Week 5 - Dealing with Difficult Emotions or Physical Pain

Turning Toward...

Dealing with Difficult Emotions or Physical Pain

So far in this course, when some difficulty presents itself during meditation in the form of a thought, emotion, or physical sensation, we have been simply acknowledging it and then "firmly but gently" returning to the object of awareness (for instance, breath in the sitting meditation). This week, we introduce a new way to deal with difficult emotions or physical pain, called "Turning Toward" that involves intentionally exploring the difficulty rather than moving away from it. This is a powerful method, but it is deeply counter-intuitive, because the last thing we think we want to do is to move closer to what's been troubling us.

When used as an informal practice, "Turning Toward" can be thought of as a more nuanced form of STOP ("One-Minute Breathing Space") that allows for a fuller exploration of what's happening. Although such an exploration might sound scary and uncomfortable, this is a gentle process, and is done in a special way, one that draws on the skills of awareness and non-judgment that you've been building so far in this course.

The "Turning Toward" practices described here were inspired by Vidyamala Burch and her "Five-Step" model. For more about her work, see "Supplementary materials by Vidyamala Burch" below.

Videos

In Turning Toward Difficulty and One Moment at a Time, Vidyamala Burch describes this surprising and counter-intuitive way of dealing with issues, whether physical or emotional. In The Gift and Power of Emotional Courage, Susan David describes a gentle but effective way of "turning toward" difficult emotional issues. Also included is a short, but powerful video called Holding Your Feelings Like a Baby by Thupten Jinpa, the Dalai Lama's interpreter, and The Three Components of Self-Compassion by Kristin Neff.

NOTE: If you are dealing with significant physical pain, be sure to also watch Tara Brach's Working Skillfully with Pain and Guided Reflection on Inhabiting this Body in the supplementary section.

Readings

Responding to Emotional or Physical Pain describes how "Turning Toward" differs from more typical ways of dealing with difficulty. "Turning Toward" Difficult Emotions and "Turning Toward" Physical Pain are one-page descriptions that will be used for the informal practice this week. Tara Brach's Radical Acceptance comes from her book by the same name and talks about the two "wings" of Radical Acceptance, clear seeing and self-compassion, both very important for "Turning Toward". If you or a loved one is dealing with back pain, The Strange Case of Chronic Back Pain, in the Supplementary section, is a must-read.

Daily Practices

For the formal practice, we introduce the "Turning Toward" Meditation. You will do this the first two days of this week, and on the following days you can choose from any of the practices you've learned so far. The "Turning Toward" meditation prepares you for doing the "Turning Toward" informal practice.

The informal practice will be to practice "Turning Toward" an unwanted emotion or physical pain that may have come up during the day. Be sure to print and review "Turning Toward" Difficult Emotions and "Turning Toward" Physical Pain to use as guides for these informal practices.

Videos

- Turning Toward Difficulty [and] One Moment at a Time - Vidyamala Burch [12 min]
- The Gift and Power of Emotional Courage - Susan David [16 min]
- Pain x Resistance = Suffering - Tara Brach [8 min]
- Holding Your Feelings "Like a Baby" - Thupten Jinpa [2 min]
- The Three Components of Self-Compassion - Kristin Neff [6 min]

Reading

- Responding to Emotional or Physical Pain - Dave Potter
- "Turning Toward" Difficult Emotions - option 1 for Informal Practice
- "Turning Toward" Physical Pain - option 2 for Informal Practice
- Radical Acceptance - Tara Brach
- The "Felt Sense" Prayer - as shared by Tara Brach

Practice sheets

- Formal Practice [PDF] [or WORD format] - "Turning Toward" Meditation
Informal Practice [PDF] or [WORD format] - "Turning Toward" informal practices
[ Be sure to read the two "Turning Toward" guidelines for informal practice in the Reading section. ]
[ NOTE: For the guided practices use the menu in the left column or go to Practices ]

Supplementary materials related to this week's topic
"Inner Listening" - An Introduction to Focusing article and videos by Ann Weiser Cornell
Working Skillfully with Pain video by Tara Brach (4 min)
Guided Reflection on Inhabiting this Body video by Tara Brach (13 min)
Mindfulness and Painful Emotions video by Steven Hayes (2 min)
The "PACE" of Pain video by Amberly Lago (14 min)
Lower Back Ache? New York Times article
The Strange Case of Chronic Back Pain article by Ron Siegel
Back Sense: Halting the Cycle of Chronic Back Pain book by Ron Siegel
Working with Pain - Mindfulness Strategies articles, talks, and meditations by Tara Brach
How To Be Sick book by Toni Bernhard
Dealing with Panic Attacks video by Steven Hayes (3 min)
Psychological flexibility (Steven Hayes' panic attack) video by Steven Hayes (19 min)
Mindfulness and Physical Pain video by Kelly McGonigal (4 min)
Buddhism's Pain Relief article by Rick Heller
Awakening Self-Compassion video by Tara Brach [23 min]
Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change book by Susan David

Supplementary materials by Vidyamala Burch
Mindfulness-Based Pain Management video by Vidyamala Burch [21 min]
The Five-Step Model - article by Vidyamala Burch
The Fist Exercise - video by Vidyamala Burch [2 min]
Living Well With Pain & Illness book by Vidyamala Burch
You Are Not Your Pain book by Vidyamala Burch
Vidyamala Burch interview video (more detail about Vidyamala's story) [58 min]
Choosing to Live Well with Pain & Illness audio interview of Vidyamala Burch [39 min]
Choosing to Live Well with Pain & Illness transcript of above interview

Once you have done at least six days of practice, done the Reading, watched the Videos, and feel that you've gotten the essence of this "Week", you are ready to go to Week 6. It's not necessary to read/view any of the Supplementary materials - these are totally optional.