

7. Application Strategies

May 3, 2018

Over the past few months, we've learned a lot about meditation. We began with a general introduction, looking first at what *mindfulness* means in the Unified Mindfulness system that I teach. I proposed that *mindfulness* is an attentional skillset, and *meditation* is any activity in which we either develop or apply the three skills of *concentration*, *clarity*, and *equanimity* ("CC&E"). I also made some suggestions about how to establish an effective mindfulness practice. The first meditation technique we learned was Noting and Labeling. When Noting and Labeling, we observe SEE-HEAR-FEEL activity in our present-moment experience. Then we learned how to use Noting and Labeling to find and enjoy the subset of *restful states*. Next we explored Nurturing the Positive, an active practice in which we create content in the See, Hear, and Feel spaces to generate positive emotions and mind states. I led you through several examples of how you might apply Nurture Positive to various personal situations. And then finally, last month, we tackled *flow*, the direct experience of impermanence. We learned a simple method of sensitizing ourselves to flow, then moved into a deeper experience of different types of direct flow, and finally touched on the fundamental flow of being: expansion and contraction.

That's quite a curriculum we've gotten through! And there are still more techniques to learn, and much more in terms of depth, breadth, and what you might call graduate level use of these basic methods. (Next month we'll be looking at Expressing the Source, with various forms of spontaneity practice, by the way). But as I hope you know, if even just one of these have resonated with you, then the basic instructions for that is all you need to have a meaningful and effective meditation practice.

This month I thought we'd take a break from learning new techniques and look at how we can use what we've already learned to work with life's challenges and joys, while at the same time developing your CC&E skills and journeying further into your own contemplative odyssey. I'm calling this Application Strategies.

Before we do that, I'd like to mention something about "using" meditation for a specific result. Often, teachers of this kind of mindfulness mediation will teach that it is *either* a way to fix things like stress or anxiety, *or* it is not to fix anything and you should have no expectation attached at all. Which is correct? Well, to paraphrase a line from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, "Ask not meditators for advice, for they will tell you both 'yes' and 'no.'" Both are correct. If we enter into a meditation period

with an expectation of what the subjective result will be, we will most likely be disappointed. Apart for Nurture Positive, all the techniques we have learned so far are observational. That is, we watch the experience of the present moment without pushing or pulling on it, without fighting or hanging on to it. We have equanimity with whatever comes up, in the moment, with no thoughts about the next moment and how it “should” play out. We may end up feeling relaxed or agitated or sleepy or alert. Any result is perfect and we do not put expectations on the results when we start. This approach is essential to avoiding suffering. It is the existence of expectations that is the root of much of the unhappiness and frustration in our lives.

On the other hand, there is a lot of well documented evidence that regular meditation can result in improved physical and mental health. So how do we “make” meditation improve our health? While we cannot control experience, we *can* cultivate an environment in which certain results are more likely to occur than if we hadn’t. It doesn’t always work out the way we plan it, though, and that’s where the equanimity comes to the fore. We can strike the bell with an intention, but we have no control over whether or not it reverberates, and we accept whatever results. Whether or not our desired outcome is coming to pass, if we are applying concentration, clarity, and equanimity to an object of meditation, then whatever the subjective results, the longer term consequences will be undoubtedly beneficial.

So with that said, let’s look at how we can be smart in customizing techniques to deal with specific issues we may be facing. For example, if I am in physical pain and my painkillers aren’t doing the job, how can I use meditation to help reduce the suffering? Or what if I am in emotional distress because of something that happened, or I am having an anxiety attack which has no concrete cause? On the flip side, we can also work toward greater fulfillment. How can I enjoy this sandwich more? How can I get the most out of a workshop I am taking? There are an infinite number personal situations, so instead of trying to have a technique for anything that comes up, it would be good to learn how to analyze and adapt a technique to anything.

We’ll use a situation I found myself in yesterday as a case study to walk through each step as I explain it.

This situation is this: After several months of trying to renew my AHCCCS health insurance, they cancelled it on April 30th, despite my having provided all the documents they requested. Yesterday I had an appointment with a patient advocate to try to figure out whether or not I would be able to get it reinstated. Before the appointment, I found strong anxiety arising, and was finding it difficult to make

myself collect all the paperwork I needed to bring with me. I wanted to help relieve the anxiety with meditation. (Don't worry, I did get my insurance back in the end.)

