



SESSION 1: WAKING UP FROM AUTOMATIC PILOT

A DEFINITION OF MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges when we pay attention in a particular way: in the present moment, with curiosity and kindness, to things as they are.

AWARENESS AND AUTOMATIC PILOT

Contrast these two situations:

- Scenario 1: you're going for a walk with a young child in the woods. You move slowly, stopping often, seeing through his or her young eyes the extraordinary richness of simple objects. Seeing as if for the first time.
- Scenario 2: you're walking to work on a familiar route. You suddenly realise that, for some time, you have been quite unaware of your surroundings, totally lost in thoughts about other things. You have been walking on automatic pilot.

The two scenarios illustrate the difference between living life deeply, as it happens, and our more usual way of rushing through life without seeing, tasting, smelling, or touching it. Just as we often walk on automatic pilot, careful observation reveals that we actually live much of our lives in this way.

On automatic pilot we are not really present, not really tuned in, only vaguely aware of the richness and fullness of life. When we are 'out of touch' in this way, the mind may slip into unhelpful habits of thinking and feeling. We may react to situations without really noticing what is happening.

When we practice mindfulness, we intentionally choose to bring awareness to our moment-to-moment experience. We notice thoughts, feelings, and body sensations as they arise. In doing so, we step out of automatic pilot and become more fully present, more in touch with ourselves and the world around us. When we live with more awareness, we are less likely to react to life and we are more able to respond to it... with choice and with freedom.

THE RAISIN PRACTICE: A SMALL FRUIT WITH A BIG MESSAGE

Did you notice how your experience of eating the raisin was different by the simple act of focusing on it? Many people say that they noticed things that they had never noticed before. The colours, taste, the texture, changes in flavour as they chew. Raisins are so insignificant; we tend to eat them by the handful while doing something 'more important'. But once you see the difference that paying full attention can make to the small things in life, you start to get an inkling of the cost of inattention. Just think of all the pleasures of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching that are drifting by you unnoticed. You may well be missing vast portions of your daily life. You only ever have a moment to live, this moment, and yet we all tend to live in 'our heads' dwelling in the past or in the future. We only rarely notice what is arising in the present moment.

Adapted from: Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World

ATTITUDES THAT CAN SUPPORT OUR MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

Learning mindfulness does involve following guidance and practising 'techniques' but the approach that we bring to our practice is just as important, or more so. The following attitudes are seen as some of the essential foundations that can help our mindfulness practice to flourish.

Non-judging - we tend to constantly judge our experience (as right or wrong, good or bad, etc.) and this can make it hard for us to see what is really here. Bringing a non-judging attitude to our practice enables us to observe, allow, and be with whatever arises. It does not mean letting go of discernment and judgement about ourselves and the world.

Patience - being in a rush to achieve results from our practice will tend to take us out of the present moment and thereby undermine our mindfulness. An attitude of patience helps us to allow things to unfold in their own time.

Beginner's mind - it is easy for our beliefs about what we know to get in the way of seeing things as they really are. When we bring an attitude of beginner's mind, we experience things as if for the first time. We ask ourselves "what is actually here right now?"

Trust - many of us tend to trust the judgement of authority figures and look outside of ourselves for 'the truth' and for guidance. It is important in our practice that we learn to listen to our own feelings and intuitions and begin to honour and trust what we hear. Our mindfulness practice becomes our teacher.

Non-striving - in our everyday lives, many of our actions are done in order to achieve something or get somewhere. In many situations, the harder we try, the more likely we are to succeed. This approach tends to be counter-productive in cultivating mindfulness and it is usually more helpful to bring a non-striving attitude to our practice. We learn to let go of trying to make things happen.

Acceptance - we often waste a lot of energy refusing to see what is here and struggling against the way things are. In our mindfulness practice we cultivate acceptance by being with each moment as it is. This does not mean that we have to like or accept everything about ourselves and the world. A willingness to see and accept the reality of how things are is often a necessary first step before taking action that may lead to change.

Letting go - when we look inward, we soon notice how the mind wants to hold on to what is pleasant in our experience and reject what is unpleasant. Our practice will benefit from us learning to sometimes let go of these tendencies and instead to simply observe, allow, let be.

