

Freeing the Mind When the Body Hurts

With Vidyamala Burch

Unit 1: The Power of Awareness



▶ Unit 1: The Power of Awareness

Unit 2: Acceptance and Kindness

Unit 3: Waking Up to Wonder

Unit 4: Arising and Passing – Living with Flow

Unit 5: Relating and Connecting

Unit 6: Engaging with All of Life

We start our journey with the first step of the BE AWARE acronym: be present. Being aware of our experience gives us choices in how we respond.



The BE AWARE Acronym

This program is structured around a six-step acronym that can help us to manage how we relate to our experience of pain and illness. This first unit will explore the BE step: being present.

<p>BE</p> <hr/> <p>Be present</p> <hr/> <p>The first step is being present: learning how to be here with our experience just as it is, transforming our reactive tendencies.</p>	<p>A</p> <hr/> <p>Accept</p> <hr/> <p>The second step is acceptance and kindness around the pain or the difficulty.</p>	<p>W</p> <hr/> <p>Wake up to wonder</p> <hr/> <p>The third step is waking up to wonder. How beautiful, discovering that there's always something pleasant, even beautiful, that we can tune into when our awareness becomes more refined and sensitive.</p>
<p>A</p> <hr/> <p>Arising and passing</p> <hr/> <p>The fourth step is arising and passing: living with flow. This is important and profound. We realize that everything is changing, everything is process, including what we relate to as pain as if it's a solid object. That too, is process.</p>	<p>R</p> <hr/> <p>Relate and connect</p> <hr/> <p>The fifth step is relating and connecting: realizing that we're not alone and our experience of pain or difficulty can become a point of empathy rather than a cause of isolation.</p>	<p>E</p> <hr/> <p>Engage</p> <hr/> <p>Finally, the sixth step is to engage with all of our life. How can we bring this training into all the moments of our life?</p>



Introduction: The Power of Awareness

Welcome to Unit One, The Power of Awareness. This is the first step of the six-step process that we're covering throughout this course based on the **BE AWARE acronym**.

So this unit is all about the first step, BE. Being aware is the foundation for this great journey of learning to change our response to pain and illness, because **awareness gives us the possibility of choice**. It's only if we know what's happening in our body, what we're feeling in the body, what we're feeling emotionally, and what we're thinking in each present moment that we have the opportunity to move from a habitual, reactive, automatic state to something that's much **more creative, more open, less tight and contracted, and more fluid, open, and kindly**. This is why mindfulness is so essential to this journey, because it's mindfulness that gives us this all-important possibility of choice: moving from reactive states to more positive and creative states.

In this unit, there are a number of different talks that I'll give.

- I'll introduce **mindfulness-based pain and illness management**, which is a signature course that I've developed through my charity, the Breathworks Foundation.
- I'll give a more personal talk about the **different stages of my own journey** from fighting to flourishing.
- I'll also introduce a wonderful text from the Buddhist tradition called **the Satipatthāna Sutta**, which is widely seen as the core or seminal text on mindfulness. I really look forward to sharing that with you. It's a really wonderful text.
- We'll do a **general awareness meditation**: just learning how to drop into the body, drop into the moment, to know what's happening. That's very much the foundation of this program: a knowing of what's going on moment by moment.
- I'll also introduce a **body scan meditation**, where we guide our awareness to the whole body and become more deeply embodied, more deeply present.

Before we go into any of that, let's do a little practice together, for two or three minutes, to have a sense of what I'm talking about, a sense of coming into the body, tuning into emotions, and tuning into thoughts...

Mindfulness and kindness are the same thing

Before I conclude this introduction, I'd like to include a really beautiful teaching from a wonderful teacher called Dipa Ma. She was an Indian woman who lived towards the end of the 20th century. She said that **mindfulness and kindness are the same thing**, which I totally agree with. So mindfulness isn't something aloof and cold, but it's **imbued with presence and love and kindness**. Dipa Ma said...

“Think about it. When you're really present aren't you also loving? And when you're really loving, aren't you also present?”

—Dipa Ma

I find that very, very beautiful. This is the quality that we can bring into this unit as well as the whole program.



Meditation 1: Simple Awareness

We'll begin by cultivating awareness. While this practice may seem simple, it is also very subtle and powerful. As we gain the ability to rest in awareness, greater freedom and self-knowledge become available.

