

Mindfulness: Being Present

Module Three

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THE SANCTUARY

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INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness – how to begin

We define mindfulness and investigate the motivation that is needed to practice it effectively. We also identify the two aspects of mindfulness training: method and attitude. Having clarified our intention for practising mindfulness, we then observe how our mind operates on ‘automatic pilot’ – how we are habitually not present. Through doing the 'body scan' exercise we learn to investigate our experience more closely and gradually begin to wake up to our present moment reality.

Settling the Mind

As we wake up to the present moment, we begin to see how unsettled our mind is. Through doing the exercises of ‘recognizing the unsettled mind’ we begin to see for ourselves that our mind is not under our control – it is like a butterfly that flies off and does its own thing driven by habit. This is an important discovery because now we know what we are working with. However, before we can work with our mind in a constructive way, we need to settle the gross level of agitation and distraction that pulls us to and fro. For this reason we do the exercise of ‘settling the mind’. Here we also introduce walking meditation to establish a balance between sitting still and moving. Walking meditation settles the mind as well, because it brings us home to our bodies and slows us down.

Mindfulness Support – sound

Having begun to settle our minds, we now introduce the key elements of sitting practice - grounding, resting and mindfulness support. But first we attend to our posture because how we hold our body affects our mind. Posture is the container for our practice. We then practice the grounding phase, which draws our mind more fully into our body such that we feel rooted and embodied. This helps to anchor our attention in the present moment. We then move into the resting phase, which involves letting go of any sense of focus and resting in our present moment experience. This is the highest form of sitting practice, but given the power of distraction, our attention quickly moves away. So at this point we introduce the mindfulness support of simply hearing any sounds that are present, which is a reference point for us to come back to the present moment.

Mindfulness Support – breath

Whereas in the previous part we used sound as a mindfulness support, in this part we use breath. We begin to notice how different supports have differing effects on the mind – with sound comes a sense of expansiveness, with breath comes a sense of being inwardly centered. Also, we see that when we work with a support we do not try to stop our thoughts or make our mind go blank, but we learn to rest our attention lightly on the support and allow our thoughts to come and go.

Mindfulness in Daily Life

We then introduce exercises for cultivating mindfulness in daily life so that when we get up from the cushion we carry our mindful awareness into everyday activities and do not leave it behind on the

cushion! In our sitting practice we strengthen the ‘muscle’ of mindfulness and in daily life we exercise this muscle.

1. OUR INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

You see, I want a lot.
Perhaps I want everything:
The darkness that comes with every infinite fall
And the shivering blaze of every step up.

So many live on and want nothing
And are raised to the rank of prince
By the slippery ease of their light judgments

But what you love to see are faces
That do work and feel thirst...

You have not grown old,
And it is not too late to dive
Into your increasing depths where life
Calmly gives out its own secret.

Reiner Maria Rilke

When our practice of mindfulness deepens we become increasingly aware of the inner landscape of our mind. Just like turning up a dimmer switch reveals the contents of a room with increasing clarity, so too mindfulness practice reveals more and more vividly the currents of emotion and patterns of thought in our minds. But, mostly what we see is not what we would like to see. The room is perhaps in a mess, dirty clothing scattered everywhere, and all kinds of old furniture and utensils litter the floor, many now entirely useless and redundant, but to which we are still fervently attached. We might also find that we do not feel safe in this room - we do not feel safe within our own mind - because it is filled with threatening objects and strange creatures that come and go unbidden and outside of our control.



1. 1. Preference

The evolved brain is very tricky. It is not designed for happiness and contentment. Its default setting is threat and drive because we are conditioned by evolution to be on the lookout for external threats and getting what we need to survive. Moreover, in our modern day and age the main threats appear to be within our own minds – we fear the unruly and chaotic emotions that arise within us and our reactions to these emotions. For example, we can dwell and ruminate on painful memories, criticizing ourselves for doing things wrong, and we can worry about the future scenarios, anxious that things might not turn out right - all of which activates our threat system and stresses us out. And, most of the time we are not even aware that we are doing this; it is unconscious and habitual. So we get used to living with an activated threat system, which then causes hormones to be released making us feel even more anxious, stressed and down.

This situation is complicated further by safety strategies many of us developed while we were growing up that ensured emotional survival then, but which have unforeseen consequences now. For example, if we are repeatedly told as child that things are dangerous, we cope by avoiding anything new or different. The unforeseen consequence is feeling anxiety when we try out new things, avoiding anything that is unfamiliar and then feeling stuck in a rut. Also, if we are repeatedly told as child we are stupid, or if we are often criticized, we cope by becoming a perfectionist as a way of avoiding criticism and becoming an unwanted self that others reject. The unforeseen consequence is to be very self-critical and to avoid forming close relationships because we fear criticism and rejection.

So it is very important to let ourselves off the hook and to understand that these processes are beyond our control and *are not our fault*. We are all in the same boat, we all have a tricky brain and we are all struggling in one way or another. Once we are prepared to come to terms with how we are now, we are then in a position to embark on a path of genuine growth and maturity that is always grounded in the fertile soil of our human imperfection and limitations. As far as our mindfulness practice is concerned, this is the point where we explore self-acceptance in more detail.

