

Mindfulness for Life

Session 2: The Art of Allowing

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If You Would Grow

*If you would grow to your best self
Be patient, not demanding
Accepting, not condemning
Nurturing, not withholding
Self-marveling, not belittling
Gently guiding, not pushing and punishing
For you are more sensitive than you know
Mankind is as tough as war yet delicate as flowers
We can endure agonies but we open fully only to warmth and light
And our need to grow
Is as fragile as a fragrance dispersed by storms of will
To return only when those storm are still
So, accept, respect, and attend your sensitivity
A flower cannot be opened with a hammer.*

By: Daniel F. Mead

The Art of Allowing

When we begin practicing mindfulness we can often bring a habit of striving to our practice. We try to 'get it right'. We can become frustrated when we find that our mind wanders or it's difficult to feel any sensation in the body. We may find the experience of the bodyscan boring or uncomfortable; we may continually fall asleep; or perhaps our mind seems to be an endless stream of thoughts that just won't calm down. We might begin to experience doubt in the practice "this doesn't work", or doubt in ourselves, "I'm sure this is great, but it's just not for me – I can't do it."

Such difficulties and doubts are experienced by almost everybody who begins practicing mindfulness. What's important is to remember that we can't do this wrong! As long as we have the intention to be present, then we're doing it right. If you fall asleep within 30 seconds or the mind is like a wild animal constantly running into the past or future, then that's just how the mind is. This is where we start.

To struggle against our mind or our experience is to use the approach of the hammer as illustrated in the poem above by Daniel Mead. With mindfulness, our intention is to take a different approach – steadfast, but gentle and allowing. We need to be steadfast, because cultivating mindfulness requires consistent effort, but we also need to be gentle with ourselves. We just do our best and congratulate ourselves for having the intention to cultivate more presence of mind. We are learning to adopt a friendly attitude to our experience and to our own mind.

Crucial to this is the *art of allowing*. For many of us this is a revolutionary way of relating to life. So often we struggle against our experience in the present moment. We judge or evaluate, compare or denigrate; and very often our judging and critical mind is directed inwards, towards ourselves. Sometimes this habit of mind manifests in simply wanting things to be other than how they are. We can notice this happening hundreds of times a day. "I wish my co-workers weren't so disorganized", "I wish the weather wasn't so miserable", "I wish I had more free time", "I wish my train wasn't late."

With mindfulness we're learning to allow the moment to be just as it is. From moment to moment this means letting our experience be as it is without resisting it in anyway. If our mind is busy when we practice the bodyscan, can we fully welcome and accept the busy mind? If we have an itch or a discomfort in the body can we fully accept and allow the difficult sensation without reacting? Learning the art of allowing enables us to release the tightness and tension that comes from resisting the unfolding experience of life. Often just accepting the moment as it is can bring a lot of ease and relief very quickly.

Mindfulness of Breathing

One important pathway to exploring the art of allowing is through mindfulness of breathing. When we practice mindfulness of breathing we don't seek to change or modify the breath in anyway, we just allow our body to breathe naturally and we feel the somatic sensations of breathing. The breath is always available to us as an aid to nourish our mindfulness. If we can follow the rhythm of our in-breath and out-breath even for a few seconds, mindfulness becomes a reality in that moment. We don't need to think or analyse, we just feel the breath flowing in and flowing out. Naturally our mind will wander here and there. When this happens, all we need to do is notice and come back to the breath.

Using the breath as a means of cultivating mindfulness has many benefits. The mind can easily become stressed and dispersed. Our breathing is an anchor, guiding us back to the present moment. If, in the course of our daily lives, we experience anger or irritation, or simply feel overwhelmed by our to-do list, taking three mindful breaths affords us the opportunity to stop and collect ourselves so that we are able to respond from a place of greater clarity and calm.

Our breath can also be a teacher. When we breathe in, the body doesn't choose or judge the oxygen that it receives. It simply accepts whatever air immediately surrounds it. And when we breathe out, the body never tries to hold onto the carbon dioxide longer than is necessary. Once it is ready to let go, it simply lets go. This has helpful parallels to teach us the art of allowing.

When we sit in mindfulness, we never know what our experience is going to be. We don't even know what each moment will be like. Our practice is to be just like the body breathing in and breathing out. We practice receiving each moment just as it is, whatever it is. We don't deny it, try to modify it, or try to improve it. We just receive it. We may feel calm, bored, happy, or sad – whatever arrives in the mind, we allow it to arrive in the mind. Similarly, just as the body lets go of the out-breath, we can learn to let go of what is past. Perhaps a thought arises about a work project. Our tendency might be to latch on to the thought and try to figure things out or come to a solution. However, when we practice mindfulness we are

learning to just notice the thought in the mind and then let it go rather than give energy to it. Often we may be thinking about something for a few minutes before we notice we have lost our awareness of the breath and the present moment. However, when we become aware again, that is an opportunity to practice letting go. We let go of whatever stream of thought the mind was preoccupied with and we come back to the breath and body.

