

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Homework Week 7

Homework:

- Practice mindfulness formally for 45 minutes every day for 6 days this week using Sitting Meditation CD and alternating every other day with the Body Scan or one of the Yoga CDs.
- Read and reflect upon “Full Body, Empty Mind” article
- Read and reflect upon: “Emotional Alchemy” article
- Continue to cultivate your intention to increase your level of awareness during daily activities such as: eating, showering, brushing your teeth, washing dishes, taking out the garbage, reading to the kids as well as awareness of the body and opportunities to practice yoga and cultivate mindfulness during the day.

Reflections

Shadows of the past are vague, and the future is too distant to come into focus. Now is brightly illuminated and richly colored. Today I will remember to keep my mind in the present. Now is all I have. Now is all anyone has. – Judith Garrison

Yesterday is but a dream, tomorrow is but a vision, but today will lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well, therefore, to this day. – Sanskrit proverb

The gift of life with all its joy and splendor is in the moment at hand. Now it is ours to relish and enjoy; now it is our to cherish and to hold, but only for the moment. – Adolfo Quezada

The past is past, and the future is yet to come. That means the future is in your hands– the future entirely depends on the present. That realization gives you a great responsibility.
– The Dalai Lama

Full Body, Empty Mind By Will Johnson

(this article is taken from Tricycle Magazine, Fall 2007. See: <http://www.tricycle.com/>)

Will Johnson explains that by turning our awareness to the full range of physical sensations, the body becomes a doorway to awakening.

In many Buddhist groups, the body is addressed only in basic instructions on posture for meditation, sometimes lasting no more than a few minutes. Many practitioners are drawn to body-based practices such as yoga, martial arts, or the Alexander technique to complement or even enable their sitting practice, but they are often on their own when it comes to integrating these traditions with their larger spiritual path. What is being lost in this gap? One of the most convincing voices for the importance of the body in meditation belongs to Will Johnson, author of several books on the topic, including *The Posture of Meditation; Aligned, Relaxed, and Resilient*; and *Yoga of the Mahamudra*.

Johnson, the director of the Institute for Embodiment Training in British Columbia, Canada, began his Buddhist practice in 1972 and was certified in the deep bodywork system of Rolfing in 1976. Drawing on his experience in these traditions, Sufism, and others, he now teaches embodiment training, what he calls “a path of awakening that views the body as the doorway, not the obstacle, to personal growth and spiritual transformation.” I exchanged emails with Johnson to discuss how meditators can explore the body and what they might gain from the practice. —Andrew Merz

You've said that in order to experience emptiness of mind, one must first experience fullness of body. While this intuitively resonates with many meditators, clear explanations of why that is true and how it can be integrated into a Buddhist meditation practice are hard to find. How do we start to understand this view in a Buddhist context, and how do we address it without feeling as though we are detracting from our usual sitting practice?

This focus on awareness of the body is what, for me, the teachings always kept leading to. The part of the Four Noble Truths that attracted me the most, for example, was the explanation about why we suffer. The Buddha's observation that we create upset for ourselves when we're in reaction, and that we manage to do this to ourselves through the twinned actions of desire and aversion, just rang true.

The teachings tell us that actions disturb our peace of mind, but what I'm suggesting is that we can't just look to what we conventionally call our mind to sort this out. Reaction, clinging, and aversion are physical actions that the body performs and that, no matter how subtle, create muscular tension through the repeated motions of either “pulling toward” (desire) or “pushing away” (aversion). Repeat anything often enough, and you create holding patterns in the body that predispose you to continue doing that action. Sitting practices that focus on relaxing the underlying tensions and holdings you feel in your body, as well as restrictions to the breath, help you mitigate the legacy and habit patterns of reacting, clinging, and aversion.

As the eleventh-century Mahamudra teacher Tilopa said, “Do nothing with the body but relax.” When we start to relax, we start feeling the body. Tensions and contractions in the body serve as a numbing blanket that keeps the tiny physical sensations that exist on every part of the body from being felt. Learning how to relax while remaining upright in the sitting posture allows the body’s full range of sensations to come out of hiding and make their existence felt. It’s always struck me as peculiar: If I know that sensations can be felt to exist everywhere in the body, then why don’t I feel them? And what effect does blocking out awareness of feeling have on me? And finally, if the mind that is “lost in thought” is somehow dependent on my not feeling the sensations of the body, what happens to the mind if I let myself feel the entire body, head to toe, as an unbroken field of sensations? The sitting posture itself can be a kind of crucible for burning off the tensions and restrictions to body and breath that all too often keep us lost in thought and unaware of feeling presence.

