

Working With Pain in Meditation and Daily Life (Week 2 Part 2)

A talk by Ines Freedman 09/20/06 - *transcribed and lightly edited*

[Begin Guided Meditation]

So, go ahead and close your eyes and get comfortable.

Sit upright, but relaxed or lie down comfortably.

Take a couple of deep breaths.

Now, let the breath return to normal.

Focus your attention on the thinking process. When a thought arises, notice if it's internal dialogue: words, or phrases. If it is, label it "talk".

If it's an image, label it "image". The image can be clear and vision-like or vague; it doesn't matter.

If both are present you can label, "talk and image".

(silence)

As the mind quiets, the grosser thoughts may calm down or even go away. But there can still be a sense of non-specific movement in the mind. This movement is the subtle processing; the pre-conscious or sub-conscious processing. In this subtle level, the thoughts are not clear yet, yet you know you're thinking. But there are no words or images. We can observe the movement, the energy. You might experience the wave-like vibratory nature of thought. Notice if it speeds up, slows down, spreads, gets more or less intense. Sink into that experience.

If it helps, you can label it "calm" or "movement" depending on how you experience it.

(silence)

You may go back and forth from this subtle processing to dialogue and images, it doesn't matter, just label it... talk... image... movement... What matters is that you notice your thoughts in whatever form they take.

(silence)

I'm going to ring the bell in a moment. Set your intention to stay mindful as we open our eyes.

[Bell sounds]

Anyone have any questions or comments about this practice?

Student 1: When you have strong emotions, do you label them “talk”?

Ines: In this practice, if you notice you have a thought about the emotion, you label it “talk”. If you’re just feeling the feeling, then, no. Just notice the thought part of the emotion. For instance, let’s say you have anger towards someone. So usually, there’s a thought going on in your head at the same time you’re feeling the anger. In this practice, you just label it “talk”, unless it’s an image.

If there’s [a predominance of] strong emotion, this is not necessarily the practice you want to work with. But, if you’re working with this practice and it comes up, [we just label the associated thoughts.]

Student 2: I was not so much noticing thoughts or images, but I’m musically inclined, so I was noting sounds on more of a pre-verbal level. I guess I was probably getting more of an image than a talk, but it was really more an observation that I was hearing. Should I label it “sound”?

Ines: Yes, “sound” works. In regular mindfulness practice you might go, “sound” or “hearing”. But recognizing that it’s sound or hearing, there is usually a thought there. So that’s a thought. What we’re looking at (and it may seem a little bit picky) by paying attention to that subtle level of our thinking, that’s where our beliefs come up. And when we do this as a practice, when our beliefs and our ideas come up, we begin to recognize, “Oh, that’s just a thought in there”. We create a little bit of spaciousness in there. We don’t just say, “oh, I’m a klutz”, we begin to recognize, “oh, that’s just a thought that I’m a klutz.” There starts to be a difference because you start observing the thinking process. That’s just something that is going on with our nervous system.

Thank you.

Mindfulness of thought is probably one of the hardest practices to do. Mindfulness of the breath is easier because the breath is right there, and it’s easy to find anytime. Mindfulness of the body, you can usually feel something in the body... especially with pain, it lets you know it’s there. In mindfulness of emotions, the emotions tend to be kind of large so it’s easy to feel them. Some of us easier than others. But, mindfulness of thinking: thinking is so prevalent. We’re continuously thinking. It’s in the background often when we meditate. We don’t choose to notice that we’re thinking.

I notice when I’m meditating regularly, that I’m much more aware of all the other things: emotions, body, etc. Not necessarily thinking, I have to really focus on paying attention to thinking. By doing that, you start noticing a lot more of what’s going on in your mind.

What we’re looking at is to recognize harmful thoughts and harmful beliefs. We can begin to incline our mind to let go of them. It doesn’t mean that they are going to stop. If you have a thought like, “how could I be so stupid?”. And you notice that it’s a

thought and that it is an unhelpful thought, just by recognizing it, it's easier to drop it. You may not drop it that moment. Or maybe you'll drop it and pick it up the next moment. It doesn't matter. Every time you recognize it, it loses a little bit of its momentum.

If we notice that we're being impatient, we can bring patience to our impatience. If we're being cruel, we can bring kindness to our cruelty. If we're being cruel to ourselves. If we're judging ourselves, we can stop judging the fact that we're judging ourselves.

We don't want to suppress thoughts. But, sometimes when we have unhelpful thoughts, we tend to think, "Oh, we don't want to have that thought, that's a bad thought... no.. no". So it's really important when we have these unhelpful thoughts to recognize them for what they are: they are habits of mind. They've been there for a long time. They have momentum, and they're not helpful. Just like when you're dusting, you don't say, "evil dust", you just dust it and move it away.

