

Summary of Session 2: Living in Our Heads

Our aim in this program is to be more aware more often. This week, we looked more closely at the way we interpret what happens to us on a moment-to-moment basis – the kind of thoughts that more or less automatically come to mind and can influence what emotions we experience, what happens in our bodies and what we do.

We saw how:

- Different people interpret the same event differently
- Each of us might interpret the same event differently at different times – for example, depending on how we felt at the time
- Our interpretations are often shaped by old habits of mind
- Our interpretations influence how we feel, and what we do

Even if we are unaware of moment-to-moment thoughts, they influence our reactions. We may find ourselves feeling annoyed or anxious, snapping at a loved one or hiding ourselves away – and because we have not noticed the thoughts, we can't understand why. This in itself can be worrying. What is wrong with us? Why are we reacting like this? Becoming aware of our own habitual thought patterns can help us to make sense of how we feel, and opens up options for how we wish to respond.

A powerful pattern of thought that takes us away from being "fully present" in each moment is our automatic tendency to judge our experience as being not quite right in some way – this is not what should be happening, not good enough, or not what we expected or wanted. These judgements can lead to sequences of thoughts about blame, what needs to be changed, or how things could or should be different. Often, these thoughts will take us, quite automatically, down some fairly well worn paths in our minds. Before we know where we are, we are feeling bad and reacting in old, knee-jerk ways. We may lose awareness of the moment, and also lose the freedom to choose what, if any, action needs to be taken.

We can regain our freedom if, as a first step, we simply acknowledge the actuality of the situation we find ourselves in, without being immediately hooked into automatic tendencies to judge, fix, or want things to be other than they are.

The Body Scan provides an opportunity to practise simply bringing an interested, gentle and friendly awareness to the way things are in each moment, without having to do anything to change things. Achieving some special state - even relaxation - is not a goal to aim for in the practice. There is no goal to be achieved, other than to bring awareness to bear as the guidance suggests.

Mindfulness of the Breath

Guidance for Sitting Meditation

1. Settle into a comfortable sitting position, either on a straight-backed chair or on a soft surface on the floor, with your buttocks supported by cushions or a low stool.

If you use a chair, choose one that has a straight back and that allows your feet to be flat on the floor, with your legs uncrossed. It is very helpful to sit away from the back of the chair, so that your spine is self-supporting (see Figure A on page 5).

If you choose to sit on the floor, use a firm, thick cushion (or a pillow folded over once or twice) which raises your buttocks off the floor three to six inches and allows your knees to touch the floor. Sit in one of the positions shown in the Figures on page 5. Figure B involves drawing one heel in close to the body and draping the other leg in front of it; Figure C involves kneeling with the cushion between the feet. Experiment with the height of the cushions or stool until you feel comfortably and firmly supported.

2. Allow the back to adopt an erect and dignified posture with the head, neck and back aligned vertically. This is the physical counterpart of the inner attitudes of self-reliance, self-acceptance, patience, and alert attention that we are cultivating. Gently close the eyes.

3. Bring your awareness to the level of physical sensations by focusing your attention on the sensations of touch, contact, and pressure in your body where it makes contact with the floor and with whatever you are sitting on. Spend a minute or two exploring these sensations, just as in the body scan.

4. Now bring your awareness to the changing patterns of physical sensations in the abdomen as the breath moves in and out of the body. (When you first try this practice, it may be helpful to place your hand on the abdomen and to become aware of the changing pattern of sensations where the hand makes contact with the abdomen. Having "tuned in" to the physical sensations in this area in this way, you can remove the hand and continue to focus on the sensations in the abdominal wall.)

5. Focus your awareness on the sensations of slight stretching as the abdominal wall rises with each in-breath, and on the sensations of gentle deflation as the abdominal wall falls with each out breath. As best you can, follow with your awareness the changing physical sensations down in the lower abdomen, all the way through as the breath enters the body on the in-breath and all the way through as the breath leaves the body on the out breath, perhaps noticing the slight pauses between one in-breath and the following out-breath, and between one out-breath and the following in-breath.

