

Session 2

Seeing Clearly: Thoughts Are Not Facts

Introduction to Session 2

When we find ourselves in situations that demand more than we can handle at that moment, we usually experience stress. How we respond to stress largely depends on how we perceive the situation.

During this training, we learn to be more consciously present in the moment. This 'being present' is not so obvious, as our mind tends to jump all over the place and often labels our own experiences as not okay. For example, do you ever think: 'Why is this happening to me now? This shouldn't be happening!' or 'This isn't good enough' or 'This isn't what I expected or wanted.' This automatic tendency to label our experiences prevents us from being fully present in the moment.

Judging and criticising our experiences can lead to a chain of thoughts about blame, what should be different, or how things could or should be changed. These judging thoughts often put us on 'mental train tracks' or cause old patterns to resurface. In this way, we not only lose awareness of the present moment but also the freedom to choose how to respond to a situation – if at all.

You can regain that freedom by simply acknowledging the situation you're in as a first step: this is how it is right now. Without immediately falling into automatic patterns or trying to judge, fix, or change things.

You can practise this during the body scan, which is scheduled for the first two weeks of the training. You'll practise experiencing what is present in the mind and body in a kind and curious way, just as it is. There's nothing you need to do to change the experience or the situation.

There is also no particular goal to strive for or state of being to achieve, like feeling relaxed. The body scan is not a relaxation exercise. You simply follow the instructions with focused attention, as best you can. If you do feel relaxed, that's a nice bonus.

The Breath as an Anchor

Breathing is living. You could see the breath as a thread or a chain linking all the events in your life from birth to death. It is always there, every moment, and it happens automatically. Have you ever noticed how the breath changes with your mood? It becomes short and shallow when we are tense or angry, quicker when we are excited, full when we are happy, and nearly disappears when we are afraid.

Most of the time we don't even notice our breath—it's just there. So one of the first things we do in mindfulness training is to become aware of it. We notice how the breath changes with our mood, our thoughts, and the movements of our body. There is no need to control it. You simply observe it, look at it, and gently feel yourself breathing in a curious and relaxed way.

With practice, we become more frequently aware of our breath. We can use it to direct our attention in various areas of our life—for example, by relaxing tense muscles or focusing on something that needs our attention. The breath can also help us deal with pain, anger, or stress in daily life.

We can use the breath as a tool, an anchor, to bring stability to body and mind. At any moment in daily life, we can tune in to the breath—a beautiful way to return to the present moment.

Sometimes, though, using the breath as an anchor can actually cause tension—such as in cases of hyperventilation or when traumatic memories are triggered. In such cases, the sensation of your feet on the floor, your sit bones on the chair or cushion, or the contact of your hands can serve as alternative anchors. You can also focus on hearing sounds, or open your eyes briefly to reconnect with your environment instead of staying with the breath. You don't have to use the breath as your anchor—just choose something you can return to easily with your attention.

Thoughts Are Not Facts

One of the first things you'll notice when doing the 'walking down the street' exercise with a group is that everyone has different thoughts and feelings about the same situation. One person might think: 'She's ignoring me—how arrogant!' and feel angry. Another might think: 'I must not be important to her' and feel sad. Yet another might wonder: 'She looks so lost in thought—could something be wrong?' while someone else might feel embarrassed and worry about how their wave looked.

Why do we all interpret things so differently?

The situation itself might influence our reaction, or past experiences with the person might colour it. Our mood also plays a big role. If you got up on the wrong side of the bed, you're more likely to interpret others negatively. Our upbringing and past experiences that shaped us matter too.

But the most important thing to realise is this: your thoughts about a situation are not necessarily true. In fact, they probably say more about how you feel or who you are than about the other person.

Thoughts strongly influence our moods and behaviour. Often, thought patterns play out automatically in the mind—we're so used to them that we hardly notice.

It's often not the situation itself, but our interpretation of it, that determines how we react. Our mind loves to compare: how is it now, how should it be ideally? We then judge the current moment as wrong. Our mind tries to fix it.

With practice, we can become more aware of our thoughts and respond differently. We can notice them, observe them with some distance, and bring our attention back to the breath or another anchor. That's how we learn to work with the mind in a different way.

Tips for the Body Scan

1. Whatever happens (e.g., falling asleep, losing concentration, thinking of other things, focusing on the wrong body part, or feeling nothing at all), let it be. These are your current experiences—simply notice them.
2. If your mind often wanders, just observe the thoughts (as events passing by) and gently guide your attention back to the body scan.
3. Let go of ideas such as ‘success’, ‘failure’, or ‘doing it right’. This is not a competition. The only discipline needed is regular practice—with openness and curiosity.
4. Release all expectations of the body scan. Imagine it as a seed you’ve planted. The more you poke at it, the less it will grow. Provide rest, stillness, and time.
5. Try to meet each moment with an attitude of: ‘Okay, this is just how it is now.’ Avoid pushing away unpleasant thoughts or sensations—doing so only distracts. Be mindful, do not strive, stay in the moment, and accept things as they are.

