

Instructions: Mindfulness of Emotions

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So, let's see, is it loud enough here now? Let's see, I think, let's see. So let's—ooh, the positioning of that counts for a lot. It's almost too loud for me, but you're okay with it. You're not okay with it? You want it too loud? Well. Well.

So, please brace yourself. I'm about to make mindfulness very unpopular. One way to understand mindfulness, in saying this in the hope to be helpful, is that we practice slow mindfulness.

Like there's a movement called *Slow Food*. In Norway, for a while, there was a movement of slow TV. There'd be a six-hour TV show that would be just a camera on the train that went over the mountains for six hours. People would sit there and watch.

My favorite slow TV was, you know, the TV camera was on a fire in a fireplace. People would just sit and watch the fire. There was also slow TV following the whole process from shearing a sheep to knitting a sweater. So we're here to practice slow mindfulness. Thank you.

And what I mean by that is, don't be in a hurry to go on to the next thing, the next thought. Don't operate in a way that the sped-up mind, the reactive mind, immediately resists, immediately wants things different, and starts to do something. And maybe none of you think of yourself as practicing fast mindfulness. Probably, I wouldn't characterize you that way. But you might want to consider slow mindfulness.

So, when you're mindful of something, think of it as the beginning of a journey, not the end. When I practiced in Burma, I practiced a checklist approach of mindfulness, which was that you were supposed to do mental noting. So as soon as I noted something, I'd done that. Then I was no longer interested in it. But think, if you use mental noting, it's the beginning, not the end.

It's saying, "This is what I'm opening to. This is what I'm going to take time to let register and really know well. Feel it, sense it, recognize it. Oh, this is what it's like. This is what's happening now."

What is it like to let it register, let the experience unfold? Because you're unfolding it. Another word that I like for this practice is the word "yes." Yes. I use it often in my practice.

It's not approving or accepting, exactly. We can't do that anymore on this retreat. But it's saying yes to metaphorically opening my arms wide, coming forward to receive. This is what the experience is like. Oh, here.

So it might just take one or two seconds, not like you have to linger for a long time. Maybe in the length of an exhale. The exhale is a journey from the beginning of the exhale to the end. Can you be there for the whole journey and receive it, take it in? Be slow, not in a hurry to jump to the next thought.

It kind of creates space to really register that experience of breathing, of exhaling, the experience of inhaling. And this opening and saying yes to receiving, accepting, registering, and allowing the journey of this experience of the moment to unfold is greatly supported by being rooted, grounded in your body, in the direct physical experience of the sensation, whatever's going on. It's meant to be an alternative to living in your thinking.

And it isn't that we're not supposed to do anything at all when we meditate. That's a misunderstanding. What we're trying not to do is have conversational thinking. Sometimes it's called discursive thinking, where there's commentary and conversations, where there's story-making and storytelling.

The thinking that is okay in meditation is slow thinking: thinking about your experience, thinking, "Oh, now I'll be with this. This is an exhale." And so, the very simple thinking about your present-moment experience is a thinking that is encouraging you to do something different than think. It's pointing beyond itself. "Oh, feel this. Be with this. Sense this. Open to this."

Be slow. Be curious. What is the journey of the exhale like? How do things change in me if I really open and feel the exhale, feel the inhale? What's the influence that has?

Without expectation, without thinking you know what's supposed to happen, you might have very simple thoughts. And one of the simple thoughts I like also, when I say to myself the word "yes," I like the word "here." I'll say, "Here." This is where I am, after all, so it's nice to be reminded.

But I say the word “here” as if, okay, now I'm going to say it as an opening, as a beginning. Now let's just take in what the experience of here is like. Very spacious, very open, very allowing in here.

And so it's okay to think. You don't have to be struggling against your thinking. But as you think very, very simply, in a way that keeps you in the present moment, that thinking can start becoming slow. There's no hurry. There's time for individual words.

And then, in the background, there might be a layer, a far-down, deep layer, where there's very subtle, almost nonverbal thinking that somehow is a recognition and knowing of what's happening. But it's not the conversation. It's not the mind having thoughts or having images.