Cont'd

6. There is no need to try to control the breathing in any way - simply let the breath breathe itself. As best you can, also bring this attitude of allowing to the rest of your experience - there is nothing to be fixed, no particular state to be achieved - as best you can, simply allow your experience to be your experience without needing it to be other than it is.

7. Sooner or later (usually sooner), the mind will wander away from the focus on the breath in the lower abdomen to thoughts, planning, daydreams, drifting along – whatever. This is perfectly OK - it's simply what minds do - it is not a mistake or a failure. When you notice that your awareness is no longer on the breath, gently congratulate yourself - you have come back and are once more aware of your experience! You may like to briefly acknowledge where the mind has been ("ah, there's thinking"). Then, gently escort the awareness back to a focus on the changing pattern of physical sensations in the lower abdomen, renewing the intention to pay attention to the ongoing in-breath or the ongoing out-breath, whichever you find.

8. However often you notice that the mind has wandered (and this will quite likely happen over and over and over again), each time, as best you can, congratulate yourself on reconnecting with your experience in the moment, gently escort the attention back to the breath, and simply resume following in awareness the changing pattern of physical sensations that come with each in-breath, with each out-breath.

9. As best you can, bring a quality of kindness to your awareness, perhaps seeing the repeated wanderings of the mind as opportunities to bring patience and gentle curiosity to your experience.

10. Continue with the practice for 10-15 minutes, or longer if you wish, perhaps reminding yourself from time to time that the intention is simply to be aware of your experience in each moment, as best you can, using the breath as an anchor to gently reconnect with the here and now each time that you notice that the mind has wandered and is no longer down in the abdomen, following the breath.

The Breath

Breath is life. You could think of the breath as being like a thread or chain that links and connects all the events of your life from birth, the beginning, to death, the end. The breath is always there every moment, moving by itself like a river.

Have you ever noticed how the breath changes with our moods -- short and shallow when we're tense or angry, faster when we're excited, slow and full when we're happy, and almost disappearing when we're afraid. It's there with us all the time. It can be used as a tool, like an anchor, to bring stability to the body and mind when we deliberately choose to become aware of it. We can tune into it at any moment during everyday life.

Mostly, we're not in touch with our breathing -- it's just there, forgotten. So one of the first things we do in mindfulness is to get in touch with it. We notice how the breath changes with our moods, our thoughts, our body movements. We don't have to control the breath. Just notice it and get to know it, like a friend. All that is necessary is to observe, watch, and feel the breath with a sense of interest in a relaxed manner.

With practice, we become more aware of our breathing. We can use it to direct our awareness to different aspects of our lives. For example, to relax tense muscles, or focus on a situation that requires attention. Breath can also be used to help deal with pain, anger, relationships or the stress of daily life. During this course, we will be exploring this in great detail.

Karen Ryder

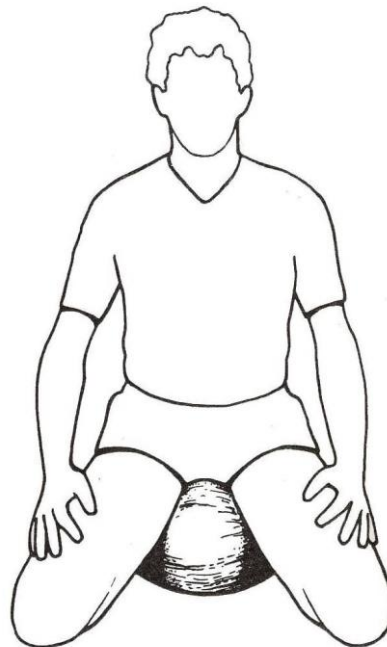
Postures for the Sitting Meditation



A



B



C

Barriers to Noticing Pleasant Moments

Especially when we are on automatic pilot, and when mood is low, it can be surprisingly difficult to tune into pleasant experiences – or even to allow them to be part of the picture. Noticing how old patterns of thought stand in the way of experiencing life’s richness is part of becoming familiar with the workings of our minds. We don’t need to do anything to change the patterns – our task is simply to become aware of their presence.

