

Introductory Course In Mindfulness Meditation
5TH Week – Mindfulness of the Mind
Taught by Gil Fronsdal

Now that we have practiced with mindfulness of the breath, body, emotions and thoughts in previous weeks, the new instruction is to turn the attention around and notice the mind itself. Not just the content of the mind in terms of particular feelings or thoughts, but the quality of the mind; the mood of the mind; the state of the mind.

Sometimes it is not easy to notice the overall state of the mind because we are focusing so much on the details of what is happening during mindfulness practice. This often can be the case in daily life as well, especially when we are preoccupied with what we want or don't want. It is like focusing on the details of driving while noticing neither how dirty the windshield is nor the strain of looking through the dirt. Part of mindfulness practice is to step back from the details of what we are experiencing in order to notice the subjective feeling of being aware. So, for example, does our awareness or our mind feel contracted or spacious, tense or relaxed, scattered or focused?

States of the mind are closely connected with our mood or attitude. Whether subtle or strong they have a pervasive quality that is more lasting than particular thoughts or impulses of the mind. For example, angry thoughts sometimes may appear briefly without affecting our mood. In contrast, an angry state of mind can shape our entire demeanor. While in an angry mood, not all our thoughts may be angry. However, the mood can linger as a background for whatever we are experiencing, sometimes significantly coloring our perception of things.

For some people, this background attitude is at the heart of what motivates their life. All too often it is closely connected to people's suffering. When they are not aware of the influence their attitude has, people can feel trapped in their suffering. An attitude or mood can create a bias in how we see our experience. Moods of desire or aversion can influence us one way, moods of generosity or friendliness another way. When we are clearly aware of our mood we are less likely to be unduly influenced by it.

If we do not notice the underlying attitude it can fester and build up stress and tension in our lives. The attitude may only cause relatively mild tension or stress in any given moment, but if it is chronically reinforced, then the tension can become great and lead to greater suffering.

In becoming mindful of attitude it is useful to distinguish between what is happening at any given moment and what our relationship is to what is happening. Mindfulness practice helps to tease these apart so that we can be more discerning about how our opinions, judgments, attitudes and feelings may or may not accurately represent what is happening. The space between what is happening and our relationship to what is happening is a door to peace.

The suffering and stress that mindfulness practice is meant to help address is less about how things are and more about our relationship to how things are. Fortunately freedom is not as much about what is happening in the world or within us, but more about how much freedom we have in relating to what is happening.

MEDITATION INSTRUCTION: MINDFULNESS OF THE MIND

1. During meditation periodically ask yourself what is your relationship to what is happening. For example, you may feel some discomfort. Be mindful of your relationship to the discomfort. Are you clinging or resisting? Are you relaxed, generous, or kind towards the discomfort? Once you notice the relationship, hold it in the warmth of your attention. Once you have done this, you can investigate some of the present-moment elements of how you are relating. How does it affect your breathing? Are there any physical sensations or emotions associated with it? What are your beliefs behind it? Also, as you notice the relationship, ask yourself if that relationship or attitude represents a way you want to be or whether it contributes to a sense of dissatisfaction or dis-ease.

Also, remember that there is no need for judging, criticizing or being upset with what we see when we look at our relationship to the present moment, even if what we see is unfortunate or difficult. Similarly, there is no need to praise or get involved with fortunate or preferred attitudes. In either case, the practice is to be mindful of the relationship or attitude without being for it or against it. This practice then allows the relationship or attitude to settle or relax.

2. Periodically notice the general state of your mind. Does it feel tired or alert, contracted or expanded, calm or agitated, fuzzy or clear, resistant or eager, pushing forward or pulling back? Putting aside whatever commentary or judgments you might have about the state of your mind, use your mindfulness to become more aware of the state. What emotions come with it? What is its felt sense? What relationship is there between your mind state and how your body feels? What does it feel like to step back and observe the state of mind rather than be in it? What happens to your state of mind as you are mindful of it?

MINDFULNESS EXERCISES FOR THE FIFTH WEEK

1. Choose an activity you do on a daily basis. This can be driving to work, preparing breakfast, reading email, etc. For one week each time you do this chosen activity become aware of your state of mind. How does your state of mind influence how you relate to the activity? Keep a log of your changing states over the week and compare the role your mind state has on how you do the activity.
2. Consider what ordinary activity you do that helps you have a good state of mind. During this week, do this activity more often and become more mindful of what this state of mind is like physically, emotionally and cognitively. Explore how you might realistically maintain this state of mind after you have finished the activity that tends to bring it on.
3. Have a conversation with a good friend (or complete stranger if that is easier) about what might be the most common attitudes that you operate under. How do these attitudes influence what you do, how you see life, and how you relate to yourself? How do you tend to relate to people who have similar attitudes to your most common ones?