So this becomes particularly useful when we come to emotions, mindfulness of emotions. And I think it's fair to say that a good percentage of the time, whether we're conscious of it or not, emotions are strongly connected to the story-making mind, the conversational mind, the mind that makes predictions, the mind that is rooted in an ancient story. That's what happened to us in the past. Somehow, that story is still living in us, maybe in a nonverbal way.

And so we want to be very careful, because we want to practice slow mindfulness of emotions. And what slow mindfulness of emotions means is every emotion is allowed. There's no emotion that is condemned in mindfulness practice, no emotion that is wrong. You can have murderous rage, and this is the place that's okay, as long as you keep your hands on your lap.

Because what we're doing here is a really big shift in how we live with our life and how it's going on here. It's not business as usual. We're stepping out of business as usual to have a—it's not a swirl of mindfulness—a presence that really trusts being present and is willing to let the experience of the moment be registered deeply.

And not necessarily because the experience should be registered deeply, but rather because we're cultivating our capacity for deep sensing, a capacity for really intimately living in our experience, for a deeper and deeper sensitivity. So it's almost like, as we allow ourselves to experience something deeply for its own sake—again, I'm repeating myself—don't be enamored or think it's about the experience so much, like the solution is by how you see it. Because, after all, we're the insight tradition. We're supposed to have insight into things.

That's true, but part of the path to that is: don't try so hard. Rather, cultivate this ability to sense deeply. And it doesn't really matter what it is. It just matters that you're sensing,

feeling, opening: yes to this, whatever it is. Yes, here, now, slowly.

Be with what you know is happening, and think of it as the beginning of a short journey of taking it in and knowing how it affects you, the influence it has on you. Some of that influence is going to be unfortunate. You feel the unwholesomeness of it. Congratulations. This is not a mistake.

But if you feel what's unwholesome, well, you're becoming a wise person in Buddhism. "Oh, this is yucky. This feels tense. This feels like now I'm caught, contracted." Oh, rather than, "Oh no," it's more like, "Oh yes." Not to the thing, but rather to the experience of your ability not to be a victim, not to be a participant, but to just be there for slow mindfulness.

"Oh, yucky! I'm so lucky to be in a place and time where I don't have to go along with being yucky." You don't have to fight it. But I can say, "Yes, let me know this." Because here I can feel and sense it deeply and keep cultivating this deep sensitivity.

And maybe when you do that here, in daily life, you'll be prepared when something yucky comes up, rises out of you, and you go, "There it is. I don't have to go along with it." You leave it alone. You have wisdom about it.

And some of it is the opposite of yucky. I guess it's yummy. Say yes. Let that be received and taken in. Yes, in a deep way.

And the yummy stuff in meditation, there's a way in which, if it's good and wholesome, it'll grow. You make room for it. Take it in. Yes.

So, to feel emotions. A huge part of emotions is to recognize they're there. And, in this regard, I use the word "emotions" to include moods, attitudes, states of mind. It's a whole gamut, array of things that are kind of an ecology of a wider, suffusive feeling or sense of how we are.

And emotions are not singular things. Emotions are made up of a variety of things. So the ecology of an emotion involves physical sensations. It's hard to have an emotion without something physical as part of it.

Some of that physicality just comes as something that spreads kind of through your body as a suffusive feeling, maybe a small part. Some of it involves actual physical muscles engaging, getting tight or tense, leaning forward or backward. Emotions involve thoughts, stories sometimes. And sometimes you can see the connection between the thought you have and the physicality of what goes on.

I've had—you know, maybe I talked about this recently, but maybe here. When I was doing

Zen practice, I had, at the time, a very intense Zen practice. I had a lot of pain, and I could start seeing that every time I had a thought of self-pity, “Poor Gil,” my muscles around my knee pain would tighten up just enough that the knee pain was unbearable.

