

# Introduction to Mindfulness (21 of 25)

## Mindfulness with Concentration 1

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Good morning, or good day for those of you where the morning has already gone by. This is the fifth week of the introduction to mindfulness meditation.

The general idea of mindfulness is very simple. At the beginning of this series, I tried to offer the simplicity of it. The instructions that I've given since then might seem complicated, but they describe the territory of what we could experience if we're available and open to the present moment. The idea is to be present simply for that. We don't have to make it complicated or do a lot of things except be present.

It's important that we know what to be present for. We began with being present for breathing, which is stabilizing and connecting. For many people, it is a wonderful beginning. For some people, it's not. In that case, there are other home bases for attention. But generally, the way we teach is to have breathing be the home base.

As we go along, the body speaks up and wants to be heard. Then we can let go of breathing. With very simple attention we recognize and feel what is happening with the experience of the body. As we go along further, emotions might arise. The emotions we can feel are expressed in the body.

Emotions can be listened to, heard, and attended to with very simple attention. It is very caring and profoundly meaningful for the emotions to have room to be without us involving ourselves with them or being for or against them. The idea is to keep attention really simple. At some point, we become aware of thinking. We stay with simple recognition.

Since we know the territory and are recognizing these things very simply, we might see different aspects of each one. We might see the particular sensations of the body. We might see where the emotions are most active and express themselves in the body sensations. We may see that emotions are made up of different parts. We can be aware of these parts because we have a sense of the map.

We don't have to go searching or figuring it out. Over time, we know more of the territory. We can bring simple awareness: "Oh, this is how it is." Some people find it very helpful to have a phrase like, "This is how it is now," or "This is how it is at the moment." Just leave it that simple.

The general way we teach is to have the breathing at the center. If something else becomes more predominant, attend to it. Be present for it, receive it, and allow it to enter into awareness. When it no longer needs to be attended to, go back to the breathing. Then go to the next thing that comes up, then back to the breathing. The breathing is the place to come back to.

This is because for many people – not everyone – having one place as a default to come back to provides stability and helps to develop continuity. The rhythm of breathing is continuous. It's always there gently rocking and massaging us, being present for us.

This way we are also developing the ability to stay with something continuously. Sometimes that's called concentration. Although some people associate concentration with straining, narrowing down, or laser focusing,

it is really more an immersion in the experience or composing ourselves on the experience – really being here for the experience.

If we don't have a home base like this – if we're not cultivating concentration *with* mindfulness – we can find that our mind has its own interests. If we are just being available to notice what is happening, the mind might not focus on our best interest. We might not see a subconscious bias towards certain directions, concerns, or emphases. For example, some people are almost addicted to their thinking. In this case, being constantly mindful of “Thinking, thinking, thinking” actually strengthens and reinforces the thinking.

On the other hand, some people prioritize their emotions. We can be predisposed to experience an emotion more than is necessary. Often our attention is not unbiased but represents deeper attachments, fears, or concerns that we bring with us.

Staying with something like breathing as continuously as you can might be equivalent to not going hiking in the mountains with all your luggage. That's really hard. You can't go very far. You might get to understand the weight of your luggage and what your hand feels like gripping the handles of the luggage. You might get to know those things really well, but you're still not going to go very far into the mountains. The idea is to be able to put down the baggage that we carry with us – the biases or orientations that don't really serve us – in order to see more freshly, go deeper, and look without bias or pre-existing orientations.

It is good to develop some modicum of concentration with the breathing without having too high a standard. Being able to stay with three breaths continuously, or sometimes even just one breath continuously, is enough to interrupt the way in which we feed our thinking, our emotional life, or some concern that we have. We can think of attention as food. Whatever direction attention is going, we're feeding that thing.

If attention is going toward being mindful and aware of thinking, then the attention goes to mindfulness. But if attention goes into the thinking itself, then we're feeding the thinking. Similarly, if attention goes into emotions, we feed them. But if attention goes into being aware and mindful of emotions, we step back and see the emotions without condemning or pushing them away. We are with the experience but not identified with it. We're not *being* the experience. Every experience is allowed to be what it is, but we don't have to be identified or defined by it or be in it.

Continuity with even just one breath is enough to step away and put down the baggage. Two or three breaths are helpful. It is good not to try too much because the idea is to let attention grow slowly. Continuity, immersion, and concentration are like a muscle that develops. Or they are like a muscle that we're relaxing and gently massaging over and over again. Slowly something develops. Or they are like butter. If you take butter out of the freezer, it's really hard and you have to break it in half. You have to take a hammer to it. But if you let the butter sit out in the warmth of the room, slowly it will get softer until you can put a butter knife on top and it sinks right through easily.

It is the same way with concentration. It is a slow warming-up process. We come back and stay with a few breaths. And then if we're not upset when we get distracted, but lovingly begin again, something begins to get into a groove. Maybe we get five breaths, maybe ten. As an act of will, we could stay for ten breaths maybe, but concentration is not meant to be an act of will. It's meant to be an act of love, care, and offering our presence to something. With the combination of mindfulness and concentration – a continuity of mindfulness – we are mindful of something and then we stay with it for a while, feel it, and be with it.

If the experience is something other than breathing – for example, a sensation in the body, an emotion, or thinking – the idea is to spend at least three breaths with it. Maybe three breaths are long enough to fully acknowledge, be with, and feel an experience. It might be enough to be able to put it aside and come back to the breathing.

This rhythm of three breaths with whatever we recognize and give attention to can be enough. However, sometimes we want to be longer with something. Staying for a long time with one thing is fine. But three breaths of putting down the baggage and just being with that can begin to overcome and relax any biases, automatic pilots, concerns, or priorities the mind has for directing attention – for example, toward our thinking.

I hope this explanation makes sense. I want to leave you with the principle that the way I teach mindfulness is in partnership with concentration. The two don't have to be done separately. One supports the other.

We will continue this introductory series tomorrow. Thank you.