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### The Kindly Awareness Practice

#### Stage 1: Responding kindly to the whole of our experience

Although the practice is about empathising with others, we start with ourselves—it’s only possible to connect with others if we have awareness, openness and honesty in our own experience. You’ll notice that the first stage of the practice also encapsulates the five step process of mindfulness outlined on page 17.

##### Kindly Breath

Start by settling in to a broad experience of the body, the breath and the moment, trying to have a sense of warmth and kindliness in the breath, imagining that it soothes the body as it flows in and out. If you can’t connect with a sense of kindness, then simply breathe with the intention of responding kindly.

##### Opening to the Unpleasant

Once you’re settled, turn your awareness towards the unpleasant side of your current experience. It’s an unavoidable part of life, and even if you’re feeling happy there will be little niggles. If you have strong sensations of pain, gently open your awareness to them with sensitivity and kindness. If the pain or disquiet is predominantly mental or emotional, look for its echo in the body—for example, if you are anxious, that might be echoed as tension in the stomach. Bringing awareness to these physical echoes of your feelings helps you to stay grounded in the present moment.

It may seem odd to take your attention to painful or unpleasant aspects of your experience, but in doing so you are saying, *“Let the pain in!”*  You open ourselves to everything, including the unpleasant, and engage with it with gentleness, kindness and tenderness. This counteracts the tendency to think, “*I want to have a good meditation, not to feel a lot of pain.”* If you do that you set up resistance to your experience before you’ve even started and this can set the tone for the entire session, manifesting as physical tension, mental dullness, reluctance to sit still or irritation.

So rather than saying, “*Oh no. Not that backache again. It’s not fair, I can’t stand it*,” gently acknowledge the pain. *“OK, I’m experiencing backache, it’s really painful. Breathe in, breathe out. The pain is hard, but it’s part of my experience. Let’s see what it feels like*.*”*

You can begin to soften resistance to the unpleasant side of your experience by *taking the breath* *to* the painful sensations, breathing in softness and breathing out with a sense that you are letting go of resistance. You can treat your pain as you would treat a child or someone that you really love who is injured.

##### Seeing into the nature of pain

As you bring awareness to painful or unpleasant sensations you also investigate their *quality* or *nature*. Usually, in our attempts to push away pain or difficult thoughts, we make them seem more solid than they really are. They become ‘the enemy’, when in reality the back pain or grief is a flow of sensations, thoughts or feelings. Paying this kind of attention to our perceived enemy can radically change our experience.

##### Searching for the pleasant

Now that you’ve softened your resistance to the unpleasant a little, you’ll probably feel more sensitive and aware and more able to appreciate the pleasant aspects of the moment. Ironically, when we’re pushing pain away we also numb ourselves to pleasure. This is why we start this meditation practice with the stage of opening towards the unpleasant before now moving onto focusing on the pleasant. Developing the attitude of a seeker who is looking for hidden treasure, you might become more aware of the warmth of your hands, or something as simple as the fact that you’re not hungry. You may notice relief around your heart as you relax into an honest acceptance of the moment.

Some people find it difficult to experience subtle sensations, in which case you can look for feelings of energy in the body, or enjoy the simple process of breathing. We aren’t necessarily looking for a big or grand experience; we are simply resting our awareness on anything pleasurable in our experience with an attitude of kindly curiosity.

##### Becoming a bigger container

Having explored the painful and pleasant sides of your experience, now broaden your perspective on it and try to have a sense that you are ‘a bigger container’ - able to hold both the pleasant and painful aspects of the moment. When you feel yourself tipping into aversion or craving, drop back to your emotional centre again, and continue to sit with the flow of experience.

Within this broad awareness you can investigate the *nature* of experience from a perspective of wholeness and integration. Living with life’s continual changes, rather than trying to grasp it or push it away, creates a strong, stable perspective. And all the time the practice is held by the kindly breath—soothing and caressing us moment-by-moment.