But, before we deal with Acceptance in the next section, it is useful to briefly revisit preference. In the last module we explored how our minds follow narrow grooves of preference that limit us and contract our awareness. There are emotions and experiences we like, experiences we do not like and other experiences we ignore and ‘tune out’ of. We saw how we associate happiness with getting what we want and unhappiness with either not getting what we want or getting what we don't want.

In the light of the insights of Evolutionary Psychology, this is perfectly understandable and not our fault. We have seen how our brains are programmed by evolution to avoid threatening things and get hold of desired things. So, in effect, we are ‘wired up’ for preference. And given our very self-critical culture, we are very on the alert for emotions and inner experiences we like or dislike because there is a high premium placed on being good enough and being acceptable in the minds of others.

So it is not surprising that when we start practicing mindfulness, and once the initial honeymoon has blown over, we find that we do not like the present moment experience that we have landed in.

Expressed in the language of the *Guesthouse* poem by Rumi, we may find to our dismay that many unwelcome guests come knocking on the door of our guesthouse. And so we try to escape into distraction, which is understandable, and the whole of modern consumer culture quickly comes to our aid.

Exercise 1: Recognizing Preference

30 minutes

Now that you are familiar with them, proceed through the graduated stages of settling, grounding and resting, in your own way, letting one naturally unfold out of the other. Finally arrive at the mindfulness support of your choice.

Then after a pause for reflection, drop in the question:

What am I *actually* experiencing right now? Be as honest and realistic as you can be. Tune into your present moment experience – thoughts, emotions, physical sensations.

After several minutes drop in the question:

What would I *like* to be experiencing now? Just allow any answers to arise naturally in your mind, without actively thinking or analyzing the question.

Next drop in the question:

How do I feel like when I look at the gap between how I am and how I would like to be?

Examine this feeling carefully. Does it present itself physically? Is there an emotion there? What thoughts arise from it? See how it affects your experience, without trying to change it. Just get to know it with an attitude of curiosity and allow it to be present with you. Lean into it with gentleness, softening around it.

Reflection after the exercise:

Contemplate alone or discuss with a partner any gap you have identified between your preferred experience and your actual experience. Then examine how you habitually react to this gap both in meditation and in daily life. See how disliking what is here and wanting what isn't here constitutes non-acceptance, and notice the particular way this manifests in your mind.

2. ACCEPTANCE

THE GUEST HOUSE

This being human is a guesthouse.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Rumi

Right at the beginning of our training we saw how mindfulness training has two aspects to it. The first is technical and concerns the methods for settling and stabilising the mind - resting our attention on a mindfulness support and working with distraction. The second, and possibly more important category, concerns our attitude. If we approach mindfulness training as something mechanical or intellectual, which has nothing to do with the way we feel at a deeper level, we will only attain superficial mindfulness, and it will have little impact on the way we are as human beings. It will fall into the category of just another piece of knowledge we have gathered and stored in our memory. Therefore, in the next part of the mindfulness training we will focus on the attitude of acceptance.

2.1 What is Acceptance?

Acceptance has a particular meaning within the context of mindfulness practice. The term gives rise to many misconceptions, so it is useful to identify what these misconceptions are. Acceptance is a way of coming to terms with whatever is present within our experience. To some people this might imply that we approve or condone negative states of mind, and so they might react – “oh, so if I am an angry person I can just carry on being angry and shouting at people”. This is not the case because it would amount to acting out and reinforcing anger, which is the opposite extreme from suppression. Acceptance is a middle path between acting out and suppression.

Accepting ourselves does not mean mindlessly indulging in emotions or inappropriate behaviour; nor does it mean showering ourselves with affirmations or having to like everything about ourselves. In fact, liking ourselves for some reason – because we approve of our behaviour or measure up to some standard – is conditional self-acceptance. *Unconditional* self-acceptance is of a totally different order - it is being completely open to the experience we are having now, whatever it may be.

It requires a balanced and objective look at ourselves – much as we might try to look objectively at another person. It might help to remind ourselves that we are not perfect and that we are ordinary human beings, not superhuman. Therefore we can expect to discover imperfections in ourselves in the form of negative thoughts and feelings. If we approach the practice in this way it is less threatening. We can comfort ourselves with the knowledge that from an evolutionary perspective our brains are formed in such a way that negative mind states and conflicts are in-built and inevitable - they are part of the human condition. Consequently, when they manifest in ourselves and others, we can learn to accept them.

The next common objection to acceptance is – “if I accept myself as I am, then it means I never make any effort to change”. This view stems from the assumption that acceptance and acquiescence are the same and that acceptance leads to resignation – if I accept myself then that is how I will always be. But the opposite is the case. If I don’t accept myself as I am, I will never find out who I am and therefore I will not know what needs to be changed. Acceptance is the first step towards being honest and getting to know ourselves better. Only when we have arrived at this point can meaningful change become possible.

Once we understand acceptance properly we see that it is a very pragmatic state of mind. For example, if we are preparing to do a job the first thing we do is clearly identify all the components of the task at hand. We are then in a position to do what needs to be done. If we fail to do this and only focus on the conditions we like, then our project will surely run into difficulties. The rules for working with our minds are no different. When we learn to look at ourselves clearly and accept what is there, we will have set out on the road to kindness and compassion because we are able to open our mind and heart to the reality of how things are and place ourselves in alignment to the situation we find ourselves in, rather than in opposition to it. In this way we are able to let go of unnecessary conflict and find some peace of mind. We begin to see that so much of our suffering and stress comes from resisting difficult states of mind rather than accepting what is there.