A good place to start is examining what happens to the body when you’re lost in thought. This, of course, is tricky to do, because when the mind is off wandering in involuntary thought, you’re not very aware of the body at all. But if you can include an observation of the body while you’re off in a thought, you’ll find that the condition “lost in thought” is directly accompanied somewhere in the body by muscular contraction and tensing, stillness and rigidity, and a subtle contraction or holding quality to the breath. In other words, when you’re lost in thought, you’re tense in body. It follows, then, that if you can consciously work with the body during your sitting practice to soften and relax the tensions and allow more resilient and natural movement to accompany the passage of the breath, the chatter of the mind can be reduced, and your practice can start going really deep.

Once we begin to burn off the tensions and restrictions, how is this release manifested in the mind and emotions?

Vipassana teachers speak of sankharas, the accumulated residues of resistance and reactions that we store in our bodies and that, through long, focused hours of meditation, gradually come to the surface of awareness in the form of sensations (often not very pleasant ones). If we can simply feel them without reacting to them, they eventually burn themselves up and disappear, leaving a much more pleasurable shimmer in their place (that is, until the next deeper level of sankharas make their way to the surface to be felt, accepted, and released).

Wilhelm Reich, one of the earliest Western psychotherapists who became interested in how the energies of the body affect states of the mind, believed that what we call the unconscious is not stored in some remote repository in the brain but rather in the soft tissues of the body. Think about this for a moment, because it makes a lot of sense. Even though we know that sensations can be felt to exist on every part of the body down to the smallest cell, most people, most of the time, have very little conscious awareness of the felt presence of their bodies. In other words, we are unconscious of the presence of sensations, and so it is in the unfelt sensations of the body that the unconscious is to be found. I would suggest that most people, at any given moment, are probably only aware of 5 to 15 percent of their bodily sensations.

The work of Buddhism is to awaken, to come out of the sleepy dreams and notions of reality that we hold to be true and replace them with a direct experience of what is more accurately occurring. To awaken in this way, we need to become conscious of what's actually going on at the very depths of our experience.

So when we unlock a particular physical tension, are we also releasing potentially difficult emotional aspects of the clinging or aversion that originally caused the tension? Many people report strong emotional reactions to bodywork – memories of a childhood trauma arising during massage therapy, for instance. In Buddhist terms, is this our karma stored in the tension in our bodies?

For Western somatic therapists and Theravada Buddhists alike, much of the work that needs to be done is to rekindle a felt awareness of the whole body as a field of vibratory sensations. I sometimes joke with people that as we start to become aware of bodily sensations, we very quickly realize why we haven't wanted to feel them! We may have visions of relaxing the body and opening to an awareness of shimmering bodily sensations that feel like soft falling rain, but more often than not what we are first going to have to go through is a phase in which we feel highly intensified, sometimes very painful sensations, and through these periods of practice we face our karma directly. When we silently weep in our meditation practice over the discomfort we might be feeling, it is likely that a sankhara of sadness has come to the surface and is being released through that sensation of pain. When we get angry and irritated in our meditation because of what we might be feeling, it's likely that a sankhara of aversion has emerged out of the repository of our unconscious.

So when I speak of relaxing the tensions and holdings in the body and breath through sitting meditation practice, please don't think that I'm implying that everything is going to proceed like a pleasant Sunday outing in the country. More often than not, large emotional and physical storms may occur during practice before the skies clear. But if we can be courageous enough to work with the simple principles of alignment, relaxation, and surrendered resilience during our sitting practice [see box, page 39], these storms do seem eventually to abate, and what appears in their place is worth the price of admission. Sometimes the clearing of the storms can take quite a bit of time (this is not fast-food therapy), and it is for this reason that I increasingly prefer to enter into retreats that last several weeks. Meditation practices that instruct students to focus solely on the activities and contents of what we conventionally call the mind may unwittingly contribute to keeping contained the deep unconscious sankharas, which always appear as sensation. Many techniques can bring about a calming effect at the surface level of the mind, but if we're sincere about wanting to truly awaken and become truly conscious, we really need to embrace the experience of the body as a focus of our practice and allow the deeply unconscious and unfelt sensations to start coming out of hiding. And yes, this can be a very intensive undertaking, one definitely not for the faint of heart! But what, really, is our choice? We either face our karma and release the accumulated tensions of the past, or we continue to avoid feeling the reality of the body and enshrine the tensions forever.

