
TOUCHING SERENITY, WELCOMING JOY

Foundational Strengths for Resilience During Difficult Times
An MBSR Graduates' Class

CLASS PRACTICE GUIDE – WEEK 2



This workbook is designed to help you focus your practice throughout the four-week course. After the course is over, it may continue to serve as a resource for your ongoing practice of mindfulness.

Week 2: Let the Beauty We Love, Be What We Do

*Today, like every other day, we wake up empty
and frightened. Don't open the door to the study
and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.
— Rumi*

Well-Being

Our control over external conditions are limited. We can be in paradise and unhappy within. We can be in difficult circumstances, still be happy. Mathieu Ricard spoke to this in last week's article/video, "What then will be happiness?"

Last week's journal prompts helped us start exploring how to nurture the inner conditions. Certain attitudes in meditation practice are conducive to a "flourishing" of well-being, serenity, and joy.

The Beauty of Meditation:

In meditation, there are attitudes we can take that are more likely to lead toward serenity.

- We can start to prefer calm to drama
- We can start to fall in love with stillness
- We can notice sensations related to the breath that are pleasant (for example, breath like silk touching skin or a perfectly soft summer breeze), etc.

Meeting the Challenges

Experiences like restlessness, remorse, doubt and strong emotions, are experiences that frustrate most meditators at various times. There are empowering things to keep in mind and also some “remedies” or antidotes:

- Remember that a huge percentage of our thoughts are just repeats.
- The mind responds to what we point it toward.
- Each time we drop the story, we challenge habitual ways of relating to it.
- The new groves we are laying down in the mind stream have freedom from the “tyranny of the mind.”
- Have faith in the practice. There is naturally a turbulent “surf zone” in meditation that we can get through.

In Daily Life:

- Become attentive and consciously seek out awareness of beauty.
- When you start to make assumptions about how things are going to turn out or being certain about the meaning behind someone’s behavior, use the same skills you are learning in the meditation practice.
- At least temporarily, try “dropping the story” or dropping the script. Even as an experiment, see what unfolds.

Journal Prompt

- Each day, intentionally notice something you find beautiful in your everyday environment. In your journal write a few words or draw a picture that capture how the experience of beauty influenced your mind, body or emotions.
- Jot down a few words about an experience of dropping the story or script for how you think something will play out. What happened?
- *If you want to keep last week’s practice going, you are welcome to do so.*

Serenity Practice: Mind-Body-Breath Serenity Meditation

- Use the class meditation recording.
- At the beginning of each period of meditation, spend a little time thinking thoughts of good will. Use the personal phrases you developed.

Suggested videos/reading (live links on class web page):

- Brene Brown: Joy is the Most Terrifying Emotion (5 min. video and accompanying article. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/18/dr-brene-brown-joy-gratitude-oprah_n_2885983.html)
- Gavin Pretor-Pinney: Cloudy with a chance of joy: Cloud Appreciation Society founder how seemingly idle pursuits provide unexpected paths to appreciating overlooked wonders. <http://bit.ly/2hctVG7>

Music

- Music: Vaughan Williams ~ The Lark Ascending – link on class web page.

How “Softening the Heart” Can Help You Make it Through the Meditation “Surf Zone”

Denise Dempsey

The Surf Zone

When we sit down to meditate, many of us who live busy lives and/or have minds that have been highly trained to be analytical – or even particularly tending toward rumination – will find ourselves in “the surf” zone, an analogy I recently heard made by meditation teachers Stephen Snyder and Tina Rasmussen. The surf zone is the place where waves come crashing onto the shore, and if you want to get out to calmer water, it’s necessary to make it through the surf zone. Training in mindfulness gives us skills to use in meditation that can lead to insight, wisdom, calm, a sense of well-being, perspective, and many other experiences that draw us toward practice. At the beginning of practice, however, there are many days when those states seem particularly distant, even impossible to attain. With experience, we may gain confidence that it is a matter of time to slowly make it through the waves, accepting their presence. Even when we get knocked over, getting back up and continuing is part of the practice.

Faith in the Practice

There are times we start to doubt the practice. Perhaps there is something on our mind that is particularly gripping: challenging events, dilemmas, difficult life circumstances, pain and discomfort, strong emotions. Nothing here is inherently an obstacle to practice, but there may be days we lose faith in the practice and are tempted to give up, or perhaps to abandon the practice and not even get in the water, so to speak. All meditators have been there at some point. So how does one reconnect with faith in the practice?

Softening the Heart

Inevitably, in states of stress, we physically and mentally contract. Our bodies become tense and our view becomes very narrow. What is calming and soothing can be an antidote to these types of experiences, which might be anything that softens the heart, opens the mind, or pleases the senses. Perhaps that is why some people are drawn to lighting candles or incense, find a serene environment or read something inspiring. Something that is accessible all the time, not dependent on outside conditions, is what is sometimes called loving kindness practice. Sometimes a few minutes at the beginning of a meditation spent inwardly repeating phrases that invoke and support conditions leading to loving kindness, ease and well-being. A simpler version and one that may, at least at times, feel more accessible, is to simply “think thoughts of good will.”

How does this work?

Firstly, phrases like “May I live with ease and with kindness... etc.” can become, in their repetition, a kind of concentration practice. “Thoughts of good will” are more general (but may be specific, according to your needs or mood). Consider wishing loving kindness for someone you care for, but knowing that if they knew you were doing it, it might evoke suspicion or discomfort. If this gets in the way of your own loving kindness practice, consider that more general thoughts of good will for another’s well-being can be easier to access. How does that feel to you when you consider this idea? If it resonates with you, consider spending time at the beginning of your meditation spending 3-5 minutes thinking thought of good will. Notice how it feels. If it feels good, try doing it regularly for a while.