

How 'Focus on Positive' is a Mindfulness Practice ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 What is the role of positive focus?

00:00:06 One thing I appreciate in this formulation of the five ways that you have honed

00:00:15 is that in the years I've been studying with you,

00:00:20 the role of what is now called focus on positive

00:00:25 was not emphasized a lot in retreats.

00:00:30 And when you formulated the five ways,

00:00:32 you made this place for what you call focus on positive

00:00:36 that includes, we used to have some place for love and kindness,

00:00:40 but this is this huge broad range of content that this covers.

00:00:47 And I wanted to know, since you've been incorporating that

00:00:51 as one of the five ways that you're doing,

00:00:56 I wondered if you've noticed a shift or any change in your students in the teaching

00:01:02 and if that's been lubricating the experience in any kind of way or not.

00:01:11 It's definitely made an improvement.

00:01:15 The idea was, or I guess the central insight behind it,

00:01:22 was to realize that all over the world,

00:01:26 there is a vast range of practices that all have something in common.

00:01:35 What they have in common is they involve intentionally creating

00:01:43 and holding positive content in your subjective world.

00:01:48 Now by the subjective world, I mean mental image,

00:01:52 internal talk, and emotional type body sensation.

00:01:57 So there's a traditional practice that goes with mindfulness

00:02:02 called loving kindness where you do that,

00:02:07 but it's in a certain direction.

00:02:09 There's certain set words typically that one uses.

00:02:13 There are certain set emotions that may or may not accompany that in the body and so forth.

00:02:21 And typically people, well I don't say typically,

00:02:24 but a lot of people don't like doing it.

00:02:27 It's just like, I don't want to turn love on like a faucet kind of thing

00:02:32 or it doesn't work for them, it leaves them cold.

00:02:35 Or at that moment.

00:02:36 Or it brings up the opposite.

00:02:38 So it occurred to me that, well, that's a specific instance of a much broader,

00:02:45 more general phenomenon.

00:02:48 If you were to do cognitive behavioral therapy,

00:02:52 they would have you intentionally create certain kinds of talk that was more rational.

00:02:58 And you would try to hold that and pay attention to that
00:03:01 even though irrational talk might be coming up.
00:03:05 Some people are into the laws of attraction, manifestation, the secret.
00:03:12 The power of positive thinking.
00:03:14 Now I don't comment on the validity or falseness of that belief system,
00:03:20 but in fact that involves intentionally visualizing, working with image space and so forth.
00:03:27 For that matter, prayer, as it's traditionally done,
00:03:31 certainly involves talk space and in the Catholic form,
00:03:36 if you're doing the rosary, you've got talk,
00:03:38 you're supposed to visualize certain scenes of the stations of the cross and so forth.
00:03:44 You've got the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria in talk space, which is a Christian mantra,
00:03:49 and you're supposed to have certain joyful or sorrowful emotions in your body.
00:03:53 So they're working intentionally with feel-image-talk.
00:03:57 Andriana practice, same deal.
00:04:02 Athletes visualizing their perfect performance.
00:04:06 People visualizing desirable outcomes of success.
00:04:10 People wishing well for other people in a general way.
00:04:16 People visualizing their own improved behavioral changes in personal behavior.
00:04:22 There's this vast range of things that people do.
00:04:26 And they all have something in common.
00:04:28 They involve working with one, two, or all three of the subjective sensory elements,
00:04:35 not in the sense of observe, but in the sense of actively create and hold.
00:04:42 So it occurred to me, why not just unify that,
00:04:45 give people the choice to do it in whatever way they want,
00:04:50 and that way they're not limited,
00:04:53 if they want to do a sort of gushy loving kindness, that's fine.
00:04:57 If they want to do a sort of new age magical thinking, that's fine.
00:05:03 If they want to do a cold rational cognitive reframing, that's fine too.
00:05:11 If they want to merge with an archetype, hey, that's fine too.
00:05:15 However you want to do it, just do it.
00:05:18 But understand that in doing that, you are actually doing a kind of mindfulness practice.
00:05:27 See, I put...
00:05:28 It's brilliant to give that freedom now.
00:05:30 Yeah, well, so that's helped.
00:05:32 In answer to your question, it's people having that freedom to do that.
00:05:36 Now they can get into it, whatever it may be.
00:05:39 But from my perspective, my main interest in having people do this
00:05:44 is as a form of mindfulness.
00:05:46 Now that's not traditional.
00:05:48 Usually the loving kindness and whatever is in contrast to mindfulness.
00:05:53 But I see it as under the category of mindfulness
00:05:58 because of the way I choose to define mindfulness.

00:06:01 I define mindfulness as any practice that elevates concentration, power,
00:06:09 sensory clarity, and equanimity.
00:06:12 And I would claim that holding certain positive content in feel-image-talk,
00:06:18 do you have to have concentration to do it?
00:06:20 Sure.
00:06:21 So it will build concentration.
00:06:24 You have to have equanimity with all the distractions of negative that will come up
00:06:29 because when I teach it, it's not a fight between positive and negative.
00:06:34 It's a selective attention to positive and let the negative just run rampant if it wants.
00:06:39 You're not trying to reject the negative and identify with the positive.
00:06:44 You're just selectively focusing on the positive.
00:06:47 So you're having equanimity with the negative.
00:06:49 You're not pushing it down.
00:06:51 You're not locking onto it either.
00:06:53 So the equanimity piece is there.
00:06:55 And probably most important, you're developing sensory clarity
00:06:59 because you're getting a familiarity with the three subjective spaces,
00:07:04 not by observing them but by actively creating with them.
00:07:09 So it's a kind of active learning to become intimate with your subjective experience.
00:07:15 So from that perspective, it falls perfectly within the category of mindfulness practice.
00:07:22 So it gives people an enormous freedom to do what's interesting and fun for them
00:07:27 while at the same time developing the core skills
00:07:30 that are the defining feature of mindfulness.
00:07:34 So it's worked out very well.
00:07:36 Thank you for your time today.