

Mindfulness for Life

Session 4: Noticing like and dislike

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"...most of what drives our emotions and behaviour is not deeply unconscious, but just below the surface of our awareness. Not only that, but this rich interior world, with its motivations, expectations, interpretations, and story lines, is accessible to all of us if we dare to look. We can all become more aware of the "stream of consciousness" going on in our minds, moment by moment. If it is potentially damaging to us, it is not because it is buried deep in the psyche but because it is virtually unattended. We have gotten so used to its whisperings that we don't even notice it is here. And so, it shapes our lives."

Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal, and Jon Kabat-Zinn

*"Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space lies our freedom and our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and happiness."*

Victor E. Frankl

Mindfulness is always mindfulness of something.

Mindfulness is always mindfulness of something. Just as there needs to be something seen in order for seeing to happen, there needs to be something known in order for mindfulness to be happening. It's not possible to be mindful of nothing. To be aware, we must be aware of something. We can be mindful of anything: the blue sky, the smile of a friend, the sound of a river, the taste of chocolate. To be mindful simply means to be deeply in touch with what is happening in the present moment.

The focus of our practice, until now, has mostly been mindfulness of the body. This is very important. By paying attention to the breath, or practicing walking meditation, mindful movement or the bodyscan, we bring the mind and body back together and establish ourselves in the present moment. When we do this, a real encounter with life is possible. We are no longer so gripped by the over-active monkey mind dragging us into the past and future. Mindfulness of the body is therefore the foundation of practice.

Further to this, practicing mindfulness of the body gives us an opportunity to rest and release tensions. This can be called the art of resting and it is where our practice should always begin. Any time we engage in a period of sitting meditation our first task is simply to bring the mind and body back together, as best we can, and allow ourselves to rest. Our habit of running and struggling through life can be very strong, and this can create tension in the body and mind, so we need to learn how to stop and rest. When we practice sitting meditation, we may experience cascading thoughts, discomfort in the body and emotional storms. This is why conscious breathing is so helpful. It is an anchor enabling us to remain grounded in the present moment, ensuring we are not so easily carried away by thinking or the storms of the mind. Further to this, it is a bridge that connects the mind to the body. When we become deeply aware of our body, we can notice where we are holding tensions and we can begin to release them. The following is a simple and very useful structure for our practice:

- 1) Awareness of the breath.
- 2) Awareness of the breath and the whole body.
- 3) Allowing the body to rest and release tensions.

Mindfulness of the Mind.

While our practice of mindfulness begins in the body, it is not limited to the body. We can also be aware of the mind. Indeed, we could say that the mind can be aware of itself. For instance, when we feel angry, it is possible to know that we are feeling angry. Or if our mind is full of thoughts, it is possible to be aware of this fact. The mind can be aware of itself.

The first aspect of the mind that we are going to bring awareness to is the domain of feeling-sensations. When we speak of feeling-sensations we do not mean emotions or “feelings” in the way that we usually speak of them. We will explore these aspects of mind later in the course. In this context, we mean the affective quality of any moment or aspect of experience. In particular, whether or not the feeling quality of any moment or aspect of experience is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. For instance, the sound of birdsong may be pleasant whereas the sound of a baby wailing or a pneumatic drill will likely be unpleasant.

These feeling-sensations are happening all the time, often without our awareness of them. For instance, when we sit on a chair, we often move or fidget unconsciously. This is because tiny unpleasant sensations arise and call for a reaction. When we notice the aroma of fresh cookies or cakes we may experience a pleasant feeling-sensation, delighting in the smell as it contacts our olfactory system. We probably experience hundreds (if not thousands) of different pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling-sensations within any given day.

This is a remarkable feature of our nervous system, keeping us alive from moment to moment. We have evolved to approach pleasant feeling-sensations and keep our distance from unpleasant feeling-sensations. For instance, we don't get burned (very often) when we are cooking because we naturally and instinctively pull our hand away from the stove if we experience the unpleasant sensation of intense heat. We don't poison ourselves with old food because we find the sight and smell disgusting. Furthermore, we keep hydrated because drinking water (especially when thirsty) is pleasant. With a little reflection, we can see that these feeling-sensations play a very important and influential role in our lives.