As you say, this does indeed sound like an intensive undertaking and one that many practitioners today may feel they simply don't have room for in their busy lives. When we sit down and encounter our deepest unconscious feelings first thing in the morning, how

do we then get up and go about our day effectively? How can we approach this work in a manner that doesn't threaten to make us fall apart completely?

The kinds of emotional storms that we're talking about generally only erupt during long, intensive retreats. When we return home to our more familiar environment, things will settle out after a day or two, and so I don't think you really have to worry about falling apart while driving to work. If we're sincere about truly going deep and purifying out some of the residue of our karma, then I think an intensive retreat at least once a year is very important. When we come back from retreat, it's helpful to keep up our formal practice by sitting daily for an hour or for however long our schedule permits.

As important as formal practices undeniably are, I feel that it is even more important to view the rest of our lives as "informal" practice. What I mean by this is that the awareness of embodied presence need not be confined to the time spent sitting on our meditation cushion. Every single moment provides an opportunity to relax the tendency to create tension in the body and unconscious thought patterns in the mind, and this can be a very gentle process. If intensive retreats are like turning up the flame on the stove, informal practice is like simmering at a low and steady heat that is practically unnoticeable and so allows you to go about your daily life without the emotional upheavals that can occur during more intensive periods of practice.

I think of informal practice as "embodied mindfulness." In truth, every single moment of our lives presents us with a choice: either awaken to the reality of the present moment, or stay sleepy and push aspects of that reality away. Sensations are here every single moment. Why don't we feel them? The visual field, in all its dazzling play, is here every moment that our eyes are open. Can we remember to look and actually see? Sounds are here constantly. Blocking them from our awareness creates a great deal of tension in the body.

Let alignment, relaxation, and surrendered resilience be your physical guides not only in your sitting practice but also as you go about your day. These three keys allow you to stay in touch with embodied presence. Merging an awareness of body with the awareness of vision and sound allows you to truly become one with this present moment. As you bring alignment, relaxation, and resilience into your daily life, your breath automatically becomes fuller and starts moving through your entire body, just as the Buddha suggested in his description of meditation. Without forcing a thing, let your breath breathe you: breathe into your entire body, and breathe out just as effortlessly. This condition, nothing more, nothing less, is really the reward and benefit of the practice. And in this way you can walk in full awareness through the city or countryside, like a knife cutting through the softest butter. Always be on the lookout not to bring any tension into this practice. Striving to attain this kind of awareness is simply self-defeating. Relax into presence. It's been there all the time.

Emotional Alchemy

The following is an article by Tara Bennett-Goleman (author of the book by the same name) in which she describes how the transforming power of mindfulness can be applied to our painful emotional patterns. (The article is taken from the Shambhala Sun, March 2001).

Each thing has to transform itself into something better, and acquire a new destiny," Paulo Coelho writes in his novel *The Alchemist*. Coelho describes the world as only the visible aspect of God, with invisible spiritual forces at play that remain largely unknown to us. Alchemy occurs when the spiritual plane comes into contact with the material plane.

I was given Coelho's book by a client, who told me, "This reminds me of our work together." Indeed, alchemy offers an apt metaphor for the process of working with emotions I will describe. Alchemists, the tales go, sought to use a magical philosopher's stone to transmute lead into gold. But lead and gold, in the more philosophical school of alchemy, were metaphors for internal states: the alchemist's discipline was one of psychological and spiritual transformation. Alchemists realized that the mystery they sought to solve was not outside themselves but in the psyche.