Therefore acceptance is a very realistic approach to our lives. It is a willingness to see clearly the facts before us and a willingness to approach difficulty rather than move away from it. It is the basis for genuine change. This requires us to start from where we are and to take on board our present situation as this is the only ground from which genuine change can take place. If we deny or refuse to see clearly the facts of our present situation, change or growth is blocked.

2.2 Causes of Non-Acceptance

We can detect three main causes for not accepting our experience:

- Many of us have a poor self-image and some people suffer greatly from self-hatred. These states of mind produce a strong belief that we can only be happy if we become someone or something else. Thinking in this way, we then block the capacity to reflect openly and honestly on our experience, we get out of touch with ourselves and strive to become some idealised image of how we should be. If we live like this then depression, paranoia and emotional dissociation are likely to develop.
- Another cause for lack of self-acceptance is the idea that we should be perfect. In our guilt driven culture people often cower psychologically under the shadow of a huge, accusing finger that ceaselessly delivers a mono-message – “you are not good enough... you are bad”. Life then becomes a torment of trying to placate this tyrant by attempting to be super-good. This is not possible because it means being perfect, but the human condition is not one of perfection. To our despair and despite our best efforts, we find ourselves thinking and feeling in ways we think are wrong and contrary to the dictates of the perfection-demanding finger. This creates anxiety, insecurity and a sense of failure. We end up feeling trapped because we see no way out. In these circumstances the mind produces a simple solution – denial and suppression. At a subliminal level, the mind simply denies the existence of the “bad” mind state, suppresses any evidence of its existence and pretends that “everything is OK.” Let’s suppose the mind state is anger – we will tell ourselves and others “oh, I never get angry, I just get a bit irritated sometimes”. This will be accompanied by a brittle smile and a shrug of the shoulders.
- Another major category is that of unrealistic striving. This often accompanies the idea that we should always be positive and only experience positive emotions and mind states. When we think in this way, the mind concludes that the appearance of any negative mind state is a failure that should be “got rid of”. So we try to get rid of negative emotions that arise and believe that by doing so they will gradually disappear - but they won’t because all we are doing is suppressing them.

Suppression

These three types of reactions to conditions that we don’t accept are dysfunctional because they amount to suppression. Suppression is a mechanism of denial that blocks thoughts and feelings from entering conscious awareness in a way that is unrecognised and habitual. It also strengthens the very thing we are trying to get rid of because it feeds energy into the habit that holds it in place. So we end

up with the opposite of what we are striving for. This is true of any inner reaction pattern based on non-acceptance, and it is one of the many reasons why acceptance is so important if any degree of mindfulness, inner growth and happiness are to become possible.

2.3 Loving Kindness and Compassion

The qualities of loving kindness and compassion arise within us when we learn to accept every situation as it is without attempting to force our point of view or preference upon it. We learn to allow the world to be the way it is without constantly spinning off into reactive states of mind, which often arise out of one-sided judgements based on ignorance or prejudice. When we kindly allow ourselves to be the way we are, the mind softens, relaxes, settles down and becomes less reactive. A sense of inner spaciousness develops that enables us to view the world from a broader perspective. This allows for the emergence of wisdom that naturally brings us into harmony with the deeper rhythms of ourselves and the world. We become more open and perceptive, less likely to project onto others, and we develop greater sensitivity to what is happening within our minds and in the world around us. As this process of growth occurs, we begin to understand more accurately what others are experiencing because we are not so caught up in our preconceptions and preferences. This naturally gives rise to kindness, caring and compassion.

2.4 How Do We Practice Acceptance?

We will work with the RAIN method, which is a simple way of entering into the practice of acceptance, and which provides a set of tools for relating to difficult emotions or experiences that may arise. RAIN is an acronym for recognizing, accepting, investigating and non-identification.

Recognition – this involves stepping out of denial and acknowledging what is present in our experience. When we deny our experience we create conflict in our mind that intensifies whatever we are going through. We will use loneliness as an example to demonstrate each of the stages of RAIN. So, when loneliness arises we acknowledge it and name it. In so doing we invite it into awareness with the result that the emotion loses some of its power over us. Simply recognising what is happening, instead of automatically reacting to it, allows us to shift from a passive to an active stance, which already gives rise to greater freedom.

Allowing – even though we may have acknowledged an emotion there might still be resistance to it. Resistance adds another layer of conflict and suffering to what is already there. It is like adding fuel to fire. Through allowing we say to our self – “OK loneliness is present, so I will open to it and work with it rather than trying to push it away.” When we open to things in this way they become workable and genuine change becomes possible. Being open to what we are experiencing does not mean wallowing in our feelings or acting them out. Instead, it involves giving ourselves space to feel what we are feeling – gently holding our feelings in our awareness, softening around them and not imposing judgements on

them. In so doing, we can open more fully to what we are experiencing, which brings us more fully into the present. Instead of trying to judge, explain or manipulate how we feel, we can simply maintain an open presence in the face of it.