#### Stage 2: A good friend

In the second stage of the practice bring to mind a friend. While you’re learning the practice it’s best to choose someone to whom you are not sexually attracted, who is roughly your own age and who is alive. This is to avoid introducing more complicated feelings that come with sexual desire, parent/child dynamics or grief.

Now invite this person into your awareness in whatever way feels most alive and engaged. That may be through a mental image of them, or a feeling of what they are like. Once you’ve evoked a sense of your friend, sit with your experience of them and bring to mind what you share. In the first stage you have reflected on the pleasure and pain in your own experience - now reflect that your friend also experiences pleasure and pain in each moment of their life. The stories of our lives are different, but the basic human experience is similar. Your friend feels joy and sorrow, hope and fear, and experiences triumphs and regrets, just like you. They experience the same range of emotions that you have, and, like you, they want to love and be loved.

You can also reflect that your friend is breathing in and out just as you are. You may find it helpful to be aware of your friend on the in-breath, breathing out kindness and well-wishing towards them on the out-breath.

#### Stage 3: a neutral person

Now bring to mind someone for whom you have no feelings of liking or disliking, perhaps because you don’t know them well. This person represents the vast mass of humanity about whom we usually don’t think, and towards whom we have no strong feelings. You might choose someone you know by sight, such as a local shopkeeper, or someone with whom you haven’t formed an emotional connection—a colleague at work, perhaps.

You bring this person to mind in a similar way to the previous stage. Then reflect on your shared humanity with its pleasures and pains, hopes and fears, and the fact that, like you, they are breathing. Try to introduce a quality of kindness and interest to the breath. On the in-breath be aware of this person and their humanity, and on the out-breath breathe out kindness and well-wishing towards them.

#### Stage 4: A person with whom you have difficulty

Now bring to mind someone with whom you feel some kind of barrier, difficulty or disharmony. When you’re learning the practice it’s probably best to choose someone with whom the difficulty is fairly mild or with whom you experience some irritation, rather than an arch-enemy!

Using your imagination, try to engage with this person’s humanity. This means reaching over the barrier that separates you and connecting with what you share. You can reflect that, whatever difficulties there may be between you, they also experience a broadly similar range of emotions to you and long to love and be loved. Although they might be difficult for you to be with, in fact they have the same tendencies of avoiding the unpleasant and grasping the pleasant with all the behavioural consequences that follow.

Rather than your response to them being dominated by dislike, you may start to relate to this person from a broader, kinder, more empathetic perspective. In this stage, too, you can infuse the breath with kindness. On the in-breath become aware of this person; and on the out-breath, breathe out kindness and well-wishing.

When choosing who to think of in the second, third and fourth stages of the practice it’s good to decide quickly rather than worrying about whether you have the right person. You may find that people move around the stages, and someone who is in the ‘good friend’ stage one day is in the ‘difficult person’ stage the next. This is normal as we all have ups and downs in our relationships. It’s also fine if the same person stays in a stage for days, weeks or even months.

It’s important to remember that you’re not trying to change the other person in this practice. You may find that your relationship with others changes over time, but this will be because you are relating to them differently, perhaps becoming less judgmental. We can never make others change; we can only take responsibility for our own responses and behaviour*.*

#### Stage 5: Spreading kindness universally

Now bring to mind the four people you have already thought of: yourself, the friend, the neutral person and the person you find difficult. You can imagine that you are sitting in a circle or just have a sense of the four people, trying to connect with what you share.

Then broaden out your awareness to include more and more people. Think of people in all directions, all of them experiencing a mixture of pain and pleasure, just as you do. No matter where they live, their age, colour or wealth - all experience pain and pleasure.

Allow kindly awareness to permeate your breath as you think of a widening circle of life. You may sense the whole world breathing—rising and falling like waves on the ocean. As the hard edges of separation soften, you may feel that you are letting go into a sense of connection with life.

Gradually bring the practice to a close, noticing sounds and sensations in the body. When you feel ready you can open your eyes, gently move the body and re-engage with the day.

***Breathworks Mindfulness-based Living Well with Pain and Illness***

***Course Handbook***