Welcome to the first meditation in this unit, The Power of Awareness. This meditation will be a simple awareness practice. And when I say simple, I mean that what we're going to do is simply learn how to be aware. And this is an **incredibly powerful skill**. If we can learn to:

- **be open and to receive whatever is happening in the body without automatically judging**, without automatically reacting...
- **receive what's happening emotionally without automatically reacting** and judging...
- be open to the thoughts that are flowing through the mind **without automatically identifying with the content of thoughts**, just see them as mental events flowing through the mind like clouds passing across a clear blue sky of awareness...

Then this is a very, very powerful basis for everything else that's going to flow out of this program.

Establishing a posture

The first thing to do is to choose our position. You can do this sitting, you can do it lying down, or you could even do it standing. Now, it may be that during the ten-minute practice you get very, very uncomfortable, for example if you've got a pain condition. **It's absolutely fine to move.** So if you notice yourself getting very tense and tight, you could adjust your posture a little bit.

On the other hand, if you're getting very mentally fidgety, it can be interesting to practice stillness. So I leave that up to you. That's quite a subtle thing to decide, but it's part of the practice: being curious. **Do I need to move or do I need to be still?** That's very interesting in itself.

So choosing our position and then beginning to settle into stillness. You might like to close your eyes. I'm going to close my eyes. I always find that supportive. But if for any reason that's disturbing, it's absolutely fine to keep your eyes open or to lower your gaze.

If for any reason you need to stop the practice before the 10 minutes is up, that's also completely fine. **If you notice yourself getting very agitated, it might be better to stop.** So I leave that up to you.

Grounding

So let's begin to settle and to allow the weight of the body to rest down into the support beneath us. Whether we're sitting, whether we're lying down, or whether we're standing, seeing if we can have a quality of **yielding and resting and arriving.** I find it interesting to see if I can rest into the chair rather than perching on top of it: seeing if I can release a little bit around gripping and holding, and allow my body to be held and supported.

To help this, **you might want to take a deeper breath in and then release on the out-breath, and arrive a little bit more.** Let the next breath flow back in on its own time. You could do that a few times if you'd like to. Have a quality of arriving, yielding, resting, releasing a little bit more with each out breath.

Natural breathing

When you're ready, **allowing your breathing to find its own natural rhythm,** there's no need to alter the breath or force the breath. A sense of opening on the in-breath and then releasing, yielding, letting go down into the support with each out-breath.

Cultivating awareness

First of all, let's have a broad and general sense. **Here we are cultivating awareness, this remarkable quality. What's your general sense of your body? What's your general sense of your mood, your mind?**

And of course, we're resting within an environment. **Maybe tuning into the sounds around us, the smells.**

So **we're cultivating presence and we're cultivating wakefulness.** Most of us, for most of the time, are very distracted. We're not really present. You could say we're not really awake to each moment. So, very gently, we're learning how to be present, open, and a little more awake right here, right now.

Awareness of the body

Now let's bring the body a little bit more to the foreground of awareness. Many of us naturally reside in the head and are very occupied with thinking, worrying, planning—all these kinds of things. But **imagine that awareness is like water, and it's pouring down inside the body to fill the body.** Becoming more open and receptive to this quality of being present in the body.

There'll be a sense of the weight of the body and the contact between the body and the surface beneath. **Feeling into those points of contact as best we can. What does that feel like?** It might be intense; it might be dull or numb.

In this practice, we're more interested in the *process* of being aware than the *content* of awareness. We can be aware of numbness or we can be aware of intensity.

If at any point, as we go through this practice, your pain is very intense or becomes disturbing, then by all means move your awareness away from that area and perhaps choose to rest in another, more neutral area: maybe the hands or feet. That's also the skill of awareness: having choice.

Being aware of temperature in the body, is it warm or cool? Are some parts of the body warm, other parts cool? See if you can receive this into awareness.

A gentle awareness

“We're not forcing experience. We're opening to what's happening. Allowing this awareness to be warm and curious and kindly, gentle. And so we wake up to our moment-by-moment experience.”

Awareness of body parts

Bringing awareness to the legs, allowing awareness to feel the legs. Seeing if we can allow awareness to be inside the legs, experiencing them directly rather than thinking about them in the abstract as an idea. **We're learning how to come closer to our actual experience rather than our ideas about our experience.**

Allowing awareness to feel the arms, flowing through the shoulders all the way down to fingers. **What's happening? Is it dull, numb, or intense? Alive?** Is the experience in the arms energetic or dull? Relaxed or tense? Numb? Warm or cool? Or a whole mixture of many things? **Seeing if we can receive it into awareness without automatically pushing and shoving against it.**

Allowing awareness to fill the neck and the head. Very often it can seem as if the head is somehow separate from the body, but the head is a limb of the body. So feeling into the physicality of the head: sensations in the face, mouth, jaw, tongue, lips.