Investigation – once we have acknowledged a difficult emotion and allowed it to be there, we can then investigate it more fully. We need to be willing to inquire into what is going on inside us, instead of just assuming that we know what our experience is and reacting automatically. Often we think we know what we are experiencing – “I just don’t like being on my own, that’s all” or “This is just an old hang up from childhood” – without understanding what is really happening. If we reflect more deeply, we discover that there is more to any experience than we can know at first glance. So we need to be willing to ask ourselves “What is going on here?” and really look with an open mind, instead of assuming that we already know. Investigation does not involve analysis, but rather paying close attention – as if we are looking at it from every angle. In doing this we cultivate a quality of curiosity and interest. We do this through applying the four foundations of mindfulness, which derive from the teachings of the Buddha:

- *Mindfulness of the body* – We notice where the loneliness is held within our body. There might be a contraction in our chest or tightness in the shoulders. We then notice what kind of sensations we are experiencing in this part of the body – maybe there is a tightness, contraction, cold, vibration...etc. Notice if we are resisting these sensations. Then notice what happens if we open to them with mindfulness and acceptance.
- *Mindfulness of feelings* – we notice if the primary feeling tone is unpleasant, pleasant or neutral. In the case of loneliness it is likely to feel unpleasant. See if we can meet this feeling with acceptance. Then notice what layers of feeling make up the loneliness – outwardly there might be the feelings of contraction and restlessness, but at a deeper level there might be feelings of vulnerability, loss and hurt. So we notice that loneliness is not one thing, but a constellation of feelings. We then try to meet each of these feelings with mindfulness and acceptance.
- *Mindfulness of thoughts* – we notice what kind of thoughts, stories or beliefs are spinning around the feelings of loneliness. There could be all kinds of thoughts about the outward situation of our loneliness or judgments about feeling lonely itself. We could be thinking it is bad to feel loneliness or we could be locked into a mental loop of trying to think of ways to change our situation. We try to take a step back and look at these thoughts. We might ask ourselves – are these thoughts true or one sided? Are they permanent or changing moment by moment?
- *Mindfulness of underlying processes* – we notice how we are relating to our experience. Are we taking the loneliness to be very solid and real? Are we seeing it as permanent? Are we clinging to it and contracting around it? Are we identifying with it as who we are? This last inquiry leads to the final stage of RAIN.

However, as Tara Brach says in her upcoming book *True Refuge* (Bantam 2012): “...such inquiry alone is not enough to arouse full mindful presence. In order for investigation to be healing and freeing, we need to approach our experience with an *intimate* quality of attention. This means contacting a sense

of care and warmth and offering a kind welcome to whatever comes up. Without this heart energy, investigation cannot penetrate; there is not enough safety and openness for real contact – self compassion is an inherent ingredient in mindful presence.”

Non-identification and letting go – We inquire of every mental state or emotion that arises – is this really who I am or is this just an experience that is moving through me? In the case of loneliness we notice if we are identifying with it. Has it become who I am in this moment?

We notice how identifying with it causes our mind to contract around it tightly so that our mental landscape becomes closed in and painful. Through paying attention and inquiring in this way, and through the previous stages of RAIN, there is a gradual dis-identification – it is as if our mind relaxed its tight grip on the anger, and there is a greater sense of spaciousness in the mind. In this way, the difficult emotion is given space to unravel, work its way through us and change.

Exercise 2: RAIN Exercise (with Guesthouse Poem)

30 - 45 minutes

Follow the normal routine of settling, grounding, resting and mindfulness support using either sound or breath as the support. When a difficult thought or emotion persistently knocks on the door of your internal guesthouse then engage with the RAIN exercise.

Step 1- Recognise

Recognise what the presenting emotion is and name it. This is like opening the door and acknowledging the guest that wants to come in.

Step 2 - Allow

Next, simply allow the emotion to be present. This is like welcoming the guest and inviting it to take a seat inside your guesthouse.

Step 3 - Investigate

Then go back to resting your attention on the mindfulness support while knowing that the guest is present within your guesthouse. If you find that the guest persistently calls for your attention, then switch your focus to the presenting emotion and make it the focus of your mindfulness practice. But do this in a particular way:

- *Mindfulness of body*

First bring your attention to where the emotion or difficulty is held within your body. Notice what kind of sensations you are experiencing in this part of the body – maybe there is a tightness, contraction, heat, vibration...etc. Notice if you are resisting these sensations. Then notice what happens if you open to them with mindfulness and acceptance.

- *Mindfulness of feelings*

Now bring your attention to the emotions and feelings connected with the experience. Notice what the primary feeling tone is and then observe what layers of feeling make up the experience. You may notice that the presenting emotion is not one feeling, but a constellation of feelings. Try to meet each of these feelings with mindfulness and acceptance.

- *Mindfulness of thoughts*
Next, notice what kind of thoughts, stories or beliefs are spinning around the presenting emotion. Try to take a step back and look at these thoughts. Are they true or one sided? Are they permanent or changing moment by moment?
- *Mindfulness of underlying processes*
Then notice how you are relating to your experience. Are you taking the emotion to be very solid and real? Are you seeing it as permanent? Are you clinging to it and contracting around it? And, are you identifying with it as who you are?

Step 4 – Non-identify

This leads to the last stage of RAIN, in which you inquire of every mental state or emotion that arises – is this really who I am or is this just an experience that is moving through me? Through practicing in this way you may come to see that the presenting emotion or difficulty is not who you are – it is simply a guest moving through your internal guesthouse of awareness.

3. BUILDING OUR COMPASSIONATE CAPACITY

THE HOUSE OF BELONGING

I awoke this morning in the gold light
turning this way and that
thinking for a moment it was one day like any other.

