

# Staying with What is Difficult

*From the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program originally developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn with additional materials produced by Mark Williams, John Teasdale and Zindel Segal*

## Meditation on a Difficulty

Bring to mind a current difficulty or open to a difficulty that is already present in your experience right now. This could be a physical pain, a worry, a regret, perhaps some unresolved emotional or interpersonal issue which still has resonance in this moment.

Tune into the physical sensations in the body where the problem is most strongly felt. This could be an actual pain or discomfort or it could be the place where tensing or bracing is occurring or where there is a “felt sense” of the emotion being experienced. Bring attention to this, and if possible, breathe into this area on the in breath and out from that area on the out breath.

Without trying to make the unpleasant experience go away, bring a sense of acceptance, curiosity and befriending to what is there. We can say, “What is this? Let’s see what is here. It is here already so I might as well feel it and be open to it”. Soften and open up around the difficulty, giving it space and allowing it to reveal itself. Hold it in awareness. Gradually, return to the breath and broaden awareness to the body as a whole and open to a fuller sense of being present.

## Working with Difficulties

Whether we are focusing on the body scan, mindfulness of movement, sitting meditation or merely observing the activities of our everyday lives, we will be aware that we frequently encounter experiences that we may find difficult or unpleasant. This could be a physical discomfort or pain. It could be the knowledge that a part of our body is not working as it should be. It could be a problematic memory, worry or concern about something going on in our lives currently. It could be an unpleasant emotional experience or state that we are struggling with. Usually, it will be something we do not like and we wish would go away!

Our relationship with the difficulties in our lives is an important contributor to how much we suffer. In fact, it could be said that the majority of our suffering is caused by our reaction to the difficulty. First there is the difficulty, say a pain in the back, then there is our reaction to this – we don’t like it; we want it to go away; we tell ourselves it is not fair; we tell ourselves that it will spoil our evening; we tell ourselves that we are always going to be struggling with this; we tell ourselves that we hate this pain that is ruining our lives!

We may notice how we tense around the difficulty, physically, emotionally and mentally. We brace ourselves, or else we may develop a stance of resignation and defeat around it. On the whole, our attitude is one of non-acceptance and aversion. We don’t want to accept the situation we are in – we want to resist it, fight against it, or push it away! This may be a useful stance against many external problems which we can resolve through active problem-solving (we can go and tell the neighbor to turn off the loud music, or if that fails, we can consider going to the police or housing association). However, when it comes to our internal experience, trying to make an experience go away, often merely leads to suppression and frustration.

With mindfulness practice, we can bring awareness to our reactivity to difficult experience. We can notice the non-acceptance and aversion in our experience: the resisting, tensing, bracing, numbing, the pushing away – however it feels to us. We can notice how this does not make the problem go away, and how it increases our suffering. Suffering is the attitude of non-acceptance, along with the original difficulty or pain.

We can practice developing a stance of accepting what is there (that does not mean that we have to like it), and learning to soften around the problem, opening to it, and allowing it to be there. Just as in the Three Minute Breathing Space, we can say, “It’s OK. Whatever it is, it is OK. Let me feel it”, or “It is here already, so I might as well allow it to be here”. We can stop fighting, and let go of the reactive part we play in turning a difficulty into suffering.

Can we treat all of our experiences like guests arriving at a Guest House, as in Rumi’s poem? What about the death of a child, the news of a life-threatening illness, acknowledgement that we can never make up for the

losses we may have experienced in a traumatic childhood? Can we open up to these as well, without getting lost in feelings of anger, resentment or despair? Can we “meet them at the door arriving and invite them in”? This is where we often need to speak of Radical Acceptance.

## **Radical Acceptance**

This is how Marsha Linehan, who founded Dialectical Behavior Therapy, describes it:

Radical Acceptance is letting go of fighting reality. The term “radical” means to imply that the acceptance has to come from deep within and has to be complete. Acceptance is the only way out of hell. It is the way to turn suffering that cannot be tolerated into pain that can be tolerated. Pain is part of living; it can be emotional and it can be physical. Pain is nature’s way of signaling that something is wrong, or that something needs to be done.

- The pain of a hand on a hot stove causes a person to move her hand quickly. People without the sensation of pain are in deep trouble.
- The pain of grief causes people to reach out for others who are lost. Without it there would probably be no societies or cultures. No one would look after those who are sick, would search for loved ones who are lost, or would stay with people who are difficult at times.
- Pain of fear makes people avoid what is dangerous.
- Pain of anger makes people overcome obstacles.

