



## **Mindfulness for Later Life Programme**

### **Week 5 Handout**

*More than anything else, I have come to see meditation as an act of love, an inward gesture of benevolence and kindness towards ourselves and towards others, a gesture of the heart that recognizes our perfection even in our obvious imperfection, with all our shortcomings, our wounds, our attachments, our vexations, and our persistent habits of unawareness.*

**Jon Kabat-Zinn, Coming to our Senses (p.69)**

Mindfulness has another strand too: one of compassion towards others and the world around you. We spoke a little about this in relation to the attitude that we cultivate towards our practice, one of kindness, and gentleness.

Mindfulness encourages us to bring a gentle and curious awareness to our sensations and emotions - encouraging acceptance rather than of avoidance or attachment.

'Let it be' - what do we mean by acceptance?

This does not mean being resigned to negative events in your life, but instead to actively and intentionally cultivate acceptance of whatever your experience is. For many people, this can be harder than coping with pain, suffering and stress. In the long run, though, allowing your experience to be there, will dramatically reduce stress and pain and improve your life.

In *The Mindful Way Through Depression*, Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal, and Jon Kabat-Zinn describe an experiment conducted with college students in which the students were given a drawing of a maze with a mouse caught in the centre. Their task was to draw a line to help the mouse find its way out of the maze. Two different versions of the

maze drawing were distributed randomly to the students. Some students received a maze that pictured the mouse in the centre and a piece of Swiss cheese at the exit of the maze. The other version depicted the same maze with the mouse in the centre, but instead of cheese, an owl hovered over the maze, "ready to swoop down and capture the mouse in its talons at any moment."

Every student was successful in solving the maze in less than two minutes regardless of whether the owl or the cheese were present. But the after effects were the interesting part: when the students later took a test of creativity, the scores of the students who helped the mouse avoid the owl were fifty percent lower than the scores of the students who helped the mouse find the cheese.

The study suggests that the state of mind produced by avoiding the owl (caution, fear, vigilance, etc) had weakened the student's creativity and significantly reduced their flexibility in handling the subsequent task.

The authors contend that this simple experiment reveals something profound: *"The same action has different consequences depending on whether it is done to move toward something we welcome or to avoid something negative."* (p.124)

Pete found that by accepting the reality of his Parkinson's disease he could live a far more fulfilling life. After years of struggle he came to an acceptance that there was very little 'fixing' to be done: he had a condition that was likely to become progressively worse. He initially became annoyed and angry with his slowly failing body, but found that introducing kindness into the breath helped ease his anger, bitterness and stress. It helped him feel more kindness towards himself as he came to terms with his Parkinson's disease. Gradually, he discovered a deep-seated acceptance of his life as it is. He realised he had a very good life despite the fact that he has Parkinson's. As he began to accept his condition, his stress levels lowered and his Parkinson's symptoms became less dominant and troubling.

## Kindness

Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.

what you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.  
how you ride and ride  
thinking the bus will never stop,  
the passengers eating maize and chicken  
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,  
You must travel where the Indian in the white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans  
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest things inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,

only kindness that rises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
It is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend.

Naomi Shihab Nye

Words under the words: selected poems (A Far Corner Book), Eighth Mountain  
Press, USA (1998)

## Mindful Movement

With the mindful movement practices that follow, it can be very helpful to bring to them an attitude of kindness and acceptance. These exercises can be a gateway to a cultivation of an inner attitude of compassion, particularly if our bodies are not able to move in the same way that they once did.

If you have lived with pain, illness or stress for some time, you will find the gentle free-flowing movements of the Mindful Movement meditation especially useful. Over the months and years, you may have become less mobile – or even scared of moving – for fear of hurting yourself further. While this is perfectly understandable, it tends to create problems of its own. The human body is designed to move, so remaining still for too long can lead to many secondary health problems. Lack of exercise causes lethargy, nausea, aches, pains and general ‘fugginess’. Remaining still for too long can bring on even feelings of stress and depression.

The ‘exercises’ in the Mindful Movement program are different from ones you may have tried in the past. Firstly, they are not exercises in the traditional sense. The aim is not to stretch as far as possible or to maintain a position for as long as you can. They are not designed primarily to enhance fitness and flexibility, although they will have these benefits in the long run. Rather, they emphasise the quality of awareness you bring to them as you carry them out. We ask you to rest your consciousness deep inside your body, so that you bring a kindly

awareness to your movements. In a sense, they simply extend the breath into a wider exercise. You can see them as breath in action. Or as a moving meditation.

