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Mindfulness 101: The Heart of Discomfort

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The death of George Floyd is very much on our minds and in our hearts. The imagery of the brutality he suffered in plain view has broken open a seemingly impenetrable gate and resulted in an outpouring of sadness and outrage. Turning away out of ignorance or to avoid feeling overwhelmed, ashamed, or helpless is not so easy anymore. The pervasiveness and perniciousness of systemic racism along with the insidious grip and consequence of the white privilege that breathes life into it is responsible as well for the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, Breonna Taylor, and countless Black, Indigenous, and people of color whose lives have been taken away, cut short, and diminished.

Today many of us are reflecting on where we are and how we got here, educating ourselves and each other, and, each in our own way, better understanding and taking ownership of our role—and our responsibilities, too. There are those who need not, for they have always known these truths, always spoken them, and always suffered their impact. If you are reading this with a deep knowing of these larger truths and with a heavy heart because you could have and can do more, then, like me, you are exploring your privilege through readings, courses, family conversations, music, listening to podcast interviews, and engaging in a great deal of soul searching. We do this to be better informed, better equipped, and better allies. But we may not feel better. It is the discomfort and unease that arises along the way—that has always been within us—that is a catalyst for growth and, most importantly, for change and taking action. It is a discomfort and unease that may be best left in place, to be metabolized in a more integral way.

Vigilance in the Face of Unpleasant Truths

Martin Luther King, Jr., said:

The ultimate measure of a person is not where one stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where one stands in times of challenge and controversy.

Many mindfulness practices involve paying attention to the sensations of the body, often singling out the breath as a focal point. Doing so sometimes can be useful for achieving a more relaxed state. Mindfulness, however, is not about relaxing—of finding comfort and convenience. It is about seeing things more clearly, of staying alert to and vigilant in the face of unpleasant truths.

Seeing more clearly what is arising within and around us depends on cutting through the mental chatter and self-protective gear that has been conditioned by our experience and culture and that can blind us to harsh realities taking place right in front of us and within us. Mindfulness practices that draw attention to the body—to the chest and shoulders that tense up, to the pulse that speeds up, to the jaw that clenches, to the breath that becomes shallow and seizes, to the heart that aches and the eyes that weep—point us to the very fabric of our being and the signals that tell us something is not right. Sometimes it is something arising in our midst. Sometimes it is something arising within us. And unless we learn to turn our attention inward and cultivate the capacity to more acutely observe and process these sensations and the feelings they awaken, we run the risk of missing out (of continuing to miss out) on the essence of our humanity.

George Floyd was tortured for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, a length of time that has prompted periods of silent reflection. Below I share a very short practice that can be integrated into your day as a way of honoring his memory and legacy, and as a reminder amid the busyness of the day given how easy it is to forget—how motivated we may be to forget.

8-4-6: Relaxation Beginning with an Exhalation

So as to remember the final moments of George Floyd's life and of all his murder has awakened—and is awakening—in us, we can engage in a modification of a powerful breathing practices that is grounded in the numbers 8-4-6. The breath is a powerful vehicle for both activation and relaxation. This breath-manipulation exercise is offered as a daily practice you can turn to, to remember George Floyd's legacy. It can be practiced during times of emotional agitation to establish a steadier state amid the discomfort so as to pay attention to the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise. And, as many mindfulness practices begin with a few slow deep breaths, it can be incorporated into your mindfulness practice to more fully engage the heart, awaken to suffering, and see more clearly a path through.

This exercise is a variation of the popular 4-7-8 breath manipulation practice popularized by Dr. Andrew Weil. One variation is changing the 7 to a 6. The other is to begin the count on an exhalation. Beginning with the exhalation is a lesser-known breath technique. In the context of this practice, it is a symbolic gesture to wake up out of routine. Prolonging the exhalation engages parasympathetic nervous system arousal associated with relaxation (e.g., slower heart rate, lower blood pressure, reduced release of the stress hormone). It can be helpful to temper the rate of exhalation by breathing through the nose. If you exhale through the mouth, which often results in quick exhalation, do so with pursed lips, as if blowing through a straw. The relaxing and grounding 8-4-6 breath practice brings these two aspects together as you:

- 1 Exhale slowly and fully to the count of 8,
- 2 Inhale to the count of 4, and
- 3 Gently hold the breath to the count of 6.
- 4 Repeat.

Importantly, as with all breath manipulation practices, be attentive to your well-being and do not force anything. Use a steady tempo that is comfortable. Repeating the cycle two times can lead to more relaxed state. If you find it useful, you may want to add one or two cycles, but excessive practice is not recommended.

This practice is offered to help us focus our attention on what has transpired, not only on that tragic day to George Floyd, but throughout the history of our nation. This practice is also an opportunity to reflect on our own lives and our opportunities for action in the days, weeks, and years ahead. It draws on the breath because the deliberate manipulation of the breath can create the space for intention. It is also a reminder that being deprived of the breath is an all-too-real event in 21st-century America. Allow this simple practice to be one you do just about any time to remember—to remember George Floyd and to help establish a steadier foundation to see things more clearly. For it's all too easy to forget.

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