

Intro to Mindfulness - Part 1 December 17, 2020 with Christine Francoeur
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When you practice concentrating on one thing at a time in meditation, you become much better at focusing on one thing at a time in all areas of your life. With practice, you'll notice that small distractions won't have an easy time stealing you away.

There will times during your practice, you'll move through these challenges easily - you'll feel encouraged and think, hey I really have this mindfulness thing down....other times, you'll feel frustration and think...why bother - that's why I think it's important to call out what may come up in the practice. and the judgment will come and you'll maybe feel like you want to quit.

When that happens, a great technique to help you is to start noting. You will recall in the beginning, you were using the practice of noting with sensations in the body - labelling them as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. You can also use noting in other ways for your practice - when the mind is overly active - you may start to note what you're aware of - THINKING, PLANNING, WORRYING, SPINNING, then, you might have a closer look into the attitude underneath your practice - FRUSTRATED, BORED, SLEEPY. The more you build this skill, the more you'll be able to observe what is happening in the present moment and you'll not so caught up and identified with it.

Susan Piver, a Buddhist teacher summed it up well. She said:

"Your mind already knows how to meditate. It is always resting on something—most often, however on thoughts based in hope or fear, the past or the future. When you begin to notice your thinking, you'll see that it is rarely focused on the present.

Here are three anchors for your mind to help you build your concentration practice: These 3 anchors are great to start practicing with. You can use any of these - set a timer and sit for few minutes. Build your

#1 Our Senses:

Re-connecting with our senses is a beautiful way to bring more mindfulness to our lives. Sight, smell, taste, hearing, and touch. All are such beautiful doorways to coming into your present experience.

One of the easiest senses to start with in a practice is hearing. Sounds are great example of what it's like to have something arise and fall away without any control from us. So often in our lives, we can get caught up in the striving and the need for control to ensure the outcome we want yet listening to sounds really is a very powerful way to remember that we have very little control. A sound will arrive in your ears without any influence from you.

#2 - Breath

Breath is a beautiful way to come back to the aliveness of ourselves. A great reminder to check in to the pulse of life that continues moment to moment with us and often we are completely unaware.

Our breath has message for us. Whether it's the speed of the breath or where it's moving in the body - it can be a sign as to how we are responding to what's happening around us. Breathing will bring you home to your body. Bringing your attention to the breath, connects the body and mind. As soon as you become aware of breathing, you're in your body. Speed up or deepen the breath and there's new energy. Slow it down and lengthen the exhalation and it will help to calm us. The inhale brings you oxygen to nourish - taking in that which helps to energize us, the exhalation releases what we no longer need allowing us to relax.

The breath is always here as an object of attention, whether formally in a seated meditation or informally as way to help return you back yourself. And we can do that anytime during the day, we can bring the attention bring to your breath, the better you will know yourself. For instance, if you're anxious or fearful, you may notice that breath is rapid and in the top part of the chest. If you're having difficult relaxing, you may notice that your exhalation is shorter and tighter.

We can create an entire practice around just watching the breath - from where it enters in the body through the nose travelling down, the body's response to the inhale - how and where you inhale - noticing the length and duration of the inhale and exhale - noticing if that breath is sticky or right. Noticing where the breath feels like it's tight in the body. It's a very powerful practice.

We can also bring a more focused attention to the breath - by altering the breath. For instance if you know that you're feeling anxious - a great way to help calm yourself - is to count the inhale - perhaps - it's a 2 or 3, then seeing if you can double the exhalation - to a 4 or 6. The exhalation is activating the parasympathetic nervous system which helps the body to relax. If you find that you're having trouble staying on the sensations of the breath in the body - just counting the breath is a great technique as well - 1 count for the inhale/exhale - 2 count for the inhale/exhale.

For a specified time - even just one minute - find a comfortable seat, let worries and plans fall away, and simply rest. Be aware of breathing and let everything else go. Nothing to do, nowhere to go, no one to be. Just sitting, abiding as the body breathes.

For some, connecting to the breath, can be difficult - it might bring on some anxiety, for others, we immediately start to change the breath or constrict the breath. If that happens while you're practicing, just recognize that it is, without judging yourself or wishing it were different - it's okay - in this practice, all is welcome, we are to work with whatever presents - so if that happens, where focusing on the breath feels constricting, just bring your attention to your hands resting in your lap, or your feet on the floor. Or you can open your eyes and start noting what's in front of you...naming...and then once you feel yourself start to settle, you can bring perhaps close your eyes again, coming back to your body.

#3 BODY SENSATIONS:

Turning the mind to the sensations in our body is a great way to bring connection back to the moment. The mind is truly woven through the body - our responses to all that happen around us will have a reaction in our body. Our body is communicating with us all the time. And those responses happen so quickly,

Being aware of your body and its signals gives you useful information about your deeper feelings and needs. Tracking your body's subtle reactions to others also tells you a lot about your relationships and what's happening in the moment.

First off, a caution: for some people, it can be difficult to fully experience being the body. We all are all here having the human experience and all of us at some point in our time on earth have had some kind of trauma, a car accident, a fall, emotional traumas. Body sensations practices might not be for you, if you do try them - do so in a limiting way, or maybe not at all.

Yet for others, it can feel good and be of benefit to be in the body. It can bring us connection, and perhaps a deeper sense of relaxation and ease. And there are numerous ways to deepen the sense of this:

- Let your attention wander through your body, a kind of observer investigating all the various sensations. It can be helpful to note the sensations -
 - Noticing sensations - tight, tingling, warm, open,
 - Pleasant, Unpleasant or Neutral
- This type of practice is great for a seated practice, or an informal practice as you move through the world. You may notice and sense all the sensations as you move through various activities in your day. routinely bring attention back to your body. What's it feel like to be a body: answering the phone . . . watching TV . . . driving . . . typing . . . lifting a child . . . sitting in a meeting . . . shoveling snow. . . crawling into bed . . . ?
- A guided body scan practice is a fantastic way to build your concentration and have you connect to the signals from the body.

A walking meditation can also be a great option

That brings together 3 ways you can help build your focus and your attention. Now, some final tips for a concentration practice: Concentration has two aspects - bringing your full attention to the object - then applying time by sustaining it.

- **RETURN:** When you practice formal concentration, keep returning attention to the object (e.g., breath, sensation, senses - like sound), fully aware of it, absorbed in it. If other thoughts, concerns, plans, etc. bubble up, let them arise but don't follow them, and keep giving your full attention to the object.
- **GO EASY:** When practicing, don't be tense or hard on yourself, but know your intention is to focus, become the energy of the eagle watching the ground below. Set a bit of your attention to watching how well you are staying concentrated, like a guardian, and to alert you to bringing your attention back if it starts to wander.
- **YOUR ATTITUDE:** Stay aware of the attitude that holds your practice - boredom, aversion, striving, ease, happiness....you may experience feelings - to extend your practice, you can invite these feelings in arise and see what happens. You may notice that the acknowledgement helps the attitude dissolve, or maybe it builds...see what is true in that moment. Just stay aware.