

# Choiceless Awareness

## Everyday Mindfulness

*Adapted from the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program manual originally developed by Jon Kabat Zinn, with additional development by Mark Williams, John Teasdale and Zindel Segal*

An essential feature of meditation is cultivating the skill of awareness. During the meditation journey we will practice cultivating awareness using particular objects of attention to emphasize different aspects of our experience of the present moment. We will focus on mindfulness of body sensations, mindfulness of the breath, mindfulness of movement, mindfulness of thoughts and emotions, mindfulness of experiences we judge to be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. With each of these objects of attention, we will explore their richness and depth, and our reactions to them. They serve as useful anchors, bringing us back to the present moment each time our minds wander away. They help us cultivate qualities of attending and gradually, the capacity to start to settle our minds.

The mode of attending we cultivate in our meditation practice is not narrow or over-focused (as it can be when we are concentrating upon something): it does not exclude or block anything out from the field of awareness. Rather, it is like the ever widening concentric circles in a pond after a pebble has been dropped in. We come to notice that the objects of attention we have been exploring are not distinctly separated from one another: they are all held in a broader field of awareness and an ever changing landscape of sensation and experience.

The practice of choiceless awareness is one of dropping focus upon any particular object of awareness, and simply attending to whatever arises within our experience. In Zen practice it is described as “just sitting.” It is like sitting in the middle of those concentric circles, allowing our awareness to be open and expansive. Simply attending to whatever arises and to all aspects of our experience, arising and passing away, coming and going, appearing and disappearing – not holding to anything. The mind is like the radiant blue sky: clear, bright, totally accepting, fully knowing and recognizing, like a mirror, reflecting all that is there, clinging to nothing, pushing nothing away. The landscapes of our experience are like rainbows, bubbles arising on the stream, shadows and light patterns, continuously flowing and changing, leaving no trace.

In this practice, we rest in awareness itself. We even let go of the idea that we are “meditating” or doing anything at all. During a period of meditation practice, we can experiment with dropping the object of awareness and just sit for a few moments with a broad open awareness. It can be useful to end a period of practice in this way, or we may find that we drop into choiceless awareness in the middle of a practice session. This is not dropping into drowsiness, sleepiness or episodes where our mindfulness becomes foggy or out of focus. The qualities of choiceless awareness include a strong sense of clarity and wakefulness.

Once our mindfulness practice is somewhat stronger, we may choose to practice longer periods of choiceless awareness. Whatever arises in the moment comes into our experience, and we meet it, as best we can, with bare attention, with acceptance and without judging. We open to whatever comes, allowing it to arise, to show itself and to fade away, without interfering in any way. Just noticing, present moment attending, welcoming whatever comes, watching, witnessing as if we are sitting quietly on the banks of the river, just letting it all flow past. If we get lost, we simply return to a familiar object of awareness, such as the breath, to anchor us back into the present moment.

## Tips for Keeping Everyday Mindfulness Going

- Bring awareness to your breath and body when you wake up in the morning, take a few conscious breaths and practice half-smiling before getting out of bed.
- From time to time during the day, bring awareness to your body posture, what your body is doing and how you make transitions between body movements.
- Bring awareness to your breathing at various times of the day. Choose to take a few conscious breaths, following the breath all the way in and all the way out.

- Use natural mindfulness triggers during the day to bring your attention back to the present moment: when the phone rings, when you pass through doorways, when you stop at traffic lights, when a sound comes into your awareness. Use these moments, to take a breath and to come into body sensation, feeling your feet on the ground.
- When you eat or drink, bring awareness to the process of stopping, tasting, sensing and nourishing yourself.
- Choose to eat one or two lunches per week in silence. Use this time to eat slowly and be with yourself.
- Bring awareness to body sensations as you go about your day, feeling the touch of air on your skin, the parts of the body in contact with the ground, the movement of your limbs as you walk.
- Notice when you are rushing or hurrying. Bring awareness to your state of mind, emotions and body sensations in these moments. Notice if tension is arising. See if there is a possibility of choosing a different stance. Whenever possible, just do one thing at a time. Enjoy the present moment!
- When you find yourself waiting or standing in life for something, use these moments as valuable opportunities to stop and tune into your experience. If you are feeling impatient in these moments, bring awareness to that.
- Bring awareness to the arising of tension in your body during the day, or check periodically for tension in your most vulnerable spots. Use these as barometers as to your stress levels and if possible, breath into these spots, and ease the tension by letting it go.
- Continue to choose daily activities that you can conduct consciously with mindful attention: brushing your teeth, doing the washing up, getting dressed. Pay full attention to what you are doing and when the mind wanders bring it back.
- Bring awareness to patterns of communication: talking and listening as well as periods of silence and notice your states of mind during these activities.
- Try to be more present during the moments of your life: feeling the breeze on your skin as your walk, noticing the small flower that is growing out of the crack in the wall, the call of the wild geese flying overhead as they start their long journey home.
- Pay attention to your walk to the car – breath in the air, feel the cold or warmth of your body. Can you open to and accept these environmental conditions and body sensations rather than resisting them? Listen to the sounds. Can you walk without feeling rushed? What happens when you slow down?
- While your car is warming up, sit quietly and consciously make the transition from work to home – take a moment to simply be – enjoy it for a moment.
- While driving, notice if you are rushing. What does it feel like? What could you do about it? Remember you've got more control than you might imagine.
- Choose to drive without the radio on and be with yourself.
- When you pull into the driveway of your home, take a minute to orient yourself to being with your family and entering your home.
- Practice tuning your mind toward a more positive frame: reflect on everything you feel grateful for today; reflect upon the positive moments and what has gone well.
- At the end of the workday, try retracing today's activities acknowledging and congratulating yourself for what you've accomplished and then make a list for tomorrow. You've done enough for today!
- Before falling asleep at night, bring awareness to your breathing and your body sensations for at least five whole breaths, all the way in and all the way out.