But the veil had gone from my darkened heart
and I thought
it must have been the quiet candlelight that filled my room,
it must have been the first easy rhythm with which I breathed myself to sleep,
it must have been the prayer I said
speaking to the otherness of the night.

And I thought
this is the good day you could meet you love,
this is the black day someone close to you could die.
This is the day you realise how easily the thread is broken
between this world and the next

and I found myself sitting up in the quiet pathway of light,
the tawny close grained cedar burning round me like fire
and all the angels of this housely heaven ascending
through the first roof of light the sun has made.

This is the bright home in which I live,
this is where I ask my friends to come,
this is where I want to love all the things
it has taken me so long to learn to love.

This is the temple of my adult aloneness
and I belong to that aloneness as I belong to my life.

There is no house like the house of belonging.

David Whyte

Sometimes, we find it difficult to be in our own internal environment and we'd rather not be in our present moment experience. This is understandable and not our fault, but we don't have to stay stuck within this situation.

One way of responding proactively is to see if we can find a different way to relate to our internal environment – welcoming whatever is present rather than avoiding it, moving towards and not away from it, being interested and paying attention to what is going on, making space for our experience. The RAIN method is one of the ways in which we can practice this.

If we can cultivate an attitude of compassion towards ourselves, we can relate to the difficult guests in our guesthouse in a different way.

3.1 Self-Compassion

One way to get into the habit of mindful self-compassion, is to practice informally throughout the day. The best times to practice are when you feel under stress—when you are caught in a traffic jam, or are arguing with a loved one, when you are worrying about your health, or perhaps when you are feeling physical pain. It helps to fix an aspiration when you wake up in the morning to be mindful of stressful moments as you go through your day.

When you notice that you're under stress, see if you can experiment with the following exercise.

Exercise 3: The Self-Compassion Break

Put your hand(s) on your heart, or hug yourself

Breathe deeply in and out

Speak kindly to yourself, really letting yourself experience what is behind the words:

This is a moment of difficulty.

Difficulties are part of everybody's life.

May I respond with kindness.

These three phrases can be seen as a self-compassion mantra, a set of memorized phrases that are repeated silently whenever you want to give yourself compassion. They are most useful in the heat of the moment, whenever strong feelings of distress arise. You might find these phrases work for you, but it's worth playing with them to see if you can find wording that fits you better. What's important is that all three aspects of self-compassion are evoked, not the particular words used.

The first phrase, *"This is a moment of difficulty"* (or suffering) is designed to bring mindfulness to the fact that you're in pain. Other possible wordings for this phrase are "I'm having a really hard time right now," "This is really difficult," "It's painful for me to feel this now," etc.

The second phrase, *"Difficulties are part of everybody's life"* is designed to remind you that imperfection is part of the shared human experience. Other possible wordings are "Everyone feels this way sometimes," "A lot of other people probably feel the same way," etc.

The third phrase *"May I respond with kindness"* is designed to help bring a sense of caring concern to your present moment experience. Other possible wordings are "I'm sorry you're having such a hard time," "Poor thing, it will be alright," "Know that I'm here for you and care about you," etc. This final

phrase, firmly sets your intention to be self-compassionate. Other possible wordings are “I am worthy of receiving self-compassion,” “I need to give myself compassionate care,” as well as the following:

- May I be kind to myself in this moment
- May I give myself the compassion I need
- May I be safe
- May I forgive myself
- May I be happy and free from suffering
- May I safely endure this pain
- May I find peace in my heart
- May I be strong
- May I be kind to myself
- May I protect myself
- May I learn to live with ease and well-being
- May I be wise and change what I can
- May we learn to live together in peace
- May we grow in mutual respect and understanding

Find the three phrases that seem most comfortable for you, and repeat them over and over again until they’re memorized, or write them on a small card to carry with you for example in your purse. Then, the next time you judge yourself or have a difficult experience, silently repeat your self-compassion mantra. It’s a handy tool to help soothe and calm troubled states of mind.

(From: Neff, 2010. Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) Training Program.)

3.2 Loving Kindness

Another way of developing our compassionate capacity is to continue with the loving kindness practice and developing it.

With all these loving kindness exercises we build from our intention to become kinder, more loving and more accepting towards ourselves and towards others. Where we encounter blocks to these practices we can let ourselves off the hook and come back to reflecting on our intention. Even if we cannot feel genuine loving kindness in this moment, we have a wish to become kinder and more caring towards ourselves and towards others. Our development of genuine loving kindness flows from this wish, from our intention.

As we train in mindfulness we often come to realize that there is an inner critic in our internal environment that does not let up. This inner critic is the voice in our head that tells us that we are not good enough and never will be. The inner critic is a block to the development of an accepting and allowing attitude to ourselves and to our environment. The development of an accepting and allowing attitude in our mindfulness practice and in our daily lives underpins the growth of our innate compassion, insight and wisdom and our growth as a mature and stable human being.

When we notice the inner critical voice, we practice allowing it to be, without engaging it, and we just observe it while resting on our mindfulness support. By not engaging our inner critic we are not putting energy into it and so its power over us gradually diminishes. Instead we focus our energy on developing an attitude of kindness, for example, by doing the loving kindness exercise below. This practice accesses the loving kindness we already have and then focuses it on ourselves.

