care. To care about our suffering and wish ourselves well, without expectation or demand, simply to share with your own heart that you care, you wish to be free of that suffering, where that wish is part of a gentle, warm-hearted goodness. Of course, that's what you want. And to keep it very simple, nothing needs to be done, nothing needs to be figured out, just appreciating the quietest, simplest compassion of our own sufferings.

And then giving yourself back to your breathing, giving yourself over to your breathing, the breathing body, following the exhale to deep inside where the exhale ends and maybe where the inhale begins, so that your breathing is a connection to a deep wellspring within, a wellspring of kindness and clarity. Thank you. Deep sensitivity from which we can gaze upon the world, bringing to mind people in your life, in the area where you live, and out across the land, undoubtedly many people who suffer, and to gaze upon the suffering world with a softness, a stillness, that allows the compassion and care, the kindness, to be uncomplicated. For care and compassion to be free from the need to do and respond, free of shoulds and judgments, and wise. Simple care, simple compassion, where something deep within you may be represented by these wishes.

May all beings be free of sufferings. May all beings know they're not alone in their suffering. We'll accompany them. Do our best to know them. May all beings know how to have compassion for themselves. May they hold themselves dearly and lovingly. May they not lose hope in themselves. May they not lose their ability for self-care.

May all beings be safe, so that their own heart and inner life can heal what is broken, heal what hurts. May all beings be peaceful so there's space for their own goodness to come out to support others, their family and community. May all beings be free of oppression and poverty and war. And may each of us hold the suffering in the world in a simple, compassionate care. May all beings be free of suffering.

Thank you.