

Mindfulness for Life

Session 7: Mindfulness of the Mind

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*Release the harsh and pointed inner
voice. it's just a throwback to the past,
and holds no truth about this moment.*

*Let go of self-judgment, the old,
learned ways of beating yourself up
for each imagined inadequacy.*

*Allow the dialogue within the mind
to grow friendlier, and quiet. Shift
out of inner criticism and life
suddenly looks very different.*

*I can say this only because I make
the choice a hundred times a day to release the voice that refuses to
acknowledge the real me.*

*What's needed here isn't more prodding toward perfection, but
intimacy - seeing clearly, and
embracing what I see.*

*Love, not judgment, sows the
seeds of tranquility and change.*

~ Diana Faulds

If you want to know your own mind, there is only one way: to observe and recognize everything about it. This must be done at all times, during your day-to-day life no less than during the hour of meditation. During meditation, various feelings and thoughts may arise. If you don't practice mindfulness of the breath, these thoughts will soon lure you away from mindfulness. But the breath isn't simply a means by which to chase away such thoughts and feelings. Breath remains the vehicle to unite body and mind and to open the gate to wisdom.

When a feeling or thought arises, your intention should not be to chase it away, even if by continuing to concentrate on the breath the feeling or thought passes naturally from the mind. The intention isn't to chase it away, hate it, worry about it, or be frightened by it. So what exactly should you be doing concerning such thoughts and feelings? Simply acknowledge their presence. For example, when a feeling of sadness arises, immediately recognize it: "A feeling of sadness has just arisen in me." If the feeling of sadness continues, continue to recognize "A feeling of sadness is still in me." If there is a thought like, "It's late but the neighbors are surely making a lot of noise," recognize that the thought has arisen. If the thought continues to exist, continue to recognize it. If a different feeling or thought arises, recognize it in the same manner...

While practicing mindfulness, don't be dominated by the distinction between good and evil, thus creating a battle within yourself. Whenever a wholesome thought arises, acknowledge it: "A wholesome thought has just arisen." And if an unwholesome thought arises, acknowledge it as well: "An unwholesome thought has just arisen." Don't dwell on it or try to get rid of it. To acknowledge it is enough.

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

What is the mind?

In our practice, it can be helpful to think of the mind as a river, flowing with thoughts, emotions and moods. One moment, we feel pleasure at sitting down and having an opportunity to relax, the next we feel agitated and restless. A few minutes later this passes and we experience some moments of calm and clarity. Another few minutes pass and we realize we've been drifting into dullness and sleepiness.

Our habitual tendency is to be caught up in what happens in the mind – to be entangled. If we have a story of anger or irritation running through our mind, it's very easy to be convinced of the truth of the story. "That co-worker is so selfish and thoughtless," or "I should be able to handle everything". Mind states and thoughts colour how we perceive the world and resultantly affect our physiology, our emotions, and our actions. Very often, the more we are caught up, the more we perpetuate these habits of mind with compulsive thinking.

With mindfulness we can learn to observe what the mind is actually doing. We can learn to step back. The story that's running in our head may have some truth to it or it may not. What's important is that we can step back and see what's happening. To continue with the analogy, mindfulness allows us to take a seat at the side of the river and watch the unfolding of thoughts and emotions without trying to change them or stop them or do anything to them. Although this "doing nothing" and "just watching" may seem unremarkable, it actually enables self-mastery – a personal sovereignty. If we can step back from what is happening in our mind, we are no longer caught by it. We gradually realize more freedom from the activity of the mind and as a result we give ourselves more choice. This freedom from the activity of the mind can be a tremendous relief.

A helpful way to practice is simply to ground the attention in the body by paying attention to the breath for 10 or 15 minutes and then practice paying 50% of your attention to the breath/body and 50% of your attention to what's happening in the mind. Continuing to rest half of your attention with the breath helps to nourish mindfulness and keep our seat at the side of the river. You can practice with the aid of these phrases:

<i>Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.</i>	<i>In</i>
<i>Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.</i>	<i>Out</i>

<i>Breathing in, I follow my in-breath from beginning to end.</i>	<i>Following in-breath</i>
<i>Breathing out, I follow my out-breath from beginning to end.</i>	<i>Following out-breath</i>

<i>Aware of my whole body, I breathe in.</i>	<i>Aware of body</i>
<i>Easing my body, I breathe out.</i>	<i>Easing body</i>

*Aware of my body, I breathe in.
Releasing tensions in my body, I breathe out.*

*Aware of body
Releasing tensions*

*Aware of the activity of my mind, I breathe in.
Smiling to my mind, I breathe out.*

*Aware of mind
Smiling*

*Breathing in, I dwell in the present moment.
Breathing out, I smile.*

*Present moment
Smiling*

The mind is constantly changing

Another analogy that can be helpful is to see the mind as being like the sky. Just as all different kinds of weather can pass through the sky, so to all different kinds of thoughts, emotions and moods can pass through the mind. However, no matter the weather, above the clouds, the sky is always blue. Our awareness is like the blue sky. The more we can be aware, the more we take our seat in the blue sky, and the less we are caught by the storms and tempests that might be raging through the mind.

