

Focus Methods in Mindfulness: Advantages and Disadvantages

~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 How can we classify mindfulness?

00:00:05 When we look at the whole field of mindfulness,

00:00:10 all the different ways that mindfulness is taught and so forth,

00:00:16 by different lineages, teachers,

00:00:21 in general we can classify the focus methods

00:00:28 in terms of, are they just letting the attention

00:00:33 sort of go wherever it goes, I call that free floating,

00:00:37 and then being aware of where it is going.

00:00:40 Are they saying, okay, we're going to systematically

00:00:44 sort of scroll through the possibilities and then start again,

00:00:48 I call that inventory.

00:00:50 Or are we going to try to cover all the possibilities at once,

00:00:53 I call that even coverage.

00:00:55 Easiest to understand with regards to the body,

00:00:58 but can be generalized to any sensory experience.

00:01:01 What is the body location?

00:01:04 I have a technique that I call noting body locations.

00:01:08 So here the categories are body locations,

00:01:12 and it's just, okay, let your attention go wherever it wants to go,

00:01:17 and note knee, face, stomach,

00:01:21 and probably 95% of the people in this room

00:01:25 have done that with me upon occasion.

00:01:28 Well, I would say that's a free floating strategy.

00:01:31 You just sort of, as it comes up, yes, you can exercise some control,

00:01:36 but it's basically what pulls you.

00:01:38 And the elements here are the various locations of sensation.

00:01:43 What is the body location?

00:01:48 By way of contrast, a systematic inventory is,

00:01:51 okay, we're going to go through the body part by part

00:01:54 and sample what's there, and then maybe repeat that cycle,

00:01:58 which could be done in any one of dozens of ways.

00:02:02 You could go sort of like band by band,

00:02:06 or you could go like, let's take the right leg, the left leg,

00:02:10 the right arm, the left arm, or if you want to be fancy

00:02:14 and get down to really subtle levels of sensation

00:02:17 and really subtle levels of flow,

00:02:20 you can attempt to continuously sweep the awareness
00:02:23 either over the surface of the body or even like a CAT scan
00:02:27 right through the body.
00:02:29 That could be up and down, right to left, left to right,
00:02:32 front to back, back to front.
00:02:34 That's a continuous inventory.
00:02:38 You can even get fancier if you want.
00:02:40 You can go in spirals.
00:02:42 All sorts of stuff you can do to make a continuous inventory of the body.
00:02:47 What is the body location?
00:02:51 By way of contrast to that, okay,
00:02:53 hold all the locations simultaneously in awareness.
00:02:57 Even coverage, I call it.
00:03:00 What is the advantage of systematic inventory?
00:03:05 The advantage to the systematic inventory is that
00:03:10 it makes sure you cover everything,
00:03:14 and so it brings a lot of sensitization and a lot of detail.
00:03:20 The disadvantage might be that there's not much to detect,
00:03:26 but of course if you have the categories of restful states,
00:03:29 then you can detect the absence as a presence.
00:03:32 But sometimes people that do the body sweeping sort of get lost
00:03:36 because they can't detect sensations.
00:03:38 That can be a possible difficulty with that.
00:03:43 Even coverage is sort of at the opposite end.
00:03:47 It integrates and gives you the big picture.
00:03:50 Ultimately, since sensory events do tend to spread,
00:03:56 it's good to be able to cover large pieces of sensory experience,
00:04:00 to have the ability to do that.
00:04:02 Most people, if you say the word concentration,
00:04:05 assume it implies a narrowing of attention.
00:04:08 But Sasaki Roshi is adamant that there's two flavors of concentration.
00:04:14 Not surprisingly, contractive, where you restrict the range of focus,
00:04:20 and expansive, where you get a flavor of being highly concentrated
00:04:25 precisely because you're holding all parts of a large object,
00:04:29 either at once or more or less at once.
00:04:34 So the even coverage builds that flavor,
00:04:39 and it gives you the big picture, and it leads to integrations.
00:04:46 Things have to be integrated before they can be annihilated,
00:04:50 and their annihilation takes them to their source.
00:04:56 There's something to be said for the even coverage,
00:04:59 but it's challenging because you lose contact with pieces and so forth.
00:05:04 So my language for even coverage is,

00:05:07 hold it as broadly as you can without straining.

00:05:10 Typically, I'll say something like that.

00:05:12 The advantage now to the free float is it's natural.

00:05:18 It's not as hard work as the inventory or the even coverage.

00:05:24 People can typically do it right away

00:05:26 and find it more fun than the other two, I would say, typically.

00:05:31 I don't know that there's any disadvantage to it specifically

00:05:38 that I can't think of right offhand,

00:05:42 but that would be briefly to compare and contrast the strategies.

00:05:47 Or let's say focus in, focus out, and focus on rest

00:05:58 are based on a free floating in general.

00:06:02 However, remember, even when you're free floating,

00:06:06 you are allowed to zoom out.

00:06:08 So those are sort of brief moments of even coverage,

00:06:11 if you zoom out to fill touch space or something.

00:06:14 So there is, in the zoom out option,

00:06:17 there's brief sort of coverage available.

00:06:20 But essentially, in focus in, focus out, and focus on rest,

00:06:24 you're free floating among the categories.

00:06:29 And if more than one is present, you're just choosing one.

00:06:33 In focus on change, when you're noting flow,

00:06:38 you are not making distinctions between where the flow is at all.

00:06:45 I mean, you're not intentionally making distinctions.

00:06:48 So it's wherever the flow is,

00:06:51 meaning if the flow infects somatic, visual, and auditory,

00:06:58 and at the moment of when you note flow, you elect to zoom out,

00:07:02 you are doing the ultimate even coverage.

00:07:04 You're covering all sensory spaces at once.

00:07:07 So it fits in there.

00:07:12 I use systematic inventories during special exercises,

00:07:19 actually quite a bit.

00:07:21 Now, focus on positive, you do evenly cover

00:07:28 whichever one, two, or all three of the spaces that you're doing.

00:07:34 You can attempt to hold the positive in all three at once if you want.

00:07:42 Or you can sort of, I don't know, sort of hold it in all three,

00:07:46 but not work too hard, and it sort of free floats,

00:07:50 but it's always going to positive in any one of them.

00:07:55 You could do it as a kind of free float,

00:07:58 or you could do it as an even coverage strategy.

00:08:06 In general, it's divide and conquer, right?

00:08:09 So if you're trying to work with a big piece of experience and you can't,

00:08:15 then you work with smaller stuff.

00:08:20 So if you're trying an even coverage and it doesn't work,

00:08:23 then try free floating or probably better still systematic inventory,

00:08:27 and then you can build to coverage.

00:08:30 Okay, good.