

Turn Towards, Turn Away: Working with the Agitation Flavor in Meditation ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 Meditation Practice

00:00:07 Sometimes when we do meditation practice, we experience calm and tranquil states.

00:00:14 But sometimes when we do meditation practice, we experience agitation, impatience, restlessness, and so forth.

00:00:22 There's a tendency to think when that kind of thing arises that I'm doing something wrong, that it's not okay.

00:00:32 I would say that not only is it okay, but actually it's quite natural.

00:00:38 An experience of restlessness in the body is a certain flavor of emotional experience in the body.

00:00:48 I use the word feel to refer to body sensations that seem to a person at a given time to be emotional in nature.

00:01:00 And I have a sort of list of common flavors of feel that come up for people.

00:01:06 The biggest uncomfortable ones are anger, fear, sadness, shame, slash embarrassment.

00:01:15 But right after the big four comes what I call agitation or impatience.

00:01:23 Now it may not be dramatic like anger, fear, sadness, and shame,

00:01:30 but the don't want to sit still, antsy kind of feel is very significant because it informs the day-to-day life of everyone.

00:01:42 Most people are hopefully not living on a day-to-day basis with rage, terror, grief, and shame flavors in their body.

00:01:53 But almost everyone experiences, usually below the threshold of awareness,

00:01:59 a kind of subtle agitation, impatience quality in day-to-day life.

00:02:05 That's what gives that sense of being driven and frenetic, that inability to stop on a dime.

00:02:23 It's primarily due to agitation flavors that sort of drive you.

00:02:29 Now, therefore, is the goal to get rid of those agitation flavors?

00:02:34 Well, no, I wouldn't really say quite that.

00:02:38 The goal is to be able to have a complete experience of those agitation flavors.

00:02:47 What do I mean by a complete experience?

00:02:51 I mean that you experience it with an extraordinary degree of concentration, sensory clarity, and equanimity.

00:03:02 These are technical terms within the basic mindfulness system that I teach,

and I've defined them elsewhere.

00:03:11 When you bring enough concentration, clarity, and equanimity to any ordinary experience, it becomes utterly extraordinary.

00:03:20 And that includes negative experiences, uncomfortable experiences, like agitation flavor in your body.

00:03:27 It's desirable to be able to have a complete experience of the agitation flavor.

00:03:34 That doesn't mean, however, that you necessarily have to work with it when it comes up.

00:03:43 You may choose to focus away from it.

00:03:46 So you're practicing, everything is sort of calm and whatever.

00:03:50 You're focusing, I don't know, you're focusing on your breath, for example, your breath sensations.

00:03:58 And all this agitation comes up.

00:04:01 So what should I do?

00:04:04 Well, one possibility is to just let it be there, but in the background, and you keep bringing your attention back to the breath.

00:04:16 But you don't think it's a bad thing that it's there, you don't try to suppress it.

00:04:20 You just don't intentionally focus on it.

00:04:23 You just keep coming back to your object.

00:04:26 Now, I would say that you're not bringing concentration or sensory clarity to the agitation.

00:04:35 But you are bringing equanimity to it, even though you're not focusing on it.

00:04:41 You're letting it be in the background, you're coming back to the breath.

00:04:45 So one strategy would be just let it be there, understand it's a natural thing.

00:04:49 You let it be in the background, you keep focusing on what you were focusing on.

00:04:55 Another strategy is, okay, let's not turn away from it, let's turn towards it.

00:05:02 Then you would be bringing three things to it.

00:05:06 You would be accepting it as a flavor in your body, so that's the equanimity piece.

00:05:10 But you were doing that before, hopefully, that was already helping a little bit.

00:05:15 But now you're bringing concentration and sensory clarity.

00:05:18 You're intentionally focusing on it and ignoring other things.

00:05:23 And you're trying to be aware of the locations, the changing intensities, and so forth.

00:05:30 And as a result of that, that agitation flavor will cause you less and less

suffering.

00:05:37 And as it causes you less and less suffering, it will less and less drive your behavior in day-to-day life.

00:05:45 In general, when a challenge comes up, one has the option to either turn towards it

00:05:54 and work with it as an object of focus,

00:05:58 or one has the option to just let it be in the background and stay with what you were originally doing.

00:06:04 You can learn something from both ways of working.

00:06:08 And I usually encourage people to explore both possibilities.

00:06:12 That gives you flexibility.

00:06:15 The price of flexibility, though, is complexity.

00:06:18 I've mentioned that one of the weak points of my approach to meditation practice is

00:06:25 that I give people a lot of options that also could be taken as a strong point, of course.

00:06:30 So I give people ways of turning their attention away from challenges,

00:06:35 onto restful states or positive states or the energy flow of the experience and so forth.

00:06:47 But I also give people ways of bringing their attention towards the challenge

00:06:52 and accepting it as an object, perhaps solidified, uncomfortable, objectified,

00:06:58 and then their opening to it, turning their attention towards the challenge.

00:07:03 If, when you're practicing, the agitation flavor comes up, it's certainly not a problem.

00:07:12 It's certainly okay. In fact, it's totally natural that that's going to happen from time to time.

00:07:17 What to do about it? Well, there's a lot of things you could do, and they're all good.

00:07:23 What should you do? Should you turn towards it? Should you turn away from it?

00:07:28 Well, I would say it's desirable to have the ability to do either approach,

00:07:34 because both are legitimate and both are productive.