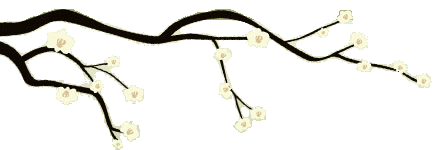
# Session 4–Staying Present



***The Guest House*** *This being human is a guest house.   
Every morning a new arrival.   
  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,   
some momentary awareness comes   
as an unexpected visitor.   
  
Welcome and entertain them all!   
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,   
who violently sweep your house   
empty of its furniture,   
still, treat each guest honourably.   
He may be clearing you out   
for some new delight.   
  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,   
meet them at the door laughing,   
and invite them in.   
  
Be grateful for whoever comes,   
because each has been sent   
as a guide from beyond*

*Rumi – a 14th Century Muslim Mystic*

*The Essential Rumi*, versions by Coleman Barks 1995 taken from http://www.panhala.net/Archive/The\_Guest\_House.html)

As human beings we have a tendency to react to our experiences, whether that is with boredom, fidgetiness, discomfort, attachment or some other reaction. The longer we sit in meditation the more likely we are to notice this tendency to react. Our reactions can generally be classified into attachment, aversion and avoidance.

* Attachment - We may want to hold on to an experience and be reluctant to let it go, or try to recreate it in some way. This happens often with pleasant experiences, such as trying to stay in ‘holiday-mode’, but also with experiences we may view as unpleasant, such as anger with a loved one.
* Aversion - Alternatively, we may try to get rid of our experience, or try to avoid having the experience. Becoming angry with ourselves or the situation and resenting it or trying to distract ourselves from it.
* Avoidance - Finally, we may space out and go somewhere else in our heads as a way of avoiding experiencing the situation.

When we try to avoid, change or rationalise feelings we end up thinking about what we are feeling and why, judging the feeling rather than simply experiencing the emotion. We put our effort into trying to change our state, rather than allowing ourselves to be with it. this happens often with sadness, disappointment, anger etc, but also happens with happiness and joy etc…”Oh well, it won’t last.” Eventually it becomes difficult to separate the experience itself from the judgements about it.

With mindfulness practice we become better able to accept what is there without trying to change it, minimise it or distract ourselves from it. We become more aware of our automatic responses and with that awareness comes the freedom to choose where to place our attention. In mindfulness our aim is not to think positively or to become relaxed or happy, it is simply to be more accepting, and less judgemental of whatever our experience is.

It can be hard not to strive or aim for ‘a result’ in our practice. We need to be wary of taking ‘staying with the breath’ too literally. This simple instruction can become a story of success or failure. Mind wandering is not failure, nor is focusing on the breath success. Observing our reactions in mind, body and feelings, we create a space around our experience in which our gentler, more instinctive wisdom can emerge. It is useful to try to let go of any desire for our practice to be any particular way, and to continue to sit with things as they are, however they are.

Formal meditation practice gives us a relatively safe environment in which to practice letting go of thoughts and judgements and staying present to what is. We can learn to see attachment, aversion or avoidance as further mental events. For instance, as we learn to let go of planning our evening meal while watching our breathing, it becomes easier to let go of the idea of blame and ‘if onlys’ in the middle of an argument or crisis.

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## Bringing the Practice into Daily Life

Formal practice is extremely valuable and is building the foundation to our mindfulness, but it’s not always practical to sit quietly for 20 minutes in the every day course of our lives, especially when things are seem to be pulling urgently for our attention.

### The 3-minute Breathing Space

The 3-minute breathing space is a mini-meditation that helps us to bring mindfulness into use more often and more skilfully.

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| Preparation | Adopt a dignified posture, mentally and physically. Close your eyes if it’s convenient. |
| Step 1 Awareness | Ask yourself, what am I experiencing right now, in thoughts in feelings, in your body. Acknowledge and notice your current experiences, whether they are wanted or not.  Having gathered a sense of what is happening right here, right now, we have stepped out of automatic pilot and now we can move our attention to a single focus. |
| Step 2 Focusing | Now we can gather our awareness and gently direct our focus to the breathing, the movements of the abdomen, the flow of the breath as it comes in and as it goes out. Spending a minute or so giving our attention to our breath. using the breath as an anchor to become fully present to the here and now. |
| Step 3 Expanding | Having gathered and focused our attention we can now expand our field of awareness. So as well as being aware of the breath we include a sense of the body as a whole, holding what we find in a gentle, more spacious awareness. |

The 3 minute breathing space practice can also help us to approach the longer practices. We may be able to let go of thinking of the whole 20 minutes we are attempting to sit for, and just sit for a few minutes at a time within a longer period.

## Home Practice

* Practice with the Mindfulness of the Breath (Track 4) and/or the Breath and Body (Track 6) daily if possible, or any tracks of the CDs if you wish.
* Carry out the 3-Minute Breathing Space (Track 2), with or without the CD, three times daily at the times that you have set for yourself. Also try to do the 3-minute breathing space whenever you remember and notice occasions when it might be useful.
* Practice mindfulness of the breath on your own for 5 to 10 minutes several times during the week, leading in with simply seeing or hearing or the three minute breathing space if you wish.
* Visit <http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/> and use any of the meditations available. (NB They can be saved for transfer to an mp3 player by right clicking the screen and then clicking ‘Save as’ and choosing a file name).