So I couldn't afford to have self-pity. The only way I could survive was to really watch my mind carefully and not participate in thoughts of self-pity. Because otherwise, that pain would—the little contractions I would see. So there's an example of how thinking can have an effect in the body.

Sometimes I think that the thinking mind is like a puppeteer with all these strings pulling on things. So, with emotions, to feel that physicality of it, to recognize the role that thoughts have in stories, how these thoughts somehow perpetuate the emotions, activate them more, or let them dissipate.

And emotions also have motivation as part of them sometimes. Some of these emotions have a desire. If there's anger, it might be wanting something to go away. If there's fear, it's wanting to retract, pull away. So sometimes you can feel the motivation that's inherent in it.

And sometimes there's just something nebulous, wide, pervasive, indistinct—just what we would call the emotion, the sense, the mood, or something. You don't have to struggle to follow what I'm saying here. But the idea is to find some anchor, some way of being present for the emotion that keeps you from being pulled into it, keeps you from reinforcing it, and keeps you from identifying with it. Which means it keeps you from defining yourself by the emotion you have.

And one way to identify with it or define yourself is to say, “I have knee pain. My knee pain.” It turns out there's no need for the I or the me. And so, if you're quite quiet and still, you can sense and feel that to add I and me to knee pain belongs to that yucky category. It's kind of a little bit off.

It doesn't feel quite right. There's a little bit of contraction, a little bit of tension. It's creating something extra that's not needed. It's a little bit of work. Pain. Just pain.

Pain. Let's feel the pain. Let's open to the pain. Let's do that slow mindfulness thing with pain, but let's not do it more than two seconds, you know, just to be with it.

And so, with emotions then, there's a lot of words that I've said. The idea is to be simple: simple, slow mindfulness. “This is my anger. This is my sadness.” This is not even my sadness. This is sadness.

“Oh, this is how it is. Yes.” And then, once you've recognized it and kind of begun to open to it, especially if you can feel it in your body, you can't underscore how useful it is to really keep registering, feeling in the body, to begin cultivating this ability to have this deep registration, this deep sensing capacity. To feel all the way down to that *yoni*, the womb, deeper place.

And for some of you, you might find it very useful to breathe with the emotion, to breathe through it. You might have a sense that the breathing is kind of accompanying whatever the emotion is. Or you imagine that your breathing breathes through it, in and out through it.

And what that does is allow you to have the emotion without the very subtle or not-so-subtle ways we get involved, latch on, react to it, and start thinking about it. The breathing is meant to be a support, to stay fluid, to stay kind of riding the massage of breathing, letting go of your thoughts on the exhale, staying, massaging, being with it. It's a way of acknowledging the emotion fully without succumbing to it.

And finally, like I said yesterday, how long you stay with an emotion that's there is variable. There's no rule exactly how long you can practice the mindfulness of a particular emotion. What I kind of recommend in this slow mindfulness is that you take it in, you feel it for a while, for some breaths, maybe four or five breaths, and then you come back to just breathing.

Come back to center yourself, ground yourself in a deeper way, deeper quiet, deeper slowness. And then, if the emotion is still there after a few breaths, you can gently go and feel it again. And this moving back and forth like that, always with the breathing, riding the breath into the emotion, going back to just the breath, is a protection from somehow subtly, unconsciously latching on, getting stuck, caught in with the emotion. Because it's so tricky with emotions.

Some people identify so easily, readily with them. So, with that, assume a meditation posture. And gently close your eyes.

And without being in a hurry, being slow, take a few moments now to notice how you're feeling. What's the mood? What's the emotion? What's the state that you have? It might be very subtle or not.

It might be a small feeling of calm after these days of sitting here. It might be a little bit of agitation, or a lot, from all these words I said. There might be some contentment or some feeling of discontentment. There might be a feeling of ease or a feeling of unease, irritation or inspiration, happiness, joy, or sadness. It's all okay for these few minutes with slow mindfulness.

In the simplest way of thinking, almost like a singular thought, maybe on the inhale, maybe

connected to the exhale, recognize how you're feeling. And if it's indistinct, recognize that. In whatever way you're feeling emotionally, mood-wise, what part of your body is most activated in relationship to it? Where does that most live in your body? Where does the emotion or mood seem to live in your body?

