

**Centering Meditation**

Allow yourself to arrive here, gently let go of the day, all the activity, all the movements and feelings and thoughts and concerns. Let yourself become aware of sitting here, in this place, in this moment. Settle into the safety and peacefulness of this gathering, in this moment. Become aware of being in your body, sitting, breathing. Settle into an awareness of your breathing, gently breathing in and out. Let your awareness settle on your breathing.

If you wish, you may set an intention for these moments of practice, for this evening. Wishing yourself well in these moments.

Notice anything arising in these moments of awareness, notice your response to anything arising in these moments, allow and accept whatever is arising to be here, naming it if you wish, letting it be, letting it in with compassion, letting it go with equanimity. Return your awareness to your breathing; relax into the awareness.

**Dharma Talk: Mindfulness: Being Present For Your Life**

James Baraz calls mindfulness the underpinning of all other practices in Awakening Joy course. Awareness and acceptance is the key to everything else. Every step after this is a wholesome state that we access through the awareness and acceptance of mindfulness.

Mindfulness could be considered a tool. Even minimal practice of mindfulness focuses attention and strengthens concentration. We experience this, and fMRI scans of the brains of adept meditators shows increased brain structure in the ACC, the structure of focal attention, and in the insula, the structure of interoception, how we know what's going on in our bodies. Our mental activity becomes less scattered and fragmented, more integrated and whole.

Mindfulness gives us a pause, a stepping back and reflecting on experience; this reduces stress and researchers have found because mindfulness reduces stress it boosts the immune system and improves the health of the heart.

But mindfulness is more than a tool. It is a practice that, when we steady our awareness and acceptance of life as it is, - Sylvia Boorstein says, may I meet this moment fully, may I meet it as a friend, it opens us to a way of being in the world that has more balance, more perspective, more equanimity, more flexibility, and thus more gratitude, more generosity, more compassion, more joy, the wholesome states.

Researchers have found that, with enough practice, there is a left shift in the brain. More activity in the left hemisphere of the brain. That doesn't mean more thinking but it means more of an approach state of mind rather than an avoiding state of mind. More

interest and more acceptance of what is happening. This helps overcome the negativity bias of the right hemisphere of the brain.

The traditional definition of mindfulness is from Jon Kabat-Zinn: focused attention, on purpose, to experience arising in the moment, without judgment. Which covers it. I learned recently from Shauna Shapiro, wrote *The Art and Science of Mindfulness*, that Jon has updated his definition to say that mindfulness as a practice leads to awareness that is really the goal, the awareness and acceptance that can hold and honor the fullness of being, as Tara Brach would say.

Mindfulness means being present – now taught as loving presence – we show up and engage in experience of the moment in an embodied and wholehearted way. There’s an element of contact with experience, not just stepping back and noticing.

### **Experiential Exercise #1: Eating a Raisin Mindfully**

Hold three or four raisins in your hand. Notice any reactions to holding the raisins, looking at them, not eating them yet. Notice the color, the texture of the raisins, the lightness of them in your hand. Notice what happens as you lift one raisin to your mouth; notice any change in your experience. Notice what happens when you roll one raisin around in your mouth without biting into it yet; notice the texture; notice your tongue moving the raisin around. Then, notice what happens when you bite into the raisin; notice your experience of taste, smell, sensation in your mouth. Chew the raisin slowly, then finally let yourself swallow the raisin. Notice your experience as the experience changes. Now, put the remaining raisins in your mouth; again notice your experience as you play with, chew, swallow the raisins. Notice your experience after the raisins are gone.

The neuroscience of eating a raisin mindfully: Any experience causes neurons in the brain to fire. Focused attention on experiences causes neurons in the brain to fire. Since mindfulness typically increases the duration, intensity and embodied experience of what we are paying attention to, mindfulness tends to increase the traces of the encoding of new neural connections in your brain. The point of a presence practice, besides providing a refuge from all the other chatter that can happen in our minds, is to begin to train the mind to focus our attention where we wish; key to the next steps in using M for self care.