Suffering is pain plus non-acceptance of pain. Suffering comes when people are unable or refuse to accept pain. Suffering comes when people cling to getting what they want, refusing to accept what they have. Suffering comes when people resist reality as it is at the moment. Pain can be difficult or almost impossible to bear, but suffering is even more difficult. Refusal to accept reality and the suffering that goes along with it can interfere with reducing pain. It is like a cloud that surrounds pain, interfering with the ability to see it clearly. Radical acceptance transforms suffering to pain.

## **Tips for Responding to Difficulties Mindfully**

1. Acknowledge that the difficulty is there.
2. Ask yourself how you feel about what you are experiencing.
3. Notice how the difficulty is being experienced in the body and any tensing, bracing or resisting around it.
4. Can you recognize any aspect of non-acceptance in your experience?
5. Can you recognize that this type of suffering is part of the human condition and part of life?
6. Can you accept that it is there – even just in this moment?
7. Bring a sense of open and warm curiosity to the current experience of the problem and come in close to it with your awareness, if it feels possible:
  - What is my experience right now?
  - What is it like?
  - Let’s see what is here!
8. Breathe with it and bring with this a sense of softening, opening and allowing.
9. If possible, breathe into it, exploring its textures, patterns and edges.
10. Allow yourself to feel it, just as it is. Allow it to express itself. Remember you are not trying to make it go away (even if you recognize that a part of you wants it to).
11. Stay with it as long as seems possible.
12. Gradually, broaden your awareness around the difficulty. Recognize that there is more to your current experience in this moment than this.
13. Use your breath, other body sensations or sound to anchor you to the present moment or shift your attention to another aspect of your experience.

## **Responding to Pleasant and Unpleasant Events**

The exploration of our reactions to everyday pleasant and unpleasant events reveals habitual tendencies which we all have:

- We like pleasant events and we want to grasp hold of them, cling to them, make them last for longer or come back.
- We don't like unpleasant events, and we want them to end or go away, we try to get rid of them, push them away or numb ourselves so we don't feel them.

We react in the same way if these are external events or internal experiences. In this way we can feel tossed about by life: not so much by the experiences themselves, but by our reactions to them. We can end up believing that we are entitled to pleasant events and that we should be able to avoid the unpleasant ones: especially if we are careful, if we are good, if we do the right things in life. When things go wrong, we can get caught up in beliefs that it is not fair, that it shouldn't be happening to us, that we are being punished, and so on. We forget that despite our reactions or our beliefs, life is full of experiences that we will sense as unpleasant, pleasant or neutral. And that all of these experiences are part of life! The variety is what gives life its texture and its depths.

However, what would it be like if we didn't compound our difficulties with strong habitual responses of reactivity, that turn unpleasant experiences into suffering?

### **The Role of Hope and Fear, Equanimity and Reactivity**

We may have noticed from our responses to pleasant and unpleasant events that there is a human tendency for us to be tossed about in our search for pleasure and in our avoidance of painful experiences. We habitually desire experiences which are pleasurable rather than unpleasant, we desire success rather than failure, gain rather than loss, praise rather than blame, being recognized rather than obscurity.

We can tend to become strongly attached to the positive aspects of these: pleasure, gain, success, praise and recognition, and want to cling to these experiences. However, things do not last, and in becoming attached to these experiences, we can set ourselves up for suffering, when the winds of opportunity change direction. The experiences of pain can feel all the worse when we have a sense of what we have lost. To fall from success, or praise or recognition into failure, blame or obscurity is all the greater if we have a sense that our well-being and happiness was dependent upon them.

We can sum up these reactive tendencies into two prime forces, those of hope and fear. Caught up in this is our sense of anticipation, expectation, wishing for things to be a certain way, expecting things to be a certain way, fearing things not turning out the way we want, disappointment when they don't, and so on. We can recognize how often our thinking is dominated by our hopes and fears and how far this can take us from mindfulness of what is actually here and an open acceptance of life as it is. We can see how much these reactive forces can contribute to our day to day suffering.

Mindfulness and acceptance can help to anchor us when life tosses us about in this way. Eventually, through our practice, we can start to develop a stance of equanimity, which can offer us real freedom through the abandonment of hope and fear in our lives. This is described by Tara Bennett-Goleman as follows:

Equanimity is a profound quality of mindfulness that cultivates the ability to let go. With equanimity, we can acknowledge that things are as they are, even though we may wish otherwise. It allows us to accept things that we have no control over, and it allows us to have the courageousness of heart to stay open in the face of adversity. Equanimity can be used as a practice, to help bring a mental ease to turbulent emotions, like anxiety, worry and fear, frustration and anger.

Of course, equanimity does not imply indifference of that we should simply accept everything as it is – injustice, unfairness, and suffering all call for action to make what changes we can. But even as we do so, an inner state of equanimity will make us more effective. And when it comes to those problems in life over which we have no control – and to our emotional reactions – equanimity offers a great inner resource: a sense of nonreactivity, of patience and acceptance.