

Introduction to Mindfulness (2 of 25)

Relaxing Distractibility

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Hello, and welcome to the second talk on the introduction to mindfulness practice. One of the very important principles of mindfulness is simplicity. Don't make the practice complicated. Mindfulness is the capacity to be aware of our present moment experience in a simple way.

One of those areas of simplicity is to notice things as they are, not as we wish they were. So if we're distracted, if we're caught up in our thoughts, a successful moment in the practice of mindfulness is to know that. Maybe this level of sometime in the future for some of you. It's possible that in the clear knowing, we get distracted. So we have to kind of step back from

being distracted in our thought streams. We step back just enough so we can really see the distraction. It might still be going on. We can say in our mind, "Oh, *this* is distraction. *This* is being caught in thought."

Be delighted in that knowing. No matter how difficult or challenging the thought or concern might be, have a deep appreciation for the value of stepping back and seeing it and knowing it clearly. It is possible to simply know that we're distracted. Over time, we come to appreciate that simple knowing.

With most forces of distraction and most things we're caught up in, the chances are that we're tense in some way. Something is tense inside of us. One example of how this might work involves seeing with the eyes. If you look at a little spot in front of you and fixate on that spot, not letting the eyes move from that spot, the eyes will tense up. It's tiring for the eyes to hold them on a little spot without moving.

When they're relaxed, free, and doing their own thing without us holding onto something, what the eyes want to do is float. The eyes move and roam and kind of float around scanning what's happening. They don't fixate on it. We might look at some small area, but the eyes themselves will gently scan and move when they're relaxed. As soon as we fixate, tension builds up.

It is the same way with our distractibility. Tension builds up. So one of the meditation instructions is the importance of noticing that tension – noticing that we're tight in the shoulders, the belly, the chest, the hands, the thighs, the lower back, or the shoulder blade area. It could be in the throat, it could be in the jaw, the nose, the cheeks, around the eyes, or in the forehead. It could be someplace deep inside the skull. There are many places where we can hold tension and the muscles get tight.

Remember that the essence of mindfulness is just to know something, and to know it in such a way that you really appreciate knowing it. That means that you're not caught up in judging it or assigning meaning to it. Rather, you're appreciating it and stepping back, "Oh, I can see it, I know it. Look at that. Look at that tension. Look at all that tightness in my muscles, in my jaw. Look at that."

It might be painful; it might be unpleasant. But don't be distracted by the unpleasant. Don't get caught in its orbit. Step back and say, "Oh, that's unpleasant." But the essence of this is, can you relax then? Can you soften someplace in the body? Soften the shoulders, soften the eyes if they're fixated. Soften the muscles of the face.

When you have a tension headache, it can be fascinating to scan through the body to see where you can relax. Ask, “Where is the tension?” Then, as you relax, especially the musculature of the head and the face, see how that affects the pain of the tension headache. Soften the belly.

Sometimes the physical tension in the body is a direct expression of tension in the mind – preoccupation and fixation in the mind. The metaphor the Buddha gave is that the mind is a puppeteer. There are lots of strings from the fingers of the puppeteer that go down to all the different muscles in our body. They constantly pull and tug on them to make us tense. You'll probably notice this sometimes when you're sitting quietly and peacefully minding your own business, and suddenly there's a thought about something terrible that happened long ago, and you get angry. Maybe the stomach tenses up when there's fear or anger. The puppeteer has done its work.

The tension of the mind can affect the body, but there's also the reverse – as the body relaxes, the mind can also relax. As the body tenses more, that fuels more tense thinking and preoccupation. So the movement of relaxing is so useful. Relaxing can be more like releasing or quieting. Exactly what the activity is is different for each of us, so I keep using the word “relax.” Maybe for you, a better word is “calm” – calm the body.

Sometimes I like the word “gentle” – gentle the body. Or “release the body.” Another word I like is to “ease” – ease up. Be easy in the body. Be easy with how things are. Ease up on things.

However you understand the activity of relaxing, which I use as a general term, this is a method by which to awaken more awareness. When we're more preoccupied and distracted, less present-moment awareness is available. As we relax and open, notice how that allows for more simple present-moment awareness. As that present moment becomes more available, *invite* in the breathing.

Some people tense up when they are told to focus on or concentrate on the breathing. They have the idea they have to concentrate and not be distracted, not leave it, so they tense up. Or when we say to bring the mind back, even the movement of bringing the mind back can become a way of tightening up. The idea is to find a way to awaken your mindfulness or allow it to continue so that there is no tension.

One way of doing this, which works for some people, once we notice we're back to some state of awareness, is to invite the breathing into that awareness, to invite it into attention, to invite it back into knowing. Then rest with it, relax with it, and flow with it. Be carried by the movements of breathing in and breathing out, until we

notice that we are distracted again. Distraction means that you are tensing up, you are getting preoccupied.

If there are quiet thoughts in the background and you are able to just stay with the breathing, let the thoughts be in the background. Don't worry about them. But when the thinking comes in the foreground or predominates, that's when you want to let your attention notice your thinking and relax something. In the relaxing, maybe invite back your breathing. In this way, hopefully, mindfulness meditation develops in such a way that you are learning not to be in conflict with any experience that you are mindful of. That might be a tall order, but when you learn to do it, it actually keeps things much simpler. Conflict is complicated.

As you go about your day today, you could try noticing when you are fixated on or preoccupied by something. Notice when you are zeroed in because you have a lot of concerns, fear, anger, annoyance, desires, ambition, or something. Notice the tension in your body and the tension in your mind. Notice the tightening, the narrowing. Then see if you can relax the body. Today, I'd encourage you to look for lots of opportunities to keep coming back to your body to relax it. Relax when you drive. When you sit down in your car to drive, relax before you start driving. When you sit down to a meal, don't just start eating right away. Take 10-15 seconds just to relax and soften. Maybe do this occasionally

between bites. Look for all kinds of possibilities to relax and see how this brings mindfulness more fully into this day.

This is stress-reduction-based mindfulness. As we reduce our stress, mindfulness surfaces. So thank you very much and I'll continue with this tomorrow.