Here are some examples of common patterns.

Being too busy

When we are under pressure, it is all too easy to forget to take time to replenish our resources and do things that give us pleasure. When life is busy, we may feel we simply don’t have the time.

The busier our lives are, the more we need moments to refresh ourselves, moments when we come alive to the pleasure in small things. Pleasure does not have to be a major event – small things can make all the difference (e.g. noticing the scent of our shampoo or shower gel, savouring a cup of coffee instead of hardly noticing we are drinking it, pausing to look around us as we walk from the car to the front door).

Not believing we deserve pleasure

High standards can get in the way of pleasure – for example, we have to complete all our tasks before we can take a moment to ourselves, or we have to look after everyone else before we can attend to our own needs.

In fact, if taking care of ourselves is always bottom of the list, it may actually be harder to meet the demands of our busy lives and can make us miserable. We need to balance attention to others with kindness to ourselves.

Comparisons

Minds are quick to make comparisons between how things are and how they “should” be. We may find ourselves comparing how we feel now with times when we felt better, or comparing ourselves with other people who seem to be feeling better than we are, or comparing how we are feeling with how we want to feel. All of these comparisons undermine our capacity to be fully present with pleasant moments. Seeing them more clearly, we can choose to give them less weight.

Lost in our thoughts

As we practice meditation, we notice how quickly our minds turn to the past (memories, action-replays of things that have happened) and the future (planning the next thing and the next, worrying, anticipating). This wandering from the present moment can mean that we rush past experiences that might have been pleasant without even noticing them. Instead, we need to cultivate a sense of *now* – fully present with our experiences as they happen.

Pleasant Experiences (Moments) Calendar

Name:.....

Be aware of a pleasant experience at the time it is happening.

Use these questions to focus your attention on the details of it as it is happening. Write it down later.

Day	What was the experience?	How did your body feel, in detail, during this experience?	What moods and feelings accompanied the experience?	What thoughts went through your mind?	What thoughts are in your mind now as you write this down?
	e.g. Heading home at the end of my shift – stopping and hearing a bird sing.	Lightness across the face, aware of shoulders dropping, uplift of corners of mouth.	Relief, pleasure.	“that’s good”, “how lovely (the bird)”, “it’s so nice to be outside.”	It was such a small thing but I’m glad I noticed it.
Day 1					
Day 2					

Day 3					
Day 4					
Day 5					
Day 6					
Day 7					

Home practice following session 2

Audio: 'Guided Body Scan'

- Practice the **Body Scan** each day
- Practice 10-15 min of '**mindfulness of the breath**'.
Being with your breath in this way, each day, provides an opportunity to become aware of what it feels like to be connected and present in the moment, without having to do anything. (There is no audio file/CD for this meditation, see written instructions)
- Complete the '**Pleasant Experience Calendar**' (one entry per day).
Make sure to bring awareness to at least one pleasant event each day. Use this as an opportunity to become really aware of the *thoughts, feelings and body sensations* around each pleasant experience, at the time it is happening. Notice and record as soon as you can, in detail, the precise nature and location of bodily sensations and use the actual words or images in which the thoughts came.
- Also now choose a **new/different 'routine activity'** to be especially mindful of, on a daily basis (brushing teeth, showering, washing dishes, shopping etc.). Continue with this same routine activity each day

Complete the 'Practice Record Form' each time you do any of the practices. Make a note of anything that you notice.

Practice Record Form

Name:.....

Record on this form each time you practice. Also, make a note of anything that comes up in the practice, so that we can talk about it at the next meeting.

Day / date	Practice (Yes / No)	Comments
Date:	Body Scan: Breath: Routine Activity:	
Date:	Body Scan: Breath: Routine Activity:	
Date:	Body Scan: Breath: Routine Activity:	
Date:	Body Scan: Breath: Routine Activity:	
Date:	Body Scan: Breath: Routine Activity:	
Date:	Body Scan: Breath: Routine Activity:	