Some alchemical schools liken our ordinary state of mind to a lump of coal and compare clear awareness to a diamond. There could seem to be no greater contrast in the material world than that between coal and a diamond; and yet the two are but different arrangements of the identical molecules of carbon. Just as a diamond is coal transformed, so clear awareness can arise from our confusion. What intrigues me about the metaphor of alchemy is the importance it places on the process of transformation. One client, an acupuncturist who has studied Chinese medicine, told me that the word "alchemy," better than any other word, describes the process of integrating the practice of mindfulness meditation with emotional work: "Alchemy is accepting everything in the pot without trying to reject or correct it—seeing that even the negative is part of the learning and healing."

Mindfulness means seeing things as they are, without trying to change them. The point is to dissolve our reactions to disturbing emotions, being careful not to reject the emotion itself. Mindfulness can change how we relate to, and perceive, our emotional states; it doesn't necessarily eliminate them.

The warmth of sunlight dissolving the moisture of clouds— nature's alchemy—echoes the warm fire of mindfulness melting the emotional clouds covering our inner nature. The effects of such periods of insightful clarity may be fleeting and momentary, lasting only until the next emotional cloud forms. But rekindling this awareness again and again— bringing it to bear on these inner clouds, letting it penetrate and dissolve the haze in our minds—is the heart of mindfulness practice, a practice we can learn to sustain.

I believe that, given the right awareness tools, we all have the potential to be inner alchemists, with the natural ability to turn our moments of confusion into insightful clarity. Gradually, as we practice doing this with our troubling feelings, we can gain an understanding of their causes.

For the most part, these insights are psychological, especially at first. But if we continue this process we can gain insights into the workings of the mind itself that can be spiritually liberating. It's as though there are two levels of reality in our lives: one dominated by these deeply ingrained emotional patterns and another that is free from conditioned patterns. Mindfulness gives us breathing space from this conditioning.

Emotional alchemy allows for the possibility that our bewilderment and turmoil might blossom into insightful clarity. "In almost every bad situation, says the Buddhist monk Nyanaponika Thera, "there is the possibility of a transformation by which the undesirable may be changed into the desirable."

There is a simple but ingenious judo in this emotional alchemy: to embrace all experiences as part of a transformative path by making them the focus of mindfulness. Instead of seeing disturbance and turmoil as a distraction, realize that they too can become the target of a keen attention. "In that way," Nyanaponika notes, "enemies are turned into friends, because all these disturbances and antagonistic forces have become our teachers."

Mindfulness is a meditative awareness that cultivates the capacity to see things just as they are from moment to moment. Ordinarily our attention swings rather wildly, carried here and there by random thoughts, fleeting memories, captivating fantasies, snatches of things seen, heard or otherwise perceived. By contrast, mindfulness is a distraction-resistant, sustained attention to the movements of the mind itself. Instead of being swept away and captured by a thought or feeling, mindfulness steadily observes those thoughts and feelings as they come and go.

Essentially, mindfulness entails a new way of paying attention, a way to expand the scope of awareness while refining its precision. In this training of the mind we learn to let go of the thoughts and feelings that pull us out of the present moment, and to steady our awareness on our immediate experience. If distractedness breeds emotional turmoil, the ability to sustain our gaze, to keep looking, can bring greater clarity and insight.

Mindfulness has its roots in an ancient system of Buddhist psychology, little known in the West, one that even today offers a sophisticated understanding of the painful emotions that sabotage our happiness. This psychology offers a scientific approach to inner work, a theory of mind that anyone, Buddhist or not, can draw insights and benefit from. When we apply this approach, the emphasis is not so much on the problems in our lives as on connecting with the clarity and health of mind itself. If we can do this, our problems become more workable. They become opportunities to learn rather than threats to avoid.

Buddhist psychology holds a refreshingly positive view of human nature: our emotional problems are seen as temporary and superficial. The emphasis is on what is right with

us, an antidote to the fixation of Western psychology on what's wrong with us. Buddhist psychology acknowledges our disturbing emotions but sees them as covering our essential goodness like clouds covering the sun. In this sense, our darker moments and most upsetting feelings are an opportunity for uncovering our natural wisdom, if we choose to use them that way.

Mindful attention allows us to delve deeper into the moment, to perceive finer subtlety, than does ordinary attention. In this sense, mindfulness creates "wise" attention, a space of clarity that emerges when we quiet the mind. It makes us more receptive to the whispers of our innate intuitive wisdom.