## Posture

The Mindful Movements can be performed either sitting or standing. At the start of each exercise, we will suggest the most suitable posture. However, you should always work within your own physical constraints, so please adopt whatever position is the most comfortable for you. If you find any of the exercises too challenging, adapt them to suit your own needs. Try to become sensitive to your body's movements. See them as an expression of the rhythm of the breath. If your fitness and flexibility are limited, be careful not to push yourself too far. Instead, progressively enhance your range of movement. Always bear in mind that it is the quality of awareness you bring to the movements that is paramount. If you are unable to carry out some of the exercises, try visualising yourself carrying them out in your mind's eye. Research shows that this too can improve your fitness and health.

## Safety

This week's exercises have been developed over many years with the help of thousands of patients, so they are safe to carry out. Nevertheless, you might like to discuss them with your doctor, specialist or physiotherapist, and practise them with care, leaving out any that you – or they – feel are unsuitable for your illness, injury or disability. Try to avoid the trap of believing that you 'should' be able to move in a certain way – or to a certain extent. Forcing yourself to meet your preconceptions can lead to injury. Instead, try to inhabit your body mindfully, with compassionate awareness and curiosity. Even the smallest movement can be surprisingly fulfilling and beneficial.

## Hard and soft edges

Try to strike a balance between pushing yourself too far and not stretching yourself enough. This can be tricky, so aim to become aware of your own character when it comes to exercise. If you tend to push yourself, then pay attention to this temptation as you move – and perhaps back off a little. If exercise tends to alarm or frighten you, then see if you can ask a little more of yourself.

How do you strike such a balance? A good way is to try to work within your 'hard' and 'soft' edges. So when you bend your knee, for example, the soft edge is the point at which you first feel a sensation of stretch and compression. Finding the soft edge requires sensitivity, so work slowly and mindfully. Gently probe your sensations. When you feel a stretch or a challenge, move a little deeper into the movement with the help of the breath. Move only a little deeper into the movement – and no further.

If you go too far, you'll reach the 'hard' edge. This is the last point of movement before a strain or injury occurs. You'll know that you've passed the hard edge when it feels as if you've begun forcing the movement. You might even start to tremble a little.

Working between these hard and soft edges is ideal. It means that your body is being mobilised without strain. The most creative place to work is a moderate stretch that can be sustained, not an intense one that you can't hold for long. It's also worth bearing in mind that your edges will change as you grow stronger and more flexible. They may change from day to day as well.

### **Different sorts of pain to watch out for**

It can be hard to distinguish between the healthy aches and pains that signify progress and those which indicate that you have pushed yourself too far. A dull ache, muscle tiredness or sensations of stretch are natural and lessen over time. If you notice 'electrical', 'nervy' or sharp sensations, you should reduce the range of the movement or, if it becomes too intense, you should stop for the day. It's sensible to err on the side of caution; you can always carry on tomorrow. Mindful Movements are a journey, not a destination. So there is no rush. And remember: you can always check with your health professional if you have any concerns.

Try to remember:

- As best you can, aim to adopt an attitude of compassion and curiosity. See if you can drop into a deep awareness of the breath as you move, allowing it to lead the pace of the movement, rather than forcing it or rushing through them.

- If you're working with an injury, it's usually helpful to do the less challenged parts of your body first.
- Practising the movements regularly can bring surprising progress, even if you seem to be doing very little in any one session.
- Always leave a few minutes at the end of a session to relax completely in a comfortable position. Give your mind and body time to assimilate the effects.

### Peace is This Moment Without Judgment

Do you think peace requires an end to war?

Or tigers eating only vegetables?

Does peace require an absence from  
your boss, your spouse, yourself? ...

Do you think peace will come some other place than here?

Some other time than Now?

In some other heart than yours?

Peace is this moment without judgment.

That is all. This moment in the Heart-space  
where everything that is, is welcome.

Peace is this moment without thinking  
that it should be some other way,  
that you should feel some other thing,  
that your life should unfold according to your plans.

Peace is this moment without judgment,  
this moment in the heart-space where  
everything that is, is welcome.