The first step in dealing with this is to analyze the situation into the basic spaces. You remember what the three basic spaces are? (See, Hear, Feel). And the subsets? (In, Out, Rest, Flow). (Now you will begin to see the benefit of having clearly defined vocabulary for these techniques and experiences. It makes it easier to see what's going on and to describe it to others, for a start). So first of all, I needed to figure out which spaces were involved.

The strongest part of the anxiety was an unpleasant sensation in my chest. It was a little hard to breathe and made me want to curl up in a ball and hide. So what space is that? (Feel In). There was also talking in my head, though it was very subtle, which was trying to convince me that I would not be able to get my insurance back. And then of course there was lots of thinking about having to deal with prescriptions and possible illnesses when I didn't have insurance (Hear In). Finally, there was an image of me sitting in front of this mean looking woman in a clinical office (See In). This image made the sensation in my chest worse.

So my analysis is that I had Feel In, See In, and Hear In, but Feel In was the strongest.

The next step is to decide which of two approaches to take: You can either *turn towards* the issue or *turn away* from it. *Turning towards* means working directly with one or more of the focus spaces that are involved. In my case, this would mean looking directly at the unpleasant sensations and/or the unpleasant thinking. *Turning away* means focussing on any of the other spaces. By turning away, I would use all my attention on something that is *not* the issue, so I'd have little attention left to be distressed by the issue. In my case that would mean choosing to meditate on Feel-, Hear-, or See-Out. (Or a combination of those).

Some people think that turning away is the same as avoiding the problem or distracting yourself from the real issue. That's not the case. Both approaches are equally effective, and which you use depends on your preference, and sometimes on the issue itself. For example, if an emotional pain sensation is too overwhelming to be able to look at directly, then turning away may be your only choice. Or if a physical pain is so great that you simply can't focus on anything else, then turning toward may be unavoidable. In either case, you are applying CC&E to your chosen focus space, so you are doing effective meditation. (And even if it doesn't help as much as you'd like with the issue,

because you are doing effective meditation, you will benefit in the long term simply by the fact that you are meditating at all).

Yesterday, I decided to turn toward. It's just what I felt would be easiest for me to do at the time. (Had I chosen to turn away, I might have ended up doing something like focus on physical relaxation, or Hearing Out, maybe doing a music meditation.)

Having decided which way to turn, the third step is to choose which of the spaces I am going to turn toward. I could focus on all three In spaces, two of them, or just one. Again, your choice may be made by necessity, or you can choose for subjective reason like interest or opportunity. I chose to focus only on Feel In. I knew that the See- and Hear-In were just stories my mind was spinning, and I didn't care to listen to them. The physical sensations seemed to be what were making me want to curl up and hide.

The fourth step is to decide on a technique. You can use Noting and Labeling, which has the subsets of rest or flow, or you can use Focus on Positive. In my case, I didn't think I'd be able to focus on positive within the strong sensations of Feel In, so I chose Noting and Labeling. I chose to start with active states, and to allow my focus to change to rest or flow if either of those came up. (If I had chosen to work in Hear- and See In, I could have done a Noting practice or a Nurture Positive, using positive affirmations and images of a smiling woman succeeding in helping me).

If you are comfortable with the Noting and Labeling options, you can decide at this point whether to use any of those. For example, I could have chosen to zoom into a less intense part of the sensation, or I could do double or triple noting to help me to keep calm and concentrated. In the event, I did not choose any specific options.

Note that you can also choose to do micro-hits or background practice, if your situation does not allow for formal meditation in stillness.

Finally you do the technique you have come up with. If you find that you want to refine the technique a little bit after a few minutes, go ahead and do that. Otherwise, just keep on meditating. In this case, my customized technique was Focus on Feel-In. And it worked well. I still felt anxious, but I was able to create some emotional distance from the sensations so that they no longer kept me from preparing for my meeting.

So to sum up the steps:

1. Analyze the issue into basic spaces.

2. Decide whether to turn toward or turn away.
3. Choose which space or spaces you want to work in, in keeping with your decision from step two.
4. Choose a technique and any options.
5. Do it, for at least 5 minutes.

After five minutes you might have noticed some ways to refine your chosen technique. After this, keep on doing the technique for as long as you have decided to meditate.

I know this sounds very complicated, but with a little practice, you'll be able to go through the whole process in a matter of seconds and be meditating your way out of suffering on the fly. In the meantime, I've made up a worksheet that you can use to get used to the algorithm. You can download it from the StillpointMeditation.weebly.com website.