Through my own inner work, as well as in my work as a psychotherapist and workshop leader, I have found that combining a mindful awareness with psychological investigation forges a powerful means to penetrate dense emotions. This meditative awareness, I've found, can bring us a remarkably subtle understanding of our emotional patterns and so help us find ways to unravel deep fixations and destructive habits.

In this work, I've found two methods to be especially potent for detecting and transforming emotional patterns: mindfulness meditation and a recent adaptation of cognitive therapy, called schema therapy, which focuses on repairing maladaptive emotional habits. Both of these methods—one ancient and one modern—bring awareness to destructive emotional habits, and that is the first step toward healing them.

Becoming aware of these emotional habits is the first step, because unless we can catch and challenge them as they are triggered by the events of our lives, they will dictate how we perceive and react. And the more they take us over, the more they'll keep coming back, complicating our relationships, our work, and the most basic ways in which we see ourselves.

Schema therapy was developed by Dr. Jeffrey Young, the founder of the Cognitive Therapy Center of New York. Its focus is on healing maladaptive patterns, or schemas, like the sense of emotional deprivation, or relentless perfectionism. In working with my own clients, I have found that mindfulness meditation and schema therapy work together naturally and powerfully.

Schema therapy gives us a clear map to destructive habits. It details the emotional contours of, say, the fear of abandonment, with its constant apprehension that a partner will leave us; or of feelings of vulnerability, such as the irrational fear that a minor setback at work means you will end up jobless and homeless.

There are ten such major schemas (and countless variations): most of us have one or two principal ones, though many of us have several others to some extent. Other common schemas include unlovability, the fear that people would reject us if they truly knew us; mistrust, the constant suspicion that those close to us will betray us; social exclusion, the feeling that we don't belong; failure, the sense that we cannot succeed at what we do; subjugation, always giving in to other people's wants and demands; and entitlement, the sense that one is somehow special, and so beyond ordinary rules and limits.

Through working with my clients, it has become clear to me that adding mindfulness to psychotherapy greatly enhances its effectiveness, helping clients see the otherwise invisible emotional patterns at the root of their suffering. I have been struck by how much the therapy process was accelerated when a client practiced mindfulness. I have found that combining a mindful awareness with psychological investigation forges a powerful tool for cultivating emotional wisdom on a practical, day-to-day level.

Much time in psychotherapy typically entails bringing the detailed anatomy of emotional habits into the light of awareness so they can be investigated, reflected on, and changed. But mindfulness meditation can make any system of psychotherapy more precise and attuned, letting us bring our own wisdom to the psychological unfolding. Instead of seeing the therapy or even the therapist as the cure, we can shift our focus to the healing qualities of our own inner wisdom. This wake-up call need not be set apart from our lives; it needn't be something we do only in isolated hours in a therapist's office. It can be part of life, moment to moment, with the application of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is synergistic with virtually any psychotherapy approach, not just schema therapy. If you are in psychotherapy, mindfulness offers a way to cultivate a capacity for self-observation that you can bring to whatever confronts you during the day. Combining mindfulness with psychotherapy may help you use more fully the opportunity for inner exploration that your therapy offers.

When it comes to the turbulent feelings that roil within us, it's not that we are able to wrap up our bewildering emotions in neat formulaic explanations, but that we can use an ongoing inquiry to reach small epiphanies, insights that grow one on the other toward a greater clarity. In a sense, our darker moments and most upsetting feelings are an opportunity for spiritual growth and uncovering our natural wisdom, for waking up—if we choose to use them that way. If so, our deepest insights can emerge from working directly—with awareness—with our own difficulties.

A strong emotional obsession or pattern is like the scene in "The Wizard of Oz" where Dorothy and her companions finally get to Oz. The Wizard is this powerful, looming presence that terrifies them—until the little dog Toto calmly goes over and pulls back the curtain to reveal an old man stooped over the controls, manipulating a huge wizard image. Emotional fixations are like that—if you see them clearly, unflinchingly, for what they really are, you take the power away from them. They no longer control you. Confusion dawns as clarity.

About the Author: TARA BENNETT-GOLEMAN is a psychotherapist and long-time student of Judaism. This article is adapted from her new book, *Emotional Alchemy: How the Mind Can Heal the Heart*, 2000, which integrates mindfulness and Buddhist psychology with schema therapy and neuroscience, published by Harmony Books, a division of Random House, Inc.