But there is stepping back and noticing in the sense of mindfulness is also open, spacious awareness, like vast sky with clouds or thoughts flowing through. I would say mindfulness is also an open spacious acceptance (non-judging, non-preferencing) mindful awareness and acceptance, awareness and allowing, of what we are aware of, Ajahn Sumedho, oh, it’s like this.

Mindfulness has a steadiness to it, a stability to it, a continuity, a depth to it. In other words, we can be mindful for a few seconds at a time. Rick Hanson suggest many moments of mindfulness many times a day, and stringing those moments together in a steadier, deeper continuity, as we get up off the cushion and walk into the kitchen or talk

to our mate or drive to work and confront our boss, until mindfulness becomes our natural resting place, our natural default, and being not mindful becomes the exception.

When that happens we are in a steady awarenensing, awarenensing and allowing. As Marci Shimoff, author of *Happy For No Reason*, teaches the ABC's of mindfulness: Awareness, Being with, with Compassion. That allows us to let arise, hold, let in, let be, and let go of anything, anything at all. There is both a clarity, a lucidity to our perception of things, and an equanimity and tranquility, as the Buddha said, neither longing nor dejection.

Mindfulness is training our mind to be able to steady and deepen our awareness like that until we naturally experience our unworried, un-grasping, unconfused True Nature, relaxed, awake. As Rick Hanson taught in *Awakening Joy* course: default setting of 3 C's: calm, content, caring

How to do that.

First I want to establish safety and trust as the context of any mindfulness practice: by sitting in a safe, quiet place where we know we won't be disturbed or interrupted, like sitting in a sangha where there is a feeling of safety and trust; by experiencing the present moment as a refuge from fears. In *Happiness is an Inside Job*, Sylvia Boorstein advises feeling held in the love of others before opening to what is. James encourages us to sit in a benevolent field of awareness. I call in Quan Yin, the goddess of compassion, whom I see as the embodiment of conscious, compassionate connection. All of these remind me of the line from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*: Love guards the heart from the abyss.

Then begin.

James has basic instructions for mindfulness practice on p. 45 of book and on the website for *Awakening Joy*. And what he taught in *Awakening Joy* course to focus attention in the present moment:

### **Experiential Exercise #2: Mindfulness of Noticing**

Hold arm out in front of you (if painful to hold arm up, rest in lap) notice close your eyes, notice, move arm back and forth, notice, move arm up and down, notice, keep noticing arm, then notice, were you noticing anything else? Focus on the present, not in pain.

Another a very simple practice for cultivating mindfulness, it's a practice of following the breath. The breath is always available, it calms the SNS, it accesses, or is, chi or life energy. This is a practice of counting the breaths to stay concentrated. So you count breaths, in and out, 1 through 10. Then repeat counting 1 through 10. If you notice your attention has wandered off the breath, bring it back gently, with kindness. The kindness conditions your mind to well-being, too. If you do that 10 times and add 8 breaths for 108, the sacred number in B, it takes ten minutes. But we'll try it for two.

And you might add a phrase that also concentrates the mind and helps it not wander. I usually say this precious moment, this precious breath.

Increasing wisdom, as they do in the East, concentration practice first, steady the mind, then open out to vipassana or insight practice. Open spacious awareness, what you're following is the awareness itself. So, we sit quietly, steadying awareness on the breath first, then when that's steady, opening awareness out to the senses – sounds, touch of clothing on skin, noticing and naming but returning awareness to the awareness itself, hearing touching, so rather than focusing on object. Focusing on process, anger arises or sadness arises, noticing and naming, noticing the awareness that is noticing, that is knowing. Sylvia says Notice what's happening in moment, notice your response to what's happening in the moment; notice any reaction to your reaction, then respond to that reaction with acceptance, kindness, compassion. A process of thinking arises, planning or judging or arguing, noticing and naming, noticing the awareness that is knowing.

With enough practice over a long enough period of time, mindfulness become awareness of awareness; we become identified with awareness itself, which is a great freedom and liberation.

