

Introductory Course In Mindfulness Meditation

3rd Week – Mindfulness of Emotions: No Hard Feelings

Taught by Gil Fronsdal

In mindfulness practice we keep our attention on the breath, unless some other experience is so strong as to pull us away from the breath; then we turn our attention to that other experience. One kind of experience that can pull us away is physical sensations, which we talked about last week; another is emotions.

No emotion is inappropriate within the field of mindfulness practice. We are not trying to avoid emotions, or to have some kinds of emotions and not others. We are trying to allow them to exist as they arise, without the additional complications of judgement, evaluation, preferences, aversion, desires, clinging, resistance or other reactions.

The Buddha once asked, "If a person is struck by an arrow, is that painful?" Yes. The Buddha then asked, "If the person is struck by a second arrow, is that even more painful?" Of course. He went on to say, that as long as we are alive, we can expect painful experiences - the first arrow. Often the significant suffering associated with an emotion is not the emotion itself, but the way we relate to it. If we condemn, judge, hate, or deny the first arrow, that is like being struck by a second arrow. The second arrow is optional, and mindfulness helps us avoid it.

An important part of mindfulness practice is investigating our relationships to our emotions. Do we cling to them? Do we hate them? Are we ashamed of them? Do we tense around them? Are we afraid of how we are feeling? Do we measure our self-worth by the presence or absence of an emotion? Can we simply leave an emotion alone?

Mindfulness itself does not condemn or condone any particular emotional reaction. Rather, it is the practice of honestly being aware of what happens to us and how we react to it. The more aware and familiar we are with our reactions, the easier it will be to have, for example, uncomplicated grief or straightforward joy, not mixed up with the second arrows of guilt, anger, remorse, embarrassment, or judgement. Emotional maturity comes, not from the absence of emotions, but from seeing them clearly.

Mindfulness helps us to be as we are without further complications. If we can be accepting of ourselves in this way, then it is much easier to know how to respond appropriately with choice rather than habit.

How to Attend to Emotions

Generally, during meditation, keep yourself centered on the breath. If there are emotions in the background, leave them there; keep the breath in the foreground of awareness as if it were the fulcrum for your experience.

When an emotion becomes compelling enough to make it difficult to stay with the breath, then bring it into the focus of meditative awareness.

There are four aspects to the mindfulness of emotions. You don't have to practice all four each time you focus on an emotion. At different times, each is appropriate. Experiment to see how each can help in developing a non-reactive attention to emotions. The four are:

Recognition: A basic principle of mindfulness is that you cannot experience freedom and spaciousness unless you recognize what is happening. The more you learn to recognize the range of your emotions, including the most subtle, the more you will become familiar and comfortable with them, and the less you will be in their thrall.

Naming: A steady and relaxed labeling of the emotion of the moment, e.g., "joy," "anger," "frustration," "happiness", "boredom," "contentment", "desire," and the like, encourages us to stay present with what is central in our experience. Naming can also help us become calm and less entangled with the emotion, less identified with it or reactive to its presence.

Acceptance: This does not mean condoning or justifying certain feelings. It means simply allowing emotions to be present, whatever they may be. Many people frequently judge and censure their feelings. Formal meditation practice offers us the extraordinary opportunity to practice unconditional acceptance of our emotions. This does not mean expressing emotion, but letting emotions move through you without any inhibitions, resistance, or encouragement.

Investigation: This entails dropping any fixed ideas we have about an emotion and looking at it afresh. Emotions are composite events, made up of bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, motivations, and attitudes. Investigation is not analysis, but more a sensory awareness exercise of feeling our way into the present moment experience of the emotions. It is particularly useful to investigate the bodily sensations of an emotion, letting the body be the container for the emotion,. In a sense, the body is a bigger container than the thinking mind which is easily exhausted, and which tends to spin off into stories, analysis, and attempts to fix the situation - away from acceptance of the present moment experience.

MINDFULNESS EXERCISES FOR THE THIRD WEEK

1. Lengthen your daily meditation session to 25 minutes. When you first sit down, notice the main concerns, feelings, physical sensations that may be pre-occupying you. Acknowledge them and remain attentive to any tendency to become lost in your thoughts concerning these experiences. Meditation proceeds easiest when we are willing to suspend - for the duration of the meditation - the need to think about anything.
2. At least once during the week "ride out an emotion." Sometime during the week when you are feeling a strong desire, aversion, fear, or other emotion, don't act on the feeling. Rather, bring your mindfulness to the feeling and observe the changes it undergoes while you are watching it. You might choose to sit, stand or walk around quietly while you do this study. Things to notice are the various body sensations and tensions, the changes in the feeling's intensity, the various attitudes and beliefs that you have concerning the presence of the emotion, and perhaps any more primary emotion triggering the feeling. If after a time the emotion goes away, spend some time noticing what its absence feels like.
3. Spend part of a day making a concentrated *effort* to notice feelings of happiness, contentment, well-being, joy, pleasure, and ease. Even if your day is primarily characterized by the opposite of these, see if you can identify even subtle and seemingly insignificant moments of these positive states. It can be as simple as appreciating the texture of a doorknob or a flash of ease in your eyes as you notice the blue sky after the fog has burned off. This is not an exercise for manufacturing positive states but rather discovering that these may be much more a part of your life than your preoccupations allow you to notice.
4. Spend part of another day noticing which feelings tend to pull you into a state of preoccupation. Sometimes there are patterns in the kinds of feelings that lead to becoming lost in thoughts. Common sources for distraction are desire, aversion, restlessness, fear, and doubt. Are any of these more common for you than the others? What is your relationship to these feelings when they appear? As you notice the patterns, does that change how easily you get pulled into their orbit? By clearly noticing their presence, can you overcome any of the ways in which these interfere with, or inhibit, whatever activities you need to do?