

Mindfulness for Life

Session 5: Self-compassion

Access more documents and the guided practices at
youthmindfulness.org/mindfulness-for-life

The Guest House

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door smiling and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

~ Rumi

Unconditional Acceptance

Practising mindfulness means learning to relate to our experience of living in a new way. With mindfulness not only are we learning to be more deeply in touch with the present moment. We're also learning to accept the moment just as it is. Our habitual way of relating to life is often based on trying to change or improve things, and losing ourselves in distraction. The ground of our practice is unconditional acceptance.

Acceptance in this context does not mean resignation. It means that we simply see what is actually happening as it is happening in the present moment. We don't try to deny it, or resist it, or change it. This includes our own self and our experience. To begin with we practice accepting each moment of experience as best we can. We accept the itch on the end of our nose without reacting to it. We accept the distracting noises without trying to block them out. This is why sitting practice is so valuable. We can't move or distract ourselves from what is happening. We just have to be with what is going on.

It may seem inconsequential or trivial to accept an itch or irritating noises, but learning to accept these elements of experience is the basis for accepting other aspects of experience that are more challenging. Accepting each moment just it is, is the doorway to accepting ourselves just as we are. We can learn to accept thoughts that arise and pass. We can learn to accept difficult emotions and mind-states. We can learn to accept parts of ourselves that we may not like – our shame, our loneliness, our anger.

We might ask the question, "What's the point in accepting these things? I don't like fear, I don't want to feel loneliness, I don't want to feel anxiety. I just want them to go away". The short answer is that resistance doesn't work. It's our habitual automatic response, but sadly it's ineffective. However, when we accept what is difficult, our relationship to it is changed. Self-kindness becomes a possibility. We learn to relate to ourselves with gentleness and compassion, and paradoxically, the more we accept ourselves as we are, the more change becomes possible.

Embracing Difficult Emotions

Because our difficult emotions and mind states are uncomfortable, we often try to resist what's there or to attack it with our reasoning mind, trying to fix and solve the 'problem' with our intellect. Painful states such as anger, jealousy, anxiety, depression and fear are often considered the 'shadow' states because they get pushed into the darkness where they act upon us in unconscious, unexamined ways.

So the first way to bring our presence to a painful emotion is to shine the light of recognition upon them. First we acknowledge our confusion, our anger, our overwhelm. Bringing the light of recognition to a feeling is not the same as analysing. In fact analysis can be seen as another subtle tool of resistance, finding intellectual strategies or storied justifications for the feeling rather than really touching into that raw and painful place where the feeling sits. With mindful awareness, we try simply to make contact with the feeling as it arises in the body: the churning agitation of jealousy; the soft and fragile place of insecurity, the weight and claustrophobia of despair.

We can bring the gentleness of the breath to these places of holding and pain, breathing into the embodied feelings with a quality of openness and acceptance and breathing out to allow a quality of gentleness and release. This practice is similar to the simple gesture of holding the hand of a crying child. When a child is in distress we don't tell them to go away, nor do we ask them to analyse their emotions. We take their hand and embrace them with our care until the storms of emotion have passed through. In the same way, we can hold the hand of a painful emotion and embrace it within the energy of mindfulness. Breathing consciously with a difficult emotion is an act of self-kindness.

We can use this simple formulation the next time a painful emotion arises, either during our practice or in the course of daily life.

1. Recognise what is there.
2. Accept the feeling. (It might be helpful to say "I accept that anger/fear/loneliness is present in me in this moment")
3. Embrace the emotion with the care of conscious breathing.

Cultivating Kindness

Cultivating kindness can be immensely beneficial in developing this attitude of unconditional acceptance. Very often, we can have a habit of being critical and judgmental towards ourselves. Cultivating kindness, enables a new way of relating to ourselves and our experience of life and goes hand in hand with cultivating mindfulness.

To begin cultivating kindness, it is very helpful to bring to mind somebody that we already feel a sense of warmth or kindness to. This enables us to touch into a felt-sense of kindness. We begin by recognizing their humanity, their vulnerability. We recognize that they have a wish to be happy and also a wish to not suffer. We simply contemplate this basic fact. This is the basis for offering a sense of kindness. We wish them well.

*May you be happy
May life not be a struggle for you
May you be safe
May you live with ease.*

We follow the rhythm of the breath and drop these kind phrases into the mind just as though we are dropping pebbles into a still lake. Our practice is then to be aware of what unfolds. It may be that we feel numb or bored. It may be that we feel kind and warm-hearted. It may be that we become aware of irritation or hurt in relationship to this person. As always, our attitude of unconditional acceptance is crucial. We don't need to force anything or make anything happen. We simply follow the breath, gently drop in the phrases of kindness and watch our experience unfold. All kinds of emotions and thoughts will arise and pass. What is key, is that we have the intention to cultivate kindness. As long as this is present, then in time we will find kindness begins to develop.

The next stage of the practice is to send kindness towards ourselves. We again spend some time recognizing the wish to be happy and to be free from suffering. We then follow the breath and drop in these phrases of kindness.

*May I be happy
May life not be a struggle for me
May I be safe
May I live with ease*

Being gentle with yourself

It is very important to remember, that none of this is easy! Even if we have been practising for years there will be elements within us – habits and mind-states – that are very difficult to accept and bring kindness to. For this reason, it's extremely helpful to be patient and to appreciate whatever success we enjoy in the practice. To take one mindful breath is a step in the direction of greater peace and compassion. To release tension in our shoulders or the muscles of our face is an act of self-kindness. To recognize a difficult emotion and then breathe consciously for even a few seconds is the beginning of self-acceptance and opens to new possibilities of self-kindness and compassion, both for our selves and for others. Embracing all of our experience – the joys and sorrows, what we like as well as what we fear – is challenging, but in doing so we find a new relationship with life and with our selves.