How close is it to the sensations of breathing? How far away is it? Almost as if breathing is accompanying or gently touching how you're feeling. At the rhythm of breathing in and breathing out, do you use the support for touching with your body how you feel?

Is there a story or explanation that's operating in relationship to how you feel? And can you drop down into the mind, the quieter, stiller place in the mind, where you can have simple thoughts, slow thoughts about how you're feeling? Not judgments, not explanations, but thoughts that encourage you to stay present: here, yes.

And then, switching to ground yourself deep in the body, register the sense of breathing, the rhythm of breathing in and out, and what it's like to register and receive those sensations of breathing from whatever deeper place is easy for you.

And then, to continue this mindfulness and emotion exercise, is there any way that you're feeling right now, any emotion or state of mind or state of being that is pleasant? Maybe it's side by side with what is unpleasant or difficult. In any way in which you have a good feeling, a wholesome feeling, a calmness, a quiet, maybe more embodied than usual in a nice way, maybe some pleasure, let that be known and felt.

Maybe, as you're feeling it, it's as if you're feeling it with your whole body. And for a few breaths, have breathing accompany, have breathing touch the places in the body where this more positive, good state is present.

And then, with the slowness of mindfulness, begin again with just your breathing, grounding yourself, settling yourself to the deepest place within that you can take in the experience of breathing. Even if you're thinking a lot, even with that, can you feel below it more deeply in your being, in your body, as if you have a whole other channel of attention, a channel of sensing and feeling with your body, whatever is going on?

So, part of this slow mindfulness movement is what I like to represent through the word “respect.” Many of you have heard me talk about this. Respecting our experience, having respect for everything, takes the form of the Latin roots of the word “respect,” which I interpret to mean “to see again,” “to look again.”

So rather than going along with the automatic reactivity, your manic, automatic first impulse around whatever is happening, slow mindfulness is: take another look, look again. What is

this? What's this experience? What's this before I make a conclusion or make a story, before I have a for or against it, before I rush ahead and try to search and understand it?

Before, just step back. Look. Feel. Sense. Like it deserves to be seen well, fully, as respectful.

And in doing this, over time, not only do you learn the capacity to be present more and more fully for what is, without the reactivity, without the overlay of your thoughts and ideas, but you also slowly start seeing patterns, because we have some memory going on. So you might notice that you're kind of thinking the same thing all the time. Or you have your top three tunes. Yeah.

And just seeing and knowing that is kind of like a little bit of a wake-up. Like, "Really? I'm doing this again?" And somehow the power of it or the allure of it maybe starts to abate because, wow, this is really frequent.

Or it might be that you see that you prioritize certain things, like with emotions. There might be a way in which you prioritize difficult emotions, or you prioritize good ones, where it's kind of like you give importance, excessive importance, to certain kinds of emotions over others. And just seeing the pattern that you live with kind of unconsciously can be a great support for learning to kind of be freer with what is, to be a little bit more open, more present for what is, rather than prioritizing one thing over another.

But there is some prioritization we do here with mindfulness. One of those is to be mindful. One of them is to practice slow mindfulness. Just really give time to whatever is here.

Another thing we prioritize is the ability to sense and feel the embodied experience. And as you go for walking meditation, you can experiment with that some. What's it like to have a wide, broad embodiment of body awareness as you walk? And what's that like, to give you a deeper sensitivity to the present moment as you walk?

What's it like to let the rhythm of stepping be a rhythm that travels through your whole body and mind, in a way, so that it keeps you from latching on to thoughts and stories and reactions or emotions? It keeps you fluid, keeps you relaxed, keeps you continually opening, present for the next moment, the next slow mindfulness.

So I hope you have enjoyed the day of practice here. And in 20 minutes, I'll be meeting with the first group. Today is Tuesday, so if you're a Tuesday group, meet with me down at the deck around the main house, down there by the lawn. Thank you.