### **Experiential Exercise #3: Practicing Awareness**

Sit comfortably. Allow your attention to focus inward. Close your eyes or have a soft gaze downward to bring the attention inward. Notice your breathing as an anchor for your awareness. Notice the awareness itself, knowing that you're breathing. Then simply notice any sensations, thoughts, feelings arising as you are sitting quietly here, paying attention to this present moment. You may notice you wish there were more raisins. You may notice your hands still feel sticky from the raisins. You may notice you're feeling a little bored, wondering what the point of all this is. You may be excited anticipating dinner tomorrow night with your family or going for a long walk in the hills this weekend. Noticing all of this, any of this for the next five minutes, with Awareness, Being with, with Compassion.

Two forms of mindfulness actually utilize different parts of brain. Concentration, medial frontal, parts of brain that can focus on an object, including constructing the sense of self. Vipassana, dorsal lateral, not constructing the sense of self, without sense of time and space.

Mindfulness as a tool to steady the mind and deepen our awareness becomes a practice that leads to benefits of concentration, spacious equanimity. Leads to way of being – less anchored in conditioned personal self, more anchored in unconditioned True Nature.

It's true that goodness naturally arises out of mindfulness practice. Natural inclination of the heart to be kind, generous, compassionate when we're not frightened or self-absorbed. We can also use mindfulness to change brain and cultivate wholesome states of mind and heart. Rick Hanson says mental activity shapes neural structure. Any

experience does; with mindfulness we choose to focus on thoughts that empower well-being. Whatever a practitioner frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind. – Buddha. Mindfulness turbo-charges the shaping. A kind of stewardship of the mind.

We use this not only on the cushion but off the cushion. Mindfulness on the hoof.

We operate on automatic pilot most of the time; more efficient, and if we've cultivated wholesome habits,; it's skillful means.

Mindfulness can help us see our experience in the moment, and what is happening in me in response to the moment, and intentionally shift it. James calls this shifting the channel. This is what Dan Siegel calls monitor and modify. We are present and mindful. We notice and name. We discern whether state we are in is wholesome or unwholesome. We choose to let go of the unwholesome and cultivate the wholesome. This is what Buddhism calls Wise Effort. I can know I'm in a critical state, I can choose to shift into a state of compassion and practice compassion for me being in that state and for the person I'm being critical of. Thoughts are not the enemy; then mind can be trained. Response to thoughts is key; kindness and compassion.

My example of shifting the channel or monitoring and modifying: when I'm disappointed, I can be critical. Not a wholesome state for me now a wholesome practice for my relationships. Sylvia again: mindfulness is knowing what is happening in the moment and knowing what is happening in me in response to the moment. Mindfulness breaks automaticity, interrupts habits. I trained myself to say compassion! Took a year and a half. Now working on gripe and grump with metta, karuna. James. Aliveness and contentment we are opening to not dependent on external conditions but on how we hold our experiences.

#### **Experiential Exercise #4: Shifting the Channel**

In dyads, explore what state of mind you might like to shift with applied mindfulness, and what more wholesome state might help you shift or counter it. What will help you shift the channel?

We can use this mindfulness on the hoof throughout the day. Check in many times a day, where am I is this a state I want to be in? Can choose to shift. This is not aversion, distraction, pushing away. Not contraction or grasping, not longing or dejection. Notice how this is human to feel this, compassion for being human. Wholesome skillful. Mental activity actually changes neural structure; priming brain to build new circuitry, strengthen new, weakens old. Go through phase of one insult after another. Eventually get to Wise View. Leads to magic of awe, than anything exists at all. And that everything that exists is impermanent. Everything changes. James, when we are mindful, we are never stuck.

Mindfulness can help us hold any difficult experience and help it dissolve. There is a teaching story in the Buddhist tradition. If you take a teaspoon of salt and dissolve it in a glass of water and then take a sip of the water – Ick! The water is too salty to drink. If you dissolve a teaspoon of salt in a large, freshwater pond, then take a glass of water from the pond and sip that water, it's fine. You can't taste the salt at all.