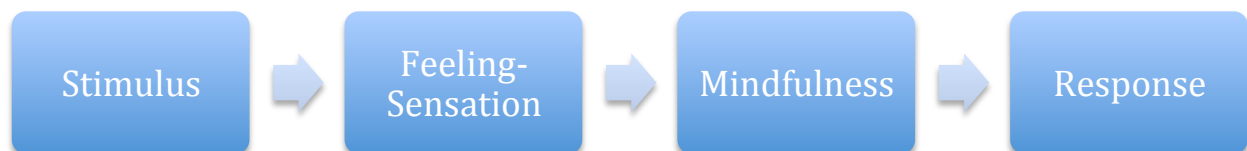
Importantly, feelings-sensations give rise to impulses and instinctive reactions. This can be illustrated in the model below:



As has been discussed, the fact that the mind works in this way is very helpful. However, these feeling-sensations can also develop into mindstates that may not be helpful or give rise to reactions or behaviours that cause problems. For instance, if your child or partner or co-worker is in a bad mood and snaps at you, it is likely this will provoke an unpleasant feeling-sensation. Very often this will give rise to an impulse to react in a habitual way. For one person it may be to take the person to task straight away, angrily shouting at them for their unfair and inappropriate behavior. For another person, the impulse may be to shrink away, quietly harboring feelings of ill-will and resentment. Still another possible eventuality is to turn the ill-will inwards “I must have done something to upset them...I’m no use...I always upset people.”

In any event the unpleasant feeling gives rise to a process of thoughts, emotions and actions that can often be unhelpful. The same is true for pleasant feeling-sensations. We may see a new phone or laptop, and the beauty of the design impresses us. However, rarely does our appreciation end at this point – very quickly this pleasant-feeling sensation will give rise to a craving/desiring mind. We may spend a lot of money on a new thing we don’t really need, and it all starts with a strong pleasant feeling-sensation.

If we are able to bring mindfulness to this process, we give ourselves a chance to act with more wisdom and awareness. As the diagram below shows, mindfulness creates space so that we can choose our response more wisely.



If we have no awareness whatsoever, then we react mindlessly to whatever arises in our experience. With mindfulness, however, we can begin to act from a place of greater clarity and kindness.

It is important to note, that it is not easy to step out of old habits of reactivity. We may have high hopes that by practising mindfulness we'll become a peaceful, kind person who never loses their temper or makes mistakes. This isn't going to happen! We still mess up. When we do it's important to be kind to ourselves. What does begin to change, is that we begin to notice our habits of reacting more quickly than we may have done before.

Our task is simply to do our best in *noticing* and *staying with* feeling-sensations as feeling-sensations, rather than getting lost in reactive patterns. Often when we have pleasant experiences we grasp at them and want to make them last longer, and when we have unpleasant experiences we push them away or try to escape them. This habit of clinging to what we like and resisting what we dislike can be exhausting. With mindfulness, we learn to pay attention to the bare quality of our affective experience, simply noticing, pleasant, unpleasant and neutral, and how the mind responds with like, dislike, or disinterest respectively. We can notice this about particular aspects of our experience as well as our general overall experience from moment to moment. One thing we may begin to learn is that the feeling-sensations in our experience constantly change from moment to moment. Like waves coming and going without end, we notice that pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling-sensations constantly pass through our experience. Why tire ourselves out with clinging and resisting? Better to just let the play of experience unfold with interest, curiosity and kindness.

Practising awareness of feeling-sensations.

To practice awareness of feeling-sensations, continue practicing awareness of breath and body and just notice, as best you can, the feeling-quality of experience. Is the mind liking or disliking? Underneath the liking or disliking there will be an affective quality to the experience – pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Our task is simply to be present and notice what is happening. The more we do this, the more freedom and choice we have.