So the attitude with which we watch our thinking is really important; to watch our thoughts with kindness and gentleness.

So, I'd like to go into one more meditation here. This is the meditation on the breath. We're going to try to focus on the pleasure of the breath.

[15:33 Guided Meditation]

So, I'd like for you to get into a meditation posture that you're comfortable in.

Close your eyes. Take a couple of deep breaths.

Relax.

Pay attention to the physical sensations of breathing.

If you have pain right now; if you have any significant pain in your lower body, try to pay attention to the breath closer to the nose, the face, the upper part of the body. If you have pain in your face or head, try to pay attention to the breath more in the abdomen. So, you want to be paying attention to the area away from the pain. If it's neither of those areas, then pay attention to the breath wherever you notice it most or where you're most comfortable with.

We're going to explore two pleasant qualities associated with breathing. The oxygen pleasure that you experience when you inhale, and the relaxation pleasure that you experience when you exhale.

First, we'll work with the oxygen pleasure.

Take a breath. Breathe out, and hold your breath out for just a moment. Notice the little bit of discomfort that you feel when you hold your breath out. When you're ready, breathe in, and notice the pleasant sensation that contrasts with that discomfort. The pleasure of the nurturing oxygen filling your lungs. Focus in on that pleasure as you breathe in. This is the oxygen pleasure.

With every breath, focus on the oxygen pleasure of the inhale. We'll work with the exhale in a little bit. For now, just work with the inhale.

Pay attention from the beginning of the inhale to the end of the inhale. Let everything else be in the background.

Now, inhale and hold it in for just a moment so you feel a little bit of pressure in that inhale just by holding it. As you exhale, feel the pleasure and relaxation of letting that breath exhale out. This is the relaxation pleasure.

Now, for a short period, just focus only on the relaxation pleasure every time you exhale.

From beginning of the exhale to the end of the exhale, stay continuous with it.

Now, start including both. As you inhale, notice the oxygen pleasure from beginning to end and on the out-breath, the relaxation pleasure from the beginning to the end of the exhale. Maintain continuous contact with the breath.

If any discomfort or pain arises, allow it to be there. Don't resist it. Just keep going back to the breath.

(silence)

Now let go of all techniques, and establish simple contact with your entire body; with any body sensations that come up.

(silence)

I'm going to ring the bell in a moment. Slowly and mindfully open your eyes when I do.

[Bell sounds]

I know that wasn't very long to work with that, but how was that for you? Were any of you able to feel the oxygen pleasure and the relaxation pleasure?

Student 3: I found that very enjoyable. (Inaudible) ... and after a while, I started experimenting with breathing from the place in my body where it was hurting instead. I transferred [my attention] as if I were breathing in and exhaling from that place. I think it was helpful for relaxing some of that pain.

Ines: That's actually a version of the practice we did last week of "local intensity and global spread". It's a similar type of practice and a great practice. Feel free to experiment with these. A lot of the techniques that are given, there are variations where sometimes a little change like that might work very well for us.

I want to mention one other thing about pain and stress. There is a stress-pain connection. Pain produces stress. Stress increases pain. Managing stress reduces pain. So, what chronic stress does is cause hormonal reactions which increase pain.

What is stress? The stress response has three components.

The first one is the physical, which is like increase in blood pressure, muscle tension, stress hormones (cortisol in particular), a lowered immune response. These are all on the physical side.

The emotional side of stress can be anxiety, worry, sadness, anger, shame, etc.

The cognitive side of stress are the thoughts and images that we hold around it. The ideas about ourselves. The conclusions we make about our lives or beliefs.

Even without any additional stress, the hormones in our body actually have a stress cycle. In the early morning, we have higher levels of cortisol than we do in the evening. Cortisol decreases pain. So, it's the reason a lot of people have less pain in the morning and it flares up at night when our cortisol levels are naturally the lowest. I've had people wonder about that, they'll say, "It gets nighttime and I start hurting". It's part of the normal cycles of the day.

Women have monthly hormonal activities where they get migraines right around their periods. So, our natural cycles of hormones affect the stress hormones.

The only reason I mention that is because sometimes we wonder, "what's going on, I was feeling fine and then all of a sudden...". So, sometimes it's these natural cyclical things. We don't have to figure these things out.

Sometimes people who have a lot of pain have periods of no pain. What's happening? So if we try to figure it out, we're really not able to, because sometimes a hormone that was set off hours ago has an effect many hours later so we have no way of knowing.

Whether we approach our pain by relaxing our bodies, letting go of our beliefs, or relaxing into emotions, it doesn't really matter. If you reduce your stress in any of those areas, it affects all the areas. So it doesn't matter which way you approach it. Any form of letting go, of relaxation, of kindness to ourselves, it doesn't matter, it all works in the same way.