Befriending - Befriending involves being curious, friendly and kind, and is a capacity that we can all develop towards ourselves and our experiences. It is available to all of us, and extends kindness and warmth to all our experience, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant.

MINDFULNESS OF BODY AND BREATH

Every meditation tradition begins with daily practices that help to focus a scattered mind. The most common way is to start by focusing on a single object that is always with you: the movement of the breath in the body. Why the breath:

1. Breath is life. You cannot survive without the nourishment that it provides for more than a few tens of seconds.
2. The breath is automatic. It does not need us to make it happen. It breathes itself. It is an important antidote to the natural tendency we all have to in believing that we have to be in control.
3. The breath provides a natural, gently moving target to focus on in your meditation. It grounds you in the here and now. You can only breathe now – you cannot breathe for five minutes ago, or for a future moment.
4. The breath is a sensitive monitor for your emotions; By being more in tune with the read-outs from your breath you can get a sense of your internal weather patterns and choose how to take skillful action to look after yourself.
5. The breath provides an anchor when the mind has wandered, when it is bored or restless, sad or anxious. Even during the shortest of meditations, you can get a sense of how things are for you, and by returning to the anchor of the breath, let go of the tendency to react automatically by trying to ‘fix’ things straight away. We can allow a space for life to live itself for a while, and for an inner wisdom to emerge about what may or may not need to be done.

PRACTISING APPRECIATION AND GRATITUDE

Attention is like Teflon for pleasant experiences but like Velcro for unpleasant experiences. Our brains evolved for survival and reproduction, rather than for happiness and peace of mind. This biological heritage seems to have left us with a natural tendency to give plenty of attention to what’s wrong and to what might be a threat. Noticing and giving time to what is lovely doesn’t flow so easily for most of us, especially when we’re under stress, but there are steps we can take to train ourselves to bring awareness to the lovely and nourishing aspects of our lives.

Just making a mental note that something is pleasant, uplifting, or beautiful can be helpful. Much more powerful is to pause and appreciate and bring awareness to the details of physical sensations, feelings, thoughts and impulses that arise. By learning to ‘turn good facts into good experiences’ in this way, we can deepen the appreciation and gratitude that we have for these enjoyable moments and thus increase the nourishment that they give us. The intention is that this can become a part of your everyday life.

MINDFULNESS OF EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES: ON WASHING THE DISHES

To my mind, the idea that doing the dishes is unpleasant can occur only when you are not doing them. Once you are standing in front of the sink with your sleeves rolled up and your hands in warm water, it really is not so bad. I enjoy taking my time with each dish, being fully aware of the dish, the water, and each movement of my hands. I know that if I hurry in order to go and have a cup of tea, the time will be unpleasant...

Washing the dishes is at the same time a means and an end. Not only do we do the dishes in order to have clean dishes, we also do the dishes just to do the dishes, to live fully in each moment while washing them.

If I am incapable of washing dishes joyfully, if I want to finish them quickly so I can go and have a cup of tea, I will be equally incapable of drinking the tea joyfully. With the cup in my hands I will be thinking about what to do next, and the fragrance and the flavour of the tea, together with the pleasure of drinking it, will be lost. I will always be dragged into the future, never able to live in the present moment.

Thich Nhat Hanh

HOME PRACTICE INVITATION

A Formal Practice: Awareness of Body and Breath.

Using the recording, practice for 10 minutes every day this week.

An Informal Practice: Mindfulness of an Everyday Activity

Choose one routine activity in your daily life and make a deliberate effort to bring moment-to-moment awareness to that activity each time you do it, just as we did in the raisin exercise. Possibilities include waking up in the morning, brushing your teeth, showering, drying your body, getting dressed, eating a meal or a snack, taking out the rubbish, shopping, and so forth. Just like during the raisin exercise, 'zero in' on knowing what you are doing as you are doing it. Notice body sensations, thoughts and feelings as they arise.

A New Habit In Everyday Life:

Five Finger Gratitude Practice: bring to mind five things for which you are grateful, counting them on your fingers and opening to and savouring the sensations of gratitude in the body as best you can.