When we are present and mindful, any experience can arise in that container and we can be with it, hold it, name it (when we name our experience keeps the frontal lobes firing, don't get swept away by it.) hold it, aware of holding it, if we do that long enough it will dissolve. Again, Marci Shimoff's A, B, C: Awareness, Being with, Compassion

Guy Armstrong, a senior teacher at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in the San Francisco Bay Area, tells of a time when he was having great difficulty settling into a long, silent meditation retreat. Restless, agitated, not a happy camper, he could finally notice and name, "Oh, despair!" As soon as he could name the despair, he was no longer in it; he could observe it and work with it skillfully, and begin to let it be, let it naturally unfold, and then let it go.

It's very true, any time we can "notice and name" the experience of the moment, we have re-engaged our pre-frontal cortex, that CEO of resilience that, in this case, allows us to notice and reflect and resolve without feeling caught or trapped.

One day I was meditating in my office on a break. Because it was a clinical day in my clinical office, I kept the ringer of the phone on, and when the phone rang, I answered it. My doctor calling to say there was an abnormality in my most recent mammogram; would I schedule an appointment to come in and have the x-ray done again? My anxiety went right through the roof; all the stories about friends' courses of cancer treatment started rushing through my head. But, because I had been meditating and had come into a state of calm awareness before the phone rang, I could watch my anxiety go through the roof, know clearly that it was going through the roof, schedule the appointment for the second mammogram, and return to my meditating, a different object of awareness than before, but still held in awareness, aware of being aware.

And, of course, there's James' story he tells in the book of the deep terror he experienced when the doctor told him he had a tear in his retina and that he could go blind in that eye if he didn't have surgery within 24 hours; how it was the mindfulness that allowed him to be aware of the fear and let it go, over and over again, on the long drive back to the retreat center where someone could get him to the airport to fly home for the surgery.

We can use this capacity to be with, hold and dissolve very deliberately to re-wire brain. Mental activity changes neural structure. We know that the brain has neural plasticity – capacity to grow neurons lifelong, we know that neurons that fire together wire together. We can harness that capacity to re-wire our brain create new neural structure. We deliberately become present and mindful. Steady, then call up difficult memory not just now but deliberately call up something from past to be with, something we can explore, play with, experiment with. We create a spacious awareness drop a teaspoon of salt into,

and watch it dissolve. Do this in exercise now. As we learn to do this, we learn we can. James, presence brings you to aliveness and gladness in the awareness, fully present, complete, and whole.

### **Experiential Exercise #5: Hand on the Heart**

Sit comfortably in your chair. Allow your eyes to gently close. Focus your awareness on your breathing, gently in and out. When that's steady, place your own hand on your own heart, feeling the warmth of the touch of your hand on your heart. Breathe gently and deeply into your heart center. Breathe into your heart center any sense of goodness, safety, trust, acceptance, ease, you can muster. Breathe in a sense of ease, safety, of calm and peace into your heart center. You may elaborate this as you wish. Breathing in a sense of contentment, well-being, a sense of kindness for yourself, gratitude for others. Slowly gently breathing in qualities of self care into your heart, acceptance delight.

Once that's steady, call to mind a moment of being with someone who loves you unconditionally, someone you feel completely safe with. This may be a moment with your beloved partner or a beloved child, or parent, though the dynamics of those relationships can sometimes be complicated and the emotions mixed, so you may choose a moment of being with a dear friend, a trusted teacher, a close colleague or neighbor, a moment when you felt seen and accepted, loved and cherished. It may be your therapist, your grandmother, a third grade teacher. This person could be a spiritual figure like Jesus or the Dalai Lama. Could be a beloved pet. Pets a great, actually.

As you remember feeling safe and loved with this person or pet, see if you can feel the feelings and sensations that come up with that memory in your body. Really savor this feeling of warmth, safety, trust, love in your body. When that feeling is steady, let go of the image and simply bathe in the feeling for 30 seconds.

Neuroscience of Hand on the Heart: Deep breathing activates the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, the calming branch. Breathing or pranayama has been a core practice in yoga to relax the body and steady the mind for 3500 years. Breathing positive emotions into the heart center calms down heart rate variability, according to the HeartMath Research Institute in Santa Cruz, CA.