Exercise 4: Cultivating Loving Kindness for Self and Other

20 minutes

The practice involves repeating three or four phrases or wishes for a person or animal towards whom we feel genuine kindness and then repeating the phrases for ourselves.

Some examples of traditional phrases include:

May you be well;
May you be happy;
May you be free from suffering;
May you be free from danger (including dangerous mind states); and
May you live with ease.

Pick three or four of the above phrases which are meaningful to you. If these phrases are not meaningful to you, then make up your own set of phrases.

Begin the practice by settling the mind. When your mind has settled, choose a person or animal for whom you feel genuine concern, imagine them sitting in front of you and then say the phrases you have chosen for them, perhaps using their name each time you say a phrase. You might not feel genuine kindness towards them all of the time, and this is OK. In doing this practice we are connecting with feelings of kindness we have already, however intermittent or conditional. You might choose, for example, a dear friend, a family member, a teacher, someone who has helped or been kind to you, or a family pet. The person or animal you choose may change from time to time.

Then after 5 minutes or so, switch to saying the same phrases for yourself. You might say 'may I be well' etc. or you might replace the 'I' with your name. You may find that it helps to imagine a younger version of yourself, perhaps when you were a child and then say the phrases for your younger self. It may help to imagine yourself sitting beside the friend you have just been saying the phrases for and then say the phrases for both yourself and that friend.

You can end the practice by spreading out your loving kindness by repeating the phrases a few times for all beings everywhere.

We are not trying to force anything or to squeeze out any particular feeling from our hearts. If things feel dry or distant, that is fine. That is our experience. We can allow whatever is there just to be there as it is. We can think of the practice as planting seeds of intention - cultivating kindness.

We might find that during this practice our hearts open allowing sensations of warmth and connection to arise and grow. If this is the case then every so often during the practice move your awareness into your body to sense how kindness feels in your body. We might find that during this practice blocks to kindness, such as fear, anxiety or anger arise. This is OK too and provides us with an opportunity to learn more about ourselves and our habitual patterns of thought and behavior. If such blocks arise, then from time to time during the practice move your awareness into your body to sense how the block feels in your body. Work with the attitude, that whatever arises is OK and just allow thoughts, emotions and physical sensations to come and go in their own good time.

While doing this practice it may happen that we say the phrases as a way of blocking out or suppressing our present moment experience, in particular uncomfortable feelings. If this happens we can bring awareness into the body and notice what sensations are present. This will help us stay in touch with our present moment experience.

4. MINDFULNESS SKILLS FOR TIMES OF DIFFICULTY

Don't surrender your loneliness
So quickly.
Let it cut more deep.

Let it ferment and season you
As few human
Or even divine ingredients can.

Something missing in my heart tonight
Has made my eyes so soft
My voice
So tender,

My need of God
Absolutely
Clear.

Hafiz

Sometimes there are periods in our lives that are full of difficulties, such as bereavement, illness, redundancy, relationship endings or divorce, overwork and other life stresses. During these times our mood may be lower than usual.

Also, when our mindfulness practice strengthens we can become aware of our deeply embedded patterns of thoughts and behaviour, which were often established in our childhood or youth. These deeper habit patterns can be difficult to face and come to terms with, and as we go through the process of accepting them, which may take weeks or months, the emotions that arise can be overwhelming. It is beneficial to go through this process of acceptance because it results in the growth of our wisdom and compassion, but at the time the process can lower our mood and make our lives more challenging.

If you have recently suffered a traumatic life event or if your mindfulness practice is opening up trauma from earlier in your life, then the wise course of action may be to reduce or stop your mindfulness practice for a while, and instead seek help from a psychotherapist qualified in an evidence based psychotherapeutic approach. Also, there are strategies which we can put in place to more skillfully navigate our way through such difficult times and periods of low mood.

4.1 Formal Sitting Practice

Over the course of this training you are given home practice assignments and these require you to do a daily practice of 30 to 45 minutes sitting practice. In times of difficulty it is not uncommon to find that you are regularly becoming overwhelmed by emotions when you sit to do your formal practice. If this happens to you and you find that it is lowering your mood in your daily life or making life more difficult, then experiment with the following options:

- Use the RAIN exercise to help you come to terms with the emotions you are experiencing. If you still feel overwhelmed, it may be unkind to yourself to continue to sit in overwhelm. Here we work the 'edge' between approaching and staying with the difficulty and withdrawing from the difficulty. Only you can determine where this 'edge' is in your own practice, and it will be different from one day to the next; but if your practice is causing your mood to drop, this may be a sign that you are pushing too hard at the 'edge'. To withdraw from the 'edge', first acknowledge the difficulty you are experiencing and commit to come back to the difficulty in future mindfulness practice, as this helps to avoid suppression of the difficulty. Then get up and do some activity that you enjoy and that will distract you from the difficulty;
- Sit for shorter periods of time, for example 15 or 20 minutes, once or twice a day;
- Switch to doing a mindfulness practice that nourishes or soothes you and which is less overwhelming. For example, you may find that switching to mindful movement, body scan, compassionate imagery or mindful walking through the park or in the countryside is beneficial;
- Have a few days off from your formal practice and carry on with your informal practice, such as the three minute breathing space and mindful daily life activities.