What's more, just like the weather, the activity of the mind is always changing. Sometimes we feel good, sometimes not so good. Sometimes we're pleased with ourselves, sometimes we get angry and self-critical. Sometimes we feel bright and cheerful, sometimes we feel lonely and downbeat. With practice, we can begin to notice that the mind is changing from moment to moment. We can begin to sense the tiny-fluctuations that take place in our emotional state with each passing thought, we can notice judgments about ourselves and others arising and passing.

Some elements of mind, such as thoughts may flash in and out of our awareness very quickly, while others may be more persistent. Pleasant or unpleasant emotions, for instance, may stay longer – minutes or hours – and moods, may stay around longer still. However, the more we observe the mind, the more we see that it is constantly changing. We can see that even moods or strong emotions wax and wane, increase in intensity and then diminish. For awhile they may subside entirely. What we might label as “loneliness” or “anxiety” we begin to see has many different shades and complexions. With practice we can see that it is the nature of the mind to constantly change.

Just like learning to ride a bike or play a musical instrument it is important to note that all of this is easier said than done! This is a lifelong practice, and

there will always be times when we still get caught up in difficult feelings, emotions and mind-states. However, it's good to take encouragement from any small positive step we take. Maybe we experience a small sense of letting go when we're running late. Rather than getting into a worked-up state, we just accept that we're doing our best and also accept our anxiety and agitation. Or it might be that a work colleague is no longer so able to irritate us. Perhaps before learning mindfulness we would be overwhelmed by the activity of the mind 100 times a week. And now we are only overwhelmed 97 times a week. That's a big improvement! What's more it's the foundation for cultivating more awareness. It's really important to take heart and encouragement from our small successes. They fuel our practice.

Noticing judgments

Another habit of the mind which is worth discussing is the tendency to judge our experience. This is really just another form of thinking, but it is quite subtle, so sometimes we don't notice that we're doing it. We might think, "I've been doing this mindfulness for months, I should be over these anxious feelings by now." Sometimes such thoughts can be very quiet in the mind – often they are not put into words, and so they are unseen. However, they can exert a powerful influence over us all the same. The best way to deal with our judging mind – and especially self-judgment – is just to recognize, "oh, there I go again, judging!" Just to note it, "judging", helps us step back, and so the judging loses its power over us.

With this we again return to the theme of acceptance. Whenever, judging is present, there's a desire to make our experience something other than it is. But of course, our practice is just to be with what is happening as fully as we can in each moment. The stormy weather of the mind never stops – anxiety, frustration, loneliness – still come. What we learn through the cultivation of mindfulness and kindness is another way of relating to all of this – what we could call *a practice of non-resistance*. In this new way of relating we open up the possibility of more freedom.

Widening the practice of kindness.

When we begin practicing the cultivation of kindness, we usually begin with a friend – somebody who we naturally feel a sense of kindness towards. We begin in this way so that we can become familiar with the mind of kindness. The next stage is to send kindness to ourselves. In some ways, this is an

extension of our practice of mindfulness. We become aware of the body and mind, and recognize we simply want to be happy. This is the basis for cultivating self-kindness. This process, does not unfold overnight, or over the course of one sitting practice. We may have very well-developed habits of self-judgment and self-criticism and so it takes a while to discover a friendlier, more forgiving attitude towards ourselves. Again, just recognizing and accepting our experience as best we can is all we need to do to ensure the process of change unfolds in a positive direction.

After a while we can then move on to sending kindness to others. Traditionally the third stage of this practice is to send kindness to someone we don't really know so well – somebody who we neither have strongly positive or negative feelings towards.

In the fourth stage, we bring to mind somebody who we find difficult. This will likely be someone who evokes such mind-states as anger, irritation, jealousy, disappointment, or hurt. Again our practice is to recognize that this person deep down wants to be happy and doesn't want to suffer. Their behavior may be unskillful, they may be challenging and difficult. However, rather than focusing on their faults, we choose to recognize the deeper vulnerability of him or her as a human being. Sending kindness to this person can provoke strong emotions and we might notice resistance. Again, it's helpful to remember not to force or struggle. If it seems very difficult, the wisest, kindest thing may be to let go of the focus on this person and return your attention to the breath or come back to sending kindness to yourself. It is also helpful in this stage to choose somebody who is only slightly difficult. We can think of this practice as building the muscle of kindness so we want to start with what's manageable rather than go for the most difficult straight away.

Why cultivate kindness?

For some people, being kind is a core value, and there doesn't need to be any rationale for this practice other than that "it's nice to be kind". Cultivating kindness in the mind naturally leads to kind action and a kinder way of relating to others, so over time this practice will benefit other people in your life.

Interestingly, cultivating kindness is not only worthwhile for the people in your life, it also can have a profound impact on you. Studies show that practicing kindness meditation for a few weeks leads to measurable increases

in experiences of positive emotion. Very often when we experience difficulty in life, our mind contracts. For instance, if we feel worried our mind gets lost in the experience of worry. We don't appreciate what's positive, we don't notice what's going on around us. Instead our mind contracts around anxious thoughts. The same is true for anger or jealousy. When we practice cultivating kindness, we take small steps towards caring for the wellbeing of others just as we care for our own. This has the effect of making the mind more open and spacious. As a result, we tend to feel happier and less bogged down. This openness and spaciousness also aids our practice of mindfulness. We can more easily rest with a receptive awareness of our experience moving to deeper levels of calm and self-discovery.