



# Introductory Meditation Course

## Week 2



### 1. The role of the body

Last week we began to look at the cultivation of body awareness. Body awareness is very important in meditation; it is the foundation of all meditation practices.

In the body awareness practice we simply bring awareness to different aspects of the body and notice what is going on there. We also notice when the mind has become interested in something else. Particularly, we notice thoughts; when we notice that our awareness is with thought we gently and without judgment bring it back to the body.

#### **Body the root of stillness**

As we sit in our chosen meditation posture, although there are movements of the breath and other slight movements of the body, the body in general is still. We can use this stillness in our practice. The body is solid and has weight - this can be acknowledged, and the more we acknowledge it the more grounded we can feel.

The other thing that can happen in this posture is that the contents of the mind come more into focus. We become more aware of the thoughts that occupy us, and our feelings and emotions. We may be quite surprised at how unruly the contents of the mind are but this is quite natural. Up until now how much of the time have you spent just sitting and not doing anything in particular? There are a lot of aspects of our experience that have been waiting to be acknowledged by awareness and now they have come to make their presence known!

#### **Shifting from thoughts to body**

As we acknowledge the stillness of the body, we begin to experience it fully. We can also learn how to shift our awareness. This means that that, as we notice the thoughts pulling us here and there, we also acknowledge that the body is still and we begin to bring our awareness down into this. The more you allow the awareness to rest with the body the more you experience its stillness.

## 2. Posture, the expression of the state of mind

As the body can tell us a lot about our state of mind, so we can deliberately adopt a posture that encourages a particular state of mind to arise. The meditation posture is an open and confident posture. To sit upright and relaxed is to be open to what is going on. The posture has strength and can be regarded as expressing our commitment to practice. As the body is relaxed its energy flows, allowing things to come and go and meet no resistance.

If you notice your posture collapsing, this is often an expression of lack of energy and dullness. On the other hand, if we hold the body in a rigid way this can create tension and obstruction. An attitude that can be held in mind when adopting a meditation posture is:

*“To sit like a mountain, ready to pounce like a tiger”*

This acknowledges that the posture is both (a) solid and grounded and (b) alive and alert.

### **Observe the body, observe the mind**

The body can tell us a lot about what our attitude is and what our state of mind is in this particular moment. Here are a few things that you may notice:

- Furrowed brow – indicates trying too hard, trying to meditate from the head rather than relaxing into the body.
- Chest collapsed – reflects sadness, depressed, weakness in the lungs, “poor me”, falling asleep, tired.
- Shallow breath – anxious, panicky, fearful.
- Shoulders tense – energy up, chest tight, holding on, angry, frustrated.

This is not an exhaustive list but it does give us some sense of how the body can reveal something of our emotional states and our underlying attitudes. As we bring awareness to these things we can better understand what to do next. For example, as we acknowledge the breath it begins to change with the result that, over time, we can become less anxious. Similarly, as we notice that the chest is collapsed we can gently encourage a sense of lift in the spine and a sense of opening out from the centre of the chest towards the shoulders and sides. If this collapsed posture is an expression of sadness, opening up in this way can allow us to give the sad feelings more space to ‘move’ through our being. By changing your posture you can change your mind!

## 3. Being and doing mode

We spend a lot of time doing, achieving and trying to change. A lot of our life is spent in doing this and that, in trying to get from ‘A’ to ‘B’. We always want more, dissatisfied with how things are. We can be very goal-orientated and have unrealistic expectations of ourselves. This attitude can easily be carried

into our meditation, where what we really need is just to **be** - being with our experience as it is. If we can learn to be with ourselves space opens up - we begin to appreciate life more and become more at ease with life's ups and downs.

### **The paradox of meditation**

People often take up meditation in order to be more grounded or calmer, to get to know themselves, or to develop qualities like kindness, positivity, letting go and acceptance. How can meditation be used as an agent of these changes?

If 'not being calm' is '**A**' and 'being more calm' is '**B**', we may think we just need to try to move towards B. But the paradox of meditation is that **by just being present with A, B arises**.

This means that meditation is about learning to be more present in our current experience and trying not to judge what is going on, instead accepting it with a sense of kindness. We can apply last week's definition of meditation as 'being aware, in the present moment, non-judgmentally' to our body, thoughts, feelings and emotions. When we bring awareness to something and see it more fully and with a sense of kindness, we can understand that whatever we are observing is constantly changing. In the same way, we can see that our thoughts and emotions are **always** changing – our minds are intrinsically volatile. This opens up the very real possibility that we need never be stuck in a particular mental state. With practice, by being with what is arising, we can just see a given mental state come into being and pass away.

## **4. The bigger container**

By being present and mindful of our experience we can experience a 'bigger container' of awareness. What this means in practice is that we learn to avoid 'closing down' into a single, narrow aspect of our experience. For instance, if I am sad and I am walking down the street, there is a much bigger context that I can choose to be part of – for example, the sensations of my feet pressing against the floor as I walk, the air against my skin, the sounds in the street and the many different faces of the people I walk past.

This is equally true of meditation. You may have some physical discomfort, for example a back ache, but this can still be held in the 'bigger container' of awareness. The discomfort is not the only experience you are having - there is the temperature of the room, the sounds outside, the smells, thoughts arising and passing away and, of course, the breath. As we acknowledge more of our experience we can develop a sense of expansion and spaciousness in our mind.

## 5. Homework

- To meditate 6 out of 7 times a week.
- Try - both in your meditation and as much of the rest of your time as you can - to practice a broader awareness of your experiences than is normally your habit.