

Mindfulness for Life

Session 6: Nourishing Happiness

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“Life is filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, sunshine, the eyes of a baby. Our breathing for example can be very enjoyable. I enjoy breathing every day. But many people appreciate the joy of breathing only when they have asthma or a stuffed-up nose. We don't need to wait until we have asthma to enjoy our breathing. Awareness of the precious elements of happiness is itself the practice of right mindfulness. Elements like these are within us and all around us. In each second of our life we can enjoy them. If we do so, seeds of peace, joy and happiness will be planted in us, and become strong. The secret of happiness is happiness itself. Wherever we are, anytime, we have the capacity to enjoy the sunshine, the presence of each other, the wonder of our breathing. We don't have to travel anywhere else to do so. We can be in touch with these things right now.”

~ Thich Nhat Hanh, Peace is Every Step.

Being our own guide

When we begin learning mindfulness it is very helpful to have guidance. Guided meditations remind us to come back to the breath when the mind wanders. They also remind us to be gentle and patient with ourselves. However, in time we develop the capacity to practice without audio guidance. When we do this, we enjoy greater autonomy over the direction of our practice. For instance, we may decide to stay with the breath for just a few minutes before moving to awareness of the whole body, or depending on our experience in the moment, we may decide to stay with a predominant focus on the breath for a longer period of time. Over time we learn to be flexible, practicing in a way that brings greater ease, self-kindness, and clarity. Rather than relying on audio guidance, we can begin to establish independence in our practice and rely on our own wisdom. Using short breathing phrases in our practice can be a helpful way to develop independence in our practice.

A way to practice sitting meditation without guidance

When sitting in meditation take a few moments to establish a comfortable and stable posture. The spine should be upright, but the muscles of the body relaxed. We want to find a way of sitting that brings comfort and ease, but also enables us to be wakeful and aware.

Begin by bringing your awareness to the posture of the body. Quickly scanning your attention throughout the body may reveal areas of tension, holding or tightness that you can easily release. Often there might be unease in the body which you are aware of but are unable to release. There's no need to struggle or strive for some perfect feeling of comfort or relaxation. Indeed, such a struggle will only bring more unease. We establish our posture and accept and enjoy whatever level of comfort we notice.

Then bring your attention to the breath. The practice is simply to feel the process of breathing. When you breathe in, you know you are breathing in. When you breathe out, you know you are breathing out. To support awareness of breathing, we can use the following phrases:

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.	<i>In</i>
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Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.	<i>Out</i>
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It may also be helpful just to use the words *in* and *out*. You may combine these words with the rhythm of breathing, or you may use them more as a signpost for your practice – gently dropping them into awareness every few minutes to remind you of your intention.

Once we have sat for a few minutes we can strengthen our mindfulness by developing the intention to follow the entirety of the in-breath and the entirety of the out-breath using the following phrases:

Breathing in, I follow my in-breath from beginning to end.	Following in-breath.
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Breathing out, I follow my out-breath from beginning to end.	Following out-breath.
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Again we can shorten these phrases to *following in-breath, following out-breath*. Bringing a curiosity to the sensations of breathing can be very helpful as can finding enjoyment in the simple process of breathing in and breathing out.

After some time we can open our awareness to embrace the whole body. When we breathe in, all the cells of our body are nourished with oxygen, and when we breathe out the whole body is involved in the process of letting go. As such, we can see that the breathing is not confined to our lungs or nostrils. We can feel the whole body breathing in and breathing out.

Aware of my whole body, I breathe in.

Aware of body

Easing my body, I breathe out.

Easing body

Finally, we can gently ease and release tensions in the body. This cannot happen by force or effort. It only happens through allowing the body to rest. If we notice tightness and discomfort, then our practice is simply to be with these sensations in a gentle and kind way.

Calming my body, I breathe in.

Calming body

Releasing tensions in my body, I breathe out.

Releasing tensions

Normally we would practice with these phrases in the order outlined above, practicing with each pair for anywhere between three and ten minutes.

From Doing to Being

Most of us are very familiar with what can be called the *doing mode*. The doing mode is present whenever we are in the mode of getting things done, hurrying from one task to the next, pulled into the future by our to-do-list. Sometimes it may show itself in an effort to constantly try and change something, or a feeling of restlessness or unease. We know the *doing mode* is in full flow when we feel overwhelmed by busyness and there's a strong sense of striving. One of the reasons the *doing mode* is so pervasive is because our society encourages it. We have a collective habit of rushing, busyness, and striving. As such to step out of this habit is not easy. It takes practice and willpower.

Mindfulness offers the possibility of accessing another way, what can be called the *being mode*. When we're in the being mode, there is no striving and no trying to get anywhere or trying to achieve anything. We're just simply in touch with what is happening. This can also be called non-doing. Sometimes we experience the *being mode* when we behold something beautiful in nature. For instance, if you see a beautiful sunset, you might look on it with a sense of wonder and appreciation. There is no attempt to change or improve the sunset. Even if it only lasts for a few seconds, those moments of simply enjoying are moments of being. If, however, we were to think, "this sunset is nice, but it needs a little more orange on the bottom left," then we've stepped back into the *doing mode* and are no longer simply *being with* the sunset.

