

About Mindfulness

Cultivation of mindfulness

Pick an object of attention, such as the body, the breath, an image or an emotion. Keep your attention on the object. If you notice that your attention has wandered away, note where it has gone, then gently bring it back to the object. You will almost certainly find that your attention wanders repeatedly. This is normal. The point of the exercise is not to have distraction-free awareness but to become more aware of when attention is wandering and more skilled at bringing it back sooner.

Particular mindfulness exercises such as the body scan or mindfulness of breathing may use stages or devices (such as counting the breaths or focusing on different parts of the breath) to aid the development of mindfulness or bring out different aspects of it.

Once the ability to remain mindful has been strengthened, it can be used to direct the attention in various ways – both in mindfulness exercises and in everyday life - to achieve different aims.

Uses of mindfulness

Body awareness and relaxation

Awareness of the body is an important foundation for all mindfulness practices. There is a strong connection between emotions, mental states and the body, so it is useful to be aware of the body. Body mindfulness can be used to relax by going through the body, identifying stresses and letting go of them. This lays a foundation for also letting go of mental and emotional patterns more easily.

Appreciation

When we become habituated to things we tend to stop truly experiencing them or appreciating them. Something that was once a pleasure may simply become a habit. Learning to pay attention to the things that we enjoy and that sustain us helps us to appreciate them again. We may also learn to appreciate things that we had not noticed before.

Knowing the mind

Keeping the attention on one thing helps us to see the directions in which it becomes pulled off. Typically there is a lot of mental 'chatter' happening in the mind: habitual patterns of thought that often do not come into conscious awareness. Greater awareness of our mind also helps us to identify thoughts, actions and situations that habitually lead to certain states of mind.

Training the mind

The mind is a complex thing that does not respond simply or obediently to how we might wish it to be or what we might want it to do. Learning how it works helps us to work with the nature of the mind to avoid harmful states of mind and cultivate 'skilful' ones. For instance we can learn to avoid or challenge habitual patterns of thought or behaviour that lead to suffering and to change our behaviour.

When we experience intrusive thoughts or emotions, either due to depression or trauma or simply from everyday human experience, mindfulness can help us to stop the thoughts from building up into a runaway pattern.

'Gladdening' the mind

Mindfulness can be used to keep the attention on positive states of mind, for instance by dwelling on positive experiences or reflecting on the positive qualities of ourselves and others. It has been shown that doing this repeatedly leads the brain to reduce its overall 'threat level', leading to reduced stress, improved immune function, reduced blood pressure and greater general bodily and mental health.

Deeper states of mindfulness

If mindfulness is cultivated skilfully, consistently and to a high degree, states of consciousness emerge in which the distractions that we usually experience cease. These states are pleasant or blissful, concentrated, and tend towards mental integration. They are not generally to be expected without a deep, sustained practice, but they are worth being aware of as they can happen for short periods in ordinary mindfulness practice and it is useful to know what you are experiencing. Mindfulness practice is sometimes derailed by chasing after these states. This will not work as it becomes a distraction that works against the mindfulness that creates them.

Resources

Change Your Mind by Paramananda

www.aberdeenbuddhistgroup.org.uk