Remembering moments of feeling safe and loved activates the release of oxytocin in the brain. Oxytocin is the hormone of safety and trust, bonding and attachment, calm and connect. We can give our brains baths of oxytocin whenever we are with someone we love and who loves us (for real, not supposed to). Neuroscientists have demonstrated many times that even remembering someone whom we love, with whom we feel loved, is enough to release small but regular doses of oxytocin. As Dan Goleman says in *Social Intelligence*, "No wonder office cubicles are papered with photos of loved one."

The warm touch of the hand on the heart also helps release the oxytocin. Feeling sensations of warmth and calm in body communicates calm to higher brain from the bottom up, the efferent nerve pathways of the ventral vagus nerve. The body calms the

brain. Essential to know that for self care. (To have a regular practice of meditation, yoga, chi gong, progressive muscle relaxation, very, very helpful.)

### **Experiential Exercise #6: Practice Holding Experience**

Close your eyes, steady your attention on your breath, creating a clear field of awareness. Then intentionally bring up disappointment, irritation, gnaw of anxiety. Little, manageable, not the worst. Notice physical sensation, emotions thought notice awareness notice your experience of this memory notice your awareness holding it. Let go and return to awareness. Being the awareness.

As we use mindfulness to heal old traumas, old wounds (and traumas and wounds can be healed only with mindfulness, have to be able to move from being caught up to step back and reflect and even further, drop story as personal, this is human, this is human condition, open to wholesome states of True Nature, non-self.) Then greater inclusiveness, greater integration in our psyche, also in our brains, greater synchrony, greater harmony. Can see this in neural firing patterns of brain, fire at higher frequency. Brain works better. Penetrating, liberating insight, wisdom. James' story – experience with retinal tear and fear of going blind led to profound, steady, unshakeable gratitude. Complete liberation from suffering is possible.

Exercise #6: to practice in conversation and we will as we end. Turn to someone near you; share how you think you will live your life into your mindfulness practice; notice your experience as you speak and as you listen.

### **Closing Meditation**

Sit quietly; allow yourself to become aware of sitting here, breathing here, being aware of being aware. May our sincere intention to deepen our mindfulness in every moment of our lives bring peace of mind and deepening joy to ourselves, and to all whose lives we touch.

### **Homework**

1. Pause and Reflect: Hit the pause button many times a day. Stop, check in how you're doing; check into the internal state of your body. Is there an openness, an expansion, a spaciousness – physiological state of happiness. Is there contraction or rigidity, the physiological states of fear or anger. Discern: is this how you want to be doing; do you want to be in a more wholesome state? Matters of consequence can obscure the magic. Find a reminder to stop and be M, stopped at a stop light, walking through doorway into kitchen.

2. Mindful awareness and acceptance: Practice mindfulness 15 minutes a day. We think to bring M into day; Howie Cohn ending a retreat bring life into mindfulness. Hold mindfulness steady, keep it steady and present as you get up to walk into bathroom or kitchen, talk to your partner or child, sit at your computer or drive your car.

3. Appreciation. Take one minute to write down everything you appreciate in this moment. Not past or future. Allow and recognize well-being in this moment. Even in the midst of hard times, notice moment of joy. Fresh flowers, photos of loved ones, a call from a friend, raindrops on the leaves.

4. Taking in the good. Moment of well-being this week, even a moment of well-being in this moment. Notice it; take it in, let it register, savor the feeling in your body for 20-30 seconds so it will install in your implicit body memory.

It only takes a reminder to breathe, a moment to be still, and just like that, something in me settles, softens, makes space for imperfection. The harsh voice of judgment drops to a whisper and I remember again that life isn't a relay race; that we will all cross the finish line; that waking up to life is what we were born for. As many times as I forget, catch myself charging forward without even knowing where I'm going, that many times I can make the chose to stop, to breathe, and be, and walk slowing into the mystery.

- Danna Faulds, Going In and In