Source: MBCT, Segal, Williams, and Teasdale, 2013

Mindfulness Attitude: Patience

Patience is a form of wisdom. It shows that we understand and accept that things sometimes need their own time to unfold. You might try to help a butterfly emerge by peeling open its cocoon—but this usually harms the butterfly. We know the butterfly needs its own time to transform, and the process cannot be rushed.

Likewise, we develop patience with our own mind and body as we train our awareness. We remind ourselves that we don’t need to be annoyed with ourselves when we notice the judging mind, when we feel tense or agitated or scared, or when nothing seems to ‘happen’ even though we’ve meditated for some time. We allow ourselves to experience what we are already experiencing. Why? Because it is already happening! When these moments arise, they are part of our reality—they are part of the life that is unfolding in this moment.

So we treat ourselves with the same care we’d offer a butterfly. Why rush through some moments just to reach others we consider ‘better’? After all, each moment is our life in that moment.

As you practise staying with yourself, you will certainly notice that the mind has its own agenda. As we’ve seen, wandering to the past and future and getting caught up in thoughts are some of the mind’s favourite activities. Some thoughts are pleasant, others bring pain or fear. In both cases, thoughts powerfully influence our awareness. Much of the time, our thoughts shape how we experience the present, disconnecting us from it.

Patience is something we can turn to when the mind becomes agitated. It helps us accept the wandering mind without forgetting that we don't have to join its journeys. Patience reminds us we don't need to fill every moment with activity and thinking to make it meaningful. In fact, the opposite is true. Being patient means fully opening up to each moment, embracing it as it is, knowing that—like butterflies—things take their own time.

Source: Kabat-Zinn, J., 2014

Sitting with Awareness: Attention to the Breath

The Basic Posture

- Sit upright, with your head, neck, and back aligned—this posture expresses an inner attitude of self-confidence, acceptance, patience, and attentiveness. That is what we are cultivating.

- Practise on a chair, meditation bench, or cushion. If using a chair, choose one with a straight back where your feet can rest flat on the floor. If possible, do not lean back but sit upright.

- If you sit on the floor, use a meditation bench or a firm cushion so your buttocks are raised a few centimetres above the floor. Whatever you sit on, make sure your knees are slightly lower than your hips.

1. Take time to explore the points of contact between your body and the floor or chair/bench/cushion—just as in the body scan.
2. Bring your attention to the changing sensations in your belly or chest as you breathe. If helpful, you can place your hand on your lower belly.
3. Focus on the rising and falling of your abdomen. You may notice the brief pause between an inhale and exhale.
4. Do not try to control your breathing. Let it flow naturally. There is nothing to achieve.
5. Your thoughts may wander (they will, again and again). That's just what the mind does. Simply notice and kindly bring your attention back to the breath.
6. Be gentle and kind with yourself.
7. Continue for ten to fifteen minutes—or longer if you wish. Use your breath as your anchor. Or, if the breath doesn't feel like a good anchor, use the sensation in your feet, your sit bones, or your hands.

Home Practice after Session 2

1. Body Scan Practice

Practise the body scan six days a week and record your experiences on the practice log.

2. Attention to the Breath

Practise 'Attention to the Breath' for ten minutes a day, for six days, at different times of day. This daily practice gives you the opportunity to become aware of what it's like to be in the here and now, without having to do anything.

3. Fill in the Pleasant Events Calendar (one event per day)

Use this as an opportunity to become aware of physical sensations, thoughts, and emotions associated with one pleasant event per day. Write them down as precisely as possible.

4. Choose a new routine activity to do with extra awareness

Examples: brushing teeth, doing the dishes, taking a shower, walking up the stairs, reading to your children, shopping, eating, clearing the table.

PLEASANT EVENTS LOG (after Session 2)

For one week, be aware of a pleasant or enjoyable event as it is happening. Later, write down what the event was and how you experienced it.

What was the event?	How did your body feel during the event?	What mood/emotions were present?	What thoughts were going through your mind?	What do you notice now, as you write about it?	Date
<i>Walking home from work and hearing a bird sing</i>	<i>My head felt clear, my shoulders dropped, I smiled</i>	<i>Happy, relieved</i>	<i>What a beautiful song, how wonderful</i>	<i>So nice to be outside. It was small, but I'm glad I noticed it.</i>	<i>Example</i>
					Day 1 Date:
					Day 2 Date:
					Day 3 Date:
					Day 4 Date:
					Day 5 Date:
					Day 6 Date:
					Day 7 Date:

Practice Log – Session 2

Each time you practice, write it down here. Make notes about anything that comes up during the practice so we can discuss it during the next session.

Day/Date	Exercise	Experiences
Day 1 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity Attention to the Breath Pleasant Events Calendar	
Day 2 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity Attention to the Breath Pleasant Events Calendar	
Day 3 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity Attention to the Breath Pleasant Events Calendar	
Day 4 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity Attention to the Breath Pleasant Events Calendar	
Day 5 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity Attention to the Breath Pleasant Events Calendar	
Day 6 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity Attention to the Breath Pleasant Events Calendar	
Day 7 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity Attention to the Breath Pleasant Events Calendar	

Space for Additional Notes