Sitting Meditation

Mindfulness of breathing while sitting is an opportunity to practice the art of allowing. When we practice mindfulness of breath and body in a sitting posture, we come back to ourselves and rest. We don't have to do anything or achieve anything. We just sit. We don't need to have any kind of special experience, or feel a particular way, or achieve great insights. We just sit to enjoy sitting, to come in contact with the feeling of being alive. Every moment of coming back to the breath and body is a moment of strengthening our capacity for present-moment attention.

Of sitting meditation, Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

"While practicing sitting meditation, you need to feel completely at ease. Every muscle of your body should be relaxed, including the muscles of your face. The best way to relax the muscles in your body is to smile gently as you breathe. You should keep your spinal column quite straight, but your body should not be rigid. This position will relax you, and you can enjoy the feeling of ease. Do not make a great effort, do not struggle, do not fight. Let go of everything as you sit..."

...If you sit always in expectation, you cannot be with or enjoy the present moment, which always contains the whole of life. Sit in this context means to sit in an awakened way, in a relaxed way, with your mind, calm, and clear. Only this can be called sitting, and it takes training and practice."

Norman Fischer, an American meditation teacher, writes:

"[Sitting meditation], is fundamentally, sitting with the basic feeling of being alive. What is the basic feeling of being alive? Being conscious, embodied and breathing. That is actually what it feels like to be alive."

Every moment of your life, and all of your feelings, thoughts, and accomplishments, depend on this, but most of us hardly ever notice it... our task is just to be present with this and nothing else. Simply sitting aware of the feeling of being alive."

Mindfulness in Daily Life

In cultivating mindfulness we can speak of formal and informal practice. Formal practices include the bodyscan and sitting meditation – where we set aside time to focus on cultivating mindfulness. Informal practice refers to bringing mindful awareness to our daily life. Both are of great importance in developing our practice.

Formal practices provide us with the opportunity to focus our entire being exclusively on cultivating mindfulness. We nourish and restore ourselves through sitting and walking meditation and this enables us to live with greater awareness. However, if we don't seek to integrate mindfulness into our daily life then we hinder it's potential. When we can combine a daily formal practice with the intention to be mindful as much as possible throughout the day we enable mindfulness to flow into our life and into our habits of mind offering the opportunity for transformation and growth.

Pausing to breathe

A wonderful way to begin nurturing mindfulness in your daily life is to practice pausing. As much as you can remember, in whatever you're doing (emailing, reading, typing) see if can you just pause for a moment. Take a few seconds to notice what's going on right in that moment. Tune into your environment and just notice the kinds of sounds that are there, the quality of light, what's in your field of vision. Then see if you can bring your attention to sensations such as temperature, sensations of contact between your feet and the floor, sensations in the hands or between the skin and your clothing. You might just check in with what's happening in the body overall – is there tiredness? Tension? Restlessness? See if you can notice without judging or trying to change or fix what's there. Allow 3 or 4 mindful breaths before returning to the activities of the day.

We could summarise this as: **Stop** – pause a moment; **Look** around – arrive in into your present moment environment; **Listen** – to what’s going on in your body and state of being at this time and enjoy three mindful breaths.

Bells of mindfulness

Another helpful practice is to use a mindfulness bell. We can think of a mindfulness bell as anything in our environment that ‘wakes us up’ to the present moment and reminds us to return, even just briefly, to our present moment state. It might be walking through a particular door, passing a particular building on the street, entering a particular room, or hearing a phone ring. Choose something unobtrusive and helpful to you, something that you can consider a ‘mindfulness buddy’ that kindly points you back to yourself in those times in the day when we get most caught in our automatic pilot of doing and thinking.

Choosing a mindful activity

Finally, it can be very helpful to choose a simple activity that you do everyday and decide to do it mindfully. This may be brushing your teeth, showering, or making your morning cup of tea or coffee. Take some time to think about an activity that you could do mindfully every day. Following the sensations of breathing is a very helpful way of staying present as you practice being mindful of the activity. For instance, as you brush your teeth, you can follow the breath as well as notice the sensations and experience of brushing. It’s good to approach this playfully and with a sense of curiosity.