4.2 Increasing Awareness of Pleasant Events

Even in the most difficult of times, there are pleasant moments to be experienced. Our minds have evolved to attend to and remember threatening situations as a means of survival. This means that unpleasant events can stick to the mind like Velcro while pleasant events can slide off the mind like silk. This natural tendency can be reinforced by our mindfulness practice in daily life in which we practice becoming present when a difficult situation arises, so as to create space to respond skilfully rather than reacting automatically. To counteract this tendency to focus on unpleasant events, we practice attending to pleasant events in our daily life. The pleasant event might be anything from sipping a nice cup of tea, to feeling the sun on your face, to swimming with turtles in Barbados, or to seeing a child at play.

When we encounter difficulties in life or low mood, one approach is to attend more closely to pleasant events. In order to do this, we can use the pleasant events calendar below. In daily life we can have the intention to become aware of at least one pleasant event every day, as the event is happening. Then later we can fill out the details of the event in the pleasant events calendar. By living our lives with the intention to become mindful of pleasant events, we gradually develop the habit of becoming more



aware during the pleasant moments in our day. This enables us to deeply experience the pleasant events in our lives and the thoughts, physical sensations and emotions that go along with them.

Pleasant Events Calendar

	<i>Example</i>	<i>Day/date</i>	<i>Day/date</i>	<i>Day/date</i>
<i>What was the experience?</i>	Meeting a good friend while shopping who I hadn't heard from in a long time			
<i>Were you aware of the pleasant feelings while the event was happening?</i>	Yes			
<i>What sensations did you experience in the body during the experience?</i>	Smiling across mouth; aware of some excitement in the chest; a lot of energy in the body			
<i>What moods, feelings and thoughts accompanied the event?</i>	Surprise and mild excitement at speaking to her; felt happy talking to her again			
<i>What's in your mind now as you write this down?</i>	It was a short meeting and I'm surprised how good it made me feel to see her			

Adapted from *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn

4.3 Nourishing and Depleting Activities

Depleting activities are activities that we do in our daily life which drain our energy and lower our mood, such as frustrating or repetitive aspects of our job, staying up too late, drinking too much alcohol, getting stuck in traffic or conversations with particular people.

Nourishing activities are activities what we do in our life that give us pleasure, boost our energy and improve our mood, such as taking a nice long bath, going out with a friend, going for a walk, listening to music or watching an uplifting movie or TV programme. Nourishing activities also include activities which give us a sense of accomplishment or mastery because we are getting things done, for example, finishing a task we have been avoiding doing, like doing the housework or writing a letter. Think back and remember if there are any activities that you used to do which nourished you.

Take time to reflect over the activities you do in your daily life and place each activity in the appropriate column in the table below. Be specific and detailed about these activities.

Depleting Activities	Nourishing Activities

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Adapted from *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression* by Segal, Williams and Teasdale

Then once you have completed your list, take steps to reduce the number of depleting activities you engage with in your daily life. You may not be able to avoid some of the depleting activities, so think about how you can change the way you engage in these activities so as to make them less depleting. For example, if you have an activity that depletes you and which you cannot avoid, then you could perhaps try one of the following options:

- make that activity one of your mindfulness practices, staying mindful as you do it
- commit to get the activity done first thing in the morning or straight away, so that you are not anticipating it all day
- break the activity up into manageable chunks interspersed with more enjoyable activities
- contemplate any beneficial results that arise from completing this activity to make it more meaningful

Try to be creative in developing strategies to reduce or change the way you engage in depleting activities.

Also, schedule into your day more nourishing activities. You can start by adding one or two new nourishing activities and then gradually add more. Again, be creative.

5. Revisiting the Mindfulness Support

Light touch

As we practice mindfulness we become increasingly aware of distraction and notice how it plays out in our minds. We see again and again how we lose awareness and are carried down familiar pathways of habit that are often unskilful and repetitive, and how we lose connection with the present moment. Then, when we realise that we are distracted and bring our attention back to the support there is a sense of being spacious, centred and grounded, and we know what is happening while it is happening. So we become increasingly familiar with the changing dynamic of mindfulness and distraction, knowing what they feel like in the very core of our being. This is the process through which the growth of awareness happens.

Through our routine of settling, grounding and resting we find a different way in to the mindfulness process allowing ourselves to 'drop into' awareness of the body, and in so doing approaching the mindfulness support from the mode of being, rather than the mode of doing, which carries with it all sorts of habits from everyday life like controlling and fixing and getting it right. So when we work with a support we do so in a very light and inclusive way, allowing our thoughts and emotions to come and go freely in our awareness, and we carry the quality of resting into how we engage with the support so we approach it with the gesture of an open hand rather than a clenched fist. In this way we do not inadvertently use the support as a way of blocking our mental and emotional experience. This is hazardous because it leads to suppression, which freezes our inner world and impedes the natural growth of awareness.

The support is way of maintaining our connection with the present moment and it is something to come back to when we get distracted. When we drift off we notice where our attention has gone and we become curious and interested in where our mind goes. In this way distraction is our teacher because it reveals our habitual patterning, enabling us to bring awareness to these different parts of ourselves. We learn not to oppose distraction directly because there it carries the momentum of many years behind it. So we use the support knowing that our habitual patterns will continue to play themselves out and knowing that our attention will be carried off by these patterns. In this way everything becomes part of our mindfulness practice. There is no sense of failing or getting it wrong because wherever our attention goes the practice is simply to notice this.

