

# Introduction to Mindfulness (24 of 25) Active vs. Receptive

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Hello, and welcome to the penultimate teaching on introduction to mindfulness meditation. One of the useful distinctions to make is between prescriptive meditation instructions and those that are descriptive. The same instructions can be offered in both ways. “Prescriptive” means this is what you do, so you apply yourself to do something. “Descriptive” means the instructions describe what you'll be aware of.

The first is a little bit more active. Some people find it very helpful to engage actively with meditation. It's kind of like play for them. They just naturally enter into the world of doing something, so it's really nice for them to engage in the instructions describing what you do. One way to do that is to have a checklist to go through. You can do the core elements of these five weeks: mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of body, mindfulness of emotions, and mindfulness of thinking.

You can go through this list and do each one a little. Start with the breathing, then recognize what's happening in the body, then the emotions, and then thinking. Or you can do it backward. Some people find that having a very clear program like that keeps them engaged and focused.

Other people find that's not helpful. They find it's more helpful to sit back and be more in the receptive mode than the active, directive mode of practice. Then the instructions become more descriptive. If you are present with an awareness that is open and available to present moment experience, then different things will come at different times, whatever is loudest in a sense. So sometimes you might be aware of the sound a neighbor is making, and that's what's most predominant. Sometimes the breathing, sometimes an emotion, and sometimes thinking predominates. What comes into awareness varies. It might feel almost random. But not being the doer and just being available in the present moment with this, now, here, feels relaxing and nice.

Sometimes it's useful to know both ways. There are times in the practice when we're more active and more prescriptive, which is what we're doing. At other times it's more descriptive; we're just describing what arrives in awareness. For example, when we start practice, it's usually a little bit more active. But as we settle and get concentrated and still, we want to be doing less and less. We enter into a more receptive mode. When we go further in practice, even being receptive is too much doing. We're just here. Phenomena and experiences arise; without us receiving them or going to them to experience them, they're there.

So be aware that there are different modes in which we can be mindful. Sometimes we are a little more active, sometimes more directed to the breathing, and sometimes – I don't know if “passive” is the right word – there is less doing and more being aware. Rather than directing the attention, there's no choice or direction for what we're aware of, except whatever comes and arises.

There can also be a combination of the two, which is a little bit more what I like to teach. The default is always to have the attention directed to, available for, or receptive to the rhythm and the experience of breathing. So there's a steadiness and a settledness as we go along. The rhythm or beat of the breathing is a bit of a protection from the mind wandering off unknowingly so that we spend a long time just drifting off in thought. Because we're keeping the breath at the center, we are more likely to notice when we start drifting off. When the mind is just receptive, quiet, and available to everything, then in a certain way, everything seems okay, and when the mind drifts off we hardly notice it. There isn't a clarity of knowing, “Oh, now the mind is thinking.”

So the combination of active and more receptive modes uses the breath as a default. But then whatever arises anywhere that is more predominant becomes the focus of meditation. So if it's a sound outside, then we do listening meditation. If it's a sensation in the body, we do mindfulness of sensation. If it's thinking, we do mindfulness of thinking. If it's an emotion, we do mindfulness of emotion. This might seem random as it works out. As the mind gets quieter, more still, or more concentrated, it's sometimes as if we go through layers within us. In different layers, different parts of this stand out: sometimes the body stands out more, sometimes the emotions, and sometimes the cognitive aspects of the mind.

All along, we want to be attentive to whether there is an attitude carried in the mind. Is there a subtle kind of mood in the awareness, in the mindfulness? Maybe there's a subtle or maybe not-so-subtle striving, trying to get something. Maybe there's a subtle sense of the Buddhist idea of conceit – some idea that “I am, and I have to do it; I have to be successful; I'm the controller, the agent, the doer” – that is a little bit extra. Conceit is like a mood or flavor that adds a little bit of weight or wind drag to the mindfulness. It keeps the mindfulness from being really clear, open, relaxed, and simple.

There might be background attitudes we carry with us of being a little bit aversive to everything that happens. Or there can be always an orientation to what we want – wanting something. With the slightest little movement, as soon as we become aware of something, we immediately think, “I want that,” or “I don't want that.” These attitudes are in the way that we're aware and they make the awareness selective: we look for “Where is that button I push to make it go away,” for instance.

In terms of the hallmark of mindfulness meditation being simplicity, when the practice instructions are descriptive they just describe what comes into awareness. Sometimes this is a really good reference point for remembering to keep it simple or learning how to keep it simple and without agendas. In the active mode, it's a little bit too easy for agendas to come along – purposes, values, and desires that are more complicated than things need to be.

So sometimes going back and forth between a little more active and a little more receptive mode can help us work through some of the attitudes, the extra baggage we carry so that the basic practice becomes simpler and simpler: just being here, just showing up, just being present with this. This is what I'm experiencing now. This is the sound. This is listening. This is a sound now. This is an in-breath now. This is a sensation now.

With each movement of “Now like this,” it's like the doors and windows are open and we allow ourselves to feel that experience more fully. The cognitive part that's something like, “This is my experience now” is like a prelude to, “Okay, this,” and experiencing it for a moment or two. Allow yourself to really feel the experience of the moment. Sometimes it's nice to take three breaths to just be with something that has arisen – “This is the experience now.” Breathe with it three times and then return to the breathing.

I hope that what I said today doesn't promote complicated meditation for you. I hope it gives you some options or some choices you can make to try to keep your meditation simple in a way that's appropriate for you – your way, what's needed now for you. The final thing I'll say is that a good reflection to do maybe near the end of the meditation or when the meditation is over is to think back about what happened in the meditation and ask if you could have been simpler. Could you have been more mindful? What would it have taken? At the end of the meditation, reflect on how it went, to learn from how it went.

For example, it's easy to drift off in thought and think about something that's really unnecessary and not really know that you're doing it or how much time you're spending that way. But when you do the review, you might see, “Wow, I just spent 15 minutes thinking about the great American novel I'm going to write, but I don't even know how to write. I'm just in a fantasy. I think I could have woken up earlier. I think I could have been a little bit more diligent in being present. Let's try to do it a little bit better tomorrow.”

That review of meditation, seeing what you can learn, where the traps were, and where you got off track can be very helpful. You can become your own teacher and find your way with this practice. Thank you.