I wanted to mention a couple of things about staying mindful during the day. Are you all familiar with the term, "the breath is an anchor"? When we do regular mindfulness

meditation, we focus on the breath, and a thought comes up, we notice thinking, an emotion comes up and we notice the emotion, but we keep going back to the breath. So the breath is seen as an “anchor”.

During the day, we have a lot of different activities going on, and a lot of distractions. How do we stay mindful, to have a practice of continuously practicing throughout our entire day? For me, using an anchor has been a really primary thing that has been effective.

I like to use two different anchors at different times in particular. One that I like to use is my abdomen. I just check in to see if my abdomen is relaxed. Like a moment ago, I got a little bit of anxious, with the thought, “Uh oh, I don’t have enough time to talk about everything that I wanted to talk about.” And immediately, my abdomen tightened up. And because I was paying attention to my abdomen, I realized, “Oh, I’m a little anxious there, and I’ll let it go.” So it’s something I can stay with throughout the day. I’ll be in the car in traffic, and I’ll go, “How’s my abdomen doing” and very often it’s like “uuugggh [there’s tension there]”. (laughs)

So it’s incredible biofeedback, it’s instant, it lets you know how you’re doing.

The other area is the breath. Sometimes, just staying present with the breath, you notice you’re holding your breath. You might be listening to somebody who is saying something you don’t want to hear, and you’re holding your breath.

Some people can use their face, their jaw, or their facial muscles. It doesn’t matter what your anchor is, but it is really helpful to have something that you use as your reference point during the day to stay mindful.

Another guideline I use for mindfulness... a lot of people get very confused during the day, “there’s so much going on, what do I pay attention to?” The guideline that I like to use in general (it doesn’t work all the time) is to pay attention to what is moving. For instance, if you’re washing the dishes, it’s your hands that are moving. So I give most of my attention to my hands. If I’m lifting weights, one of the things that’s important is that your posture is good. You don’t want to be lifting weights while you’re slumped over. So I have a global sense of my body, but then I have most of my attention on the contractions of my muscles... on what’s moving.

So, if you’re talking, most of your mindfulness needs to be on what you’re saying (laughs), but I tend to focus on keeping my abdomen relaxed. Because I find if I’m getting anxious when I’m talking, or if I’m really trying to prove a point, I find that I’m already pretty tight. So that gives me good feedback.

In general, in non-emotional things, pay attention to what’s moving.

If I’m walking really fast, I tend to pay attention to the global sense of the body... my body moving through space. If I tend to walk slow, like in the house, I’ll pay attention to

the bottom of my feet. It doesn't matter really, what you pay attention to. It's whatever works for you to keep you in your body.

Right at this moment, what can you pay attention to in your own bodies and still listen? And still participate? And still have the sense of your body right now. What's useful to you?

So before we close, I'd like to mention a couple of non-meditation suggestions with pain.

Last week, I mentioned my two favorite ones. Exercise and movement, which I can't stress enough. The second was a nutritional one: the elimination of sugar.

So there are two other things I would like to offer up here.

The first one is music. They did this interesting study with 60 patients who had continuous pain, from osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, or disk problems. They were in constant pain for quite a period of time. They broke up these patients into three groups. One group listened to any music they wanted for an hour a day. The second group listened to relaxation music they were given. And the third group didn't listen to music at all. They found that the two groups that listened to music were the same and both had a 15% to 20% reduction in pain. Not just during the time that they were listening, but during the rest of the day. The group that didn't listen to anything actually had a 1% increase in pain, probably because they were paying attention to their pain.

So the main thing is that music tends to make us happy. And anytime we're happy and relaxed, it's good.

The second activity I'd like to touch on is laughter. Just like smiling increases endorphins, laughter kicks in even more. They actually found that it boosts the immune system. I think it was Norman Cousins who was very famous for curing himself with laughter and vitamin C. But laughter the most (laughs). It increases your circulation. It decreases stress. They've found that people who laugh heal faster, and again, it decreases pain.

So, if there's any way to bring that into your life in an active form [it's helpful]. One problem is we take things too seriously. Especially when there's pain, it feels serious. It's very hard to come out of that seriousness and problems that we're having to deal with. So anything we can do to bring laughter and lightness and lighten up in our lives is really helpful.

So I'd like to just end with the reminder to stay present and connected with your bodies during the day.

See if you can take those one minute breaks over and over throughout the day. Keep that going. Stay relaxed. Take the time to really let go in your body.

Keep a daily practice.

And remember, as my screensaver says, “Whenever I feel blue, I start breathing again.”
(laughs)

(and with a smile...) So, thank you very much.

[End of Week 2, Part 2]