Importantly, the being mode and doing mode are not two distinct states. We can think of them more like a spectrum. The more we practice mindfulness the stronger the capacity for simply being becomes, and the less sway the doing mode has over us. Our task is not to try and vanquish the doing mode. Indeed, it has its place and value. The problem is that, for many of us, things have become unbalanced. This is one of the reasons we practice mindfulness – to enable more moments of being in our life.

Nourishing Happiness

One benefit of the being mode, is that it allows us to be in touch with and enjoy the conditions of happiness that are available in the present moment. This can be called the *art of happiness*. The first step in the practice of nourishing joy and happiness through mindfulness is learning to stop – learning to rest in the being mode. When we do this we are able to notice and connect with conditions of happiness. It is a bit like sitting on a train moving at 60 miles an hour. Because the train is moving so fast, it's not possible to really see and be aware of the trees and leaves that pass by the window. When the doing mode is dominant, we move so quickly, we can't be in touch with the conditions of happiness that are already in our lives. We can't enjoy them. When we stop we have the opportunity to connect and this connection allows us to enjoy more.

As such, the practice of nourishing joy and happiness always begins with our foundational practice – embodied presence. We begin by bringing our mind home to our body through either walking or sitting meditation. After practicing gentle awareness of the body, breath or our steps for ten minutes or

so, our mind may begin to calm down a little. Of course, very often this will not be the case! Our mind may race for the full duration of a 20 or 30 minute practice period. If this is the case, then we do our best to simply accept “this is how this moment is”, with the knowledge that we are developing our patience and inner strength. Over time, however, the mind will tend towards more calm and presence.

Once we have nourished our embodied presence we can then bring our mind to notice the conditions of happiness that are available to us in the here and now. There are thousands of conditions that support our health and wellbeing from moment to moment, but our habit is to ignore them rather than appreciate them. We can recognize a particular condition of happiness by recognizing that we would suffer if this condition were taken away from us. For instance, we often do not appreciate our lungs. We only notice how important and valuable our healthy lungs are, when we have a bad chest infection or a serious cough. Once we are able to breathe freely again, we can really experience and value the enjoyment of healthy lungs. This is true for countless elements in our body – our heart, our eyes, our hands, our teeth etc.

We can also recognize conditions of happiness in our environment. The air we breathe, the trees that provide the air, the blue sky that protects us from the sun’s radiation, the warmth of the room we are sat in, the clean water that we have available to drink. It can be very nice to practice observing conditions of happiness in the body or environment that are available in the here and now because we can *get in touch* with these in a very real way. We do not need to be grateful for our eyes or our lungs in an abstract way. We can use our mindfulness to experience the wonder of having eyes and lungs directly. We can experience gratitude for the clean air and trees through our breath – knowing that the breath would not be possible without the air and the trees. As such our appreciation is felt in our body rather than just as a cognitive exercise.

It is also very good to practice recognizing and appreciating other conditions of happiness that may not fall within these domains (body and environment). We may like to appreciate certain people or relationships when we sit in meditation, or other aspects of our lives, such as a car that still works, the political or social freedoms we enjoy, or our ability to read and understand language. There are countless conditions of happiness that we can practice with. What’s important is that we remain embodied as we appreciate.

It's important to note that when we practice nourishing joy and happiness, we shouldn't expect dramatic emotions or experiences. Very often our experience of joy and happiness can be very subtle and quiet. There is still great value in even the subtlest experiences of joy and happiness, however, if we can be aware of them. Every moment we are aware of a condition of happiness and practice appreciating it with the help of our mindfulness, we are cultivating the habits of joy and happiness. The practice can thus be pleasant in the present as well as an investment in our future health and happiness.

What's more, it's very important that we don't try to force ourselves to feel a particular way or become frustrated if we don't experience any joy or happiness. ***As soon as we want our experience of meditation to be other than how it is, we fall into the doing/striving mode, and we've lost touch with simply being with whatever is present. The paradox is that simply being – i.e. non-seeking – will in time bring the benefits we seek from practicing.*** Our approach is always to be playful and curious – somewhat like we are learning to paint. The first time we apply our paintbrush to the canvas, we won't create a masterpiece. But every time we do it, we become more sensitive and attuned.

Finally there can be times when we practice nourishing joy and happiness out of a sense of wanting to avoid how we actually feel. This approach is not helpful. If we experience difficult emotions, or restlessness, or just a quiet sense of unease, it is much more helpful to give our attention to this experience. We can embrace difficult mindstates or emotions with the practice of ***recognizing, allowing, and embracing***, we learned last week.