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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.

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

***Course Handbook***