As our practice deepens we come to see that there is a subtle interplay between distraction and mindfulness. All through our training there is a sense of 'losing it and finding it.' It is not neat and tidy. It is 'the full catastrophe' in the words of Kabat Zinn. Seldom are we one pointedly focused in the present moment. We come to accept this and see that it is part of the process of learning.

Zooming in and out

We can use the analogy of watching a movie to illustrate the process of practicing mindfulness. One moment we are watching the movie, sitting in the cinema, and then in the next moment we find

ourselves absorbed in one of the scenes, totally captivated and lost in the experience. As soon as we become aware of this we notice an immediate sharpening of awareness and then find ourselves once again sitting in the cinema watching the film – in fact we never moved from our seat!

So we do not try to stop the movie. All we do is notice when we get caught in a scene and then mindfulness brings us back to our seat. We see how moment by moment our relationship to the movie changes – one moment in it, the next moment we are watching it.

Following on from this analogy, it is perhaps inaccurate to say that we ‘bring our attention back to the support’ as this can result in a sudden pulling away with the implicit sense of the thought being wrong. There may be a subtle violence as we wrench our attention back to the support. In fact, bringing our attention back to the support is more like ‘zooming out’ of a thought sequence we are caught in and regaining the fullness of our experience, that is, regaining a sense of perspective in which we are grounded in the body resting in this place at this time. Then we notice how our mind ‘zooms in’ to another thought and awareness is lost such that we find ourselves back in the movie again, not watching it.

At one level, mindfulness is a form of remembering or recollection. We wake up in the movie and remember that we are intending to practice mindfulness, and then we ‘zoom out’ again coming back to our present moment experience. We notice that when we ‘zoom in’ and get drawn into the storyline our experience narrows and contracts. And then when we regain awareness we see how our experience opens out again and we regain a sense of space and perspective.

So ‘losing it and finding’ it is all part of the process, all part of becoming familiar with our mind. And every time we come back to the support - every time we ‘zoom out’ of the movie or mental loop - mindfulness strengthens. It is like a balance scale - in the beginning distraction is stronger, then the more we practice mindfulness, the more it strengthens until finally it tips the balance.

There needs to be kindness and gentleness in this process. We allow the drama to happen. We don't try to stop the habitual patterns from playing themselves out. We welcome them and accept them, but at the same time we gradually refocus our attention on the support. There is also humour because we gradually come to see that it is all not a big deal. As we allow things to just happen and become curious and interested in where our attention goes, dropping any sense of succeeding or failing, our internal landscape becomes less threatening and fearful. Perhaps then we may start to actually experience that whatever happens in our mind OK, and that we are fundamentally OK too.

Exercise 5: Mindfulness Support Revisited

30 – 45 minutes

Start by following the usual routine of settling, grounding and resting. When your mind starts to drift off into thinking engage with one of the mindfulness supports such as sound or breath. Approach the support in light and gentle way with an attitude that is kind and inclusive – thoughts, emotions and sensations are free to arise, display and dissolve.

We notice how our mind moves and become curious as to where our attention goes. Wherever our mind wanders to becomes part of the practice. With this comes a sense of relaxing and opening and allowing.

As our awareness deepens we notice that when we get distracted our mind contracts and ‘zooms in’ to a thought or storyline. Noticing this, our awareness sharpens and our attention ‘zooms out’ again bringing us back into our body resting lightly with the support in this time and place. We become familiar with this process of ‘losing it and finding it’ again and again noticing our own unique styles of distraction and pathways of habit.

All the time we simply pay attention to what is happening while it is happening with a kind and non-judgmental attitude.

HOME PRACTICES

Formal Practice

45 minutes formal practice each day, using the recordings of the guided practices. You might find it helps to begin or end your session with 10 - 15 minutes of walking meditation or mindful movement. The home assignments until module three are:

3 Jan – 9 Jan	Recognising preference exercise (<i>exercise 1</i>).
10 Jan – 16 Jan	Formal sitting practice using a mindfulness support of your choice and using the RAIN exercise (<i>exercise 2</i>) when difficulties arise.
17 Jan – 23 Jan	Start your formal practice with the Cultivating loving kindness to self and other (<i>exercise 4</i>) and continue to the end of your session with a mindfulness support of your choice.

Informal Practice

Continue to do the 3 minute breathing space, 3 times a day and do “Exercise 3: The self-compassion break” in times of difficulty.

3 Jan – 9 Jan	At the end of the three minute breathing space notice any gap between how your present moment experience is and how you would like it to be, and briefly check in to how you feel about this gap.
10 Jan – 23 Jan	Use the pleasant events calendar for at least one week.
3 Jan – 9 Jan	At the end of the three minute breathing space say a few loving kindness phrases for yourself and for those around you.
17 Jan – 23 Jan	Use the depleting and nourishing activities table to add more nourishing activities into your daily life, and to reduce or engage creatively with depleting activities.

Also, continue to be especially mindful during chosen daily activities, adding another activity every so often, perhaps each week or once a fortnight. Refer to module one.

Keeping a Journal

Continue your daily mindfulness journal. You don't have to write much, but see if you can write a few words down after your formal session. Once a week you can look back at what you've written and write a more in-depth entry. This will help you to gain an overview of your own process. Keep a record of the formal and informal practices you do and reflect on how things are going. Also record any classes or workshops you attend and relevant books you are reading. You do not have to hand in the journal; it is your own private record.

Directed Reading - The Mindful Path to Self Compassion – by Chris Germer