Being aware of the whole body as we rest inside, moment by moment by moment.

Including emotions

Staying aware of the body, let's include our emotional weather. **What's your mood right now?** It might be positive or it might be challenging. It might be confused. It might be a mixture of things. Maybe you don't know.

“The main thing is that we are bringing awareness to this emotional dimension of our experience with curiosity, with openness, with kindness.”

So it's a warm quality of awareness and a sense of gently breathing with our emotions. **If at any point they become very intense and challenging and difficult, then by all means broadening awareness, coming back to something stabilizing:** maybe the bottom on the chair, the feet on the floor, the hands resting.

It is as if we're waking up to our emotional life a little more right now. And **if we're awake to what's happening, we can learn to work with what's happening**, which is what we'll be doing throughout this program. The first thing is cultivating awareness.

Turning awareness towards thinking

Let's turn our awareness towards our thinking life right now. Staying in the body, staying with our emotions, and including our thoughts. Very often we're completely identified with the content of our thoughts. But we have this extraordinary ability as humans to be able to **step away from the content and to be aware of our thoughts**. So we're looking *at* our thoughts rather than *from* our thoughts.

We can imagine our thoughts are like clouds passing across the clear blue sky awareness, or like fish swimming through the ocean of awareness. **Let them come, let them go; let them come, let them go**. It's completely normal to think. It's what minds do. But we can learn to have a much more creative relationship with ourselves using awareness.

Broadening awareness

And to conclude, let's broaden. Let's be aware of the whole body; resting inside the whole body; our emotional weather, the arising and passing of our emotions; our thoughts flowing through the mind, flowing through awareness. **Just resting here inside the richness of this experience**. Cultivating this extraordinary quality of awareness: awareness that's a little less reactive and a little more open and receptive and kindly.

Staying centered and grounded, **opening our awareness to include sounds around us, our environment, other people**.

And when we're ready to bring a little bit of movement to the body, maybe the hands and the fingers. **What's it like to move?** We're receiving movement into awareness.

Opening the eyes if we've had them closed. Looking around and coming into bigger movements if you want to. I always want to stretch at the end of the meditation.

Perhaps forming an intention to take this quality of awareness with us into whatever's coming next: gently, kindly aware and loving.



Introduction to Mindfulness-Based Pain and Illness Management

Vidyamala relates her experience of pain and disability and how it led to Breathworks, a foundation that helps people with chronic pain, disability, and illness to thrive. We'll also reflect on and the Buddha's experience of pain and what this tells us about freeing the mind when the body hurts...

Welcome back. And in this talk, I'm going to say a little bit about my own personal background, but mainly introduce you to Mindfulness-Based Pain and Illness management. This is the signature program I've developed for the charity I founded about 20 years ago: the Breathworks Foundation. We've taught this approach to many, many people around the world and **we know it's effective based on the feedback and the scientific evaluation** that we've done.

Vidyamala's story

Here's a little bit about myself: I was brought up in New Zealand and had a very active childhood, was very sporty and loved the outdoors. And then I injured my spine when I was 16. I went on to have major surgeries when I was 17, and then I had a car accident five years later that fractured another part of my spine.

My journey of living with pain, living with disability, living with impairment and some degree of paraplegia, is very long standing. I've had this for a very, very long time. Initially I found it extremely difficult, as you can imagine. And I know now, looking back, how I escalated my suffering with my mind. If I look back, I can see that very clearly. I made my suffering worse through my mental torment. **I don't judge myself for that. It's all completely understandable and human.**

But the really amazing thing is in 1985 I was taught to meditate when I was in hospital, and that was when I first had the glimpse that...

“I had the potential to use this power of awareness to change the way I related to my pain, suffering, and difficulties.”

I went on to become an ordained Buddhist. I lived in a retreat center here in the UK for five years. I did a lot of intensive meditation retreats, and mined my mind! I went very deeply into my mind and my heart. That was a very remarkable time. Of course, a lot of sorrow, a lot of grief came up as well, and I worked through those. And now I have generally quite a happy life. I have a very rich and fulfilling life. And most importantly, my pain is a lot better. **My pain is a lot better than it was 30 or 40 years ago, quite remarkably so.**

Mindfulness-Based Pain and Illness Management

Mindfulness-Based Pain and Illness Management has very much come out of that experience, of my experience. In a way, I've been my own laboratory. I've had meditation, I've had the teachings of the Buddha to draw on. And then I've had my own ongoing pain and discomfort to draw on. How can I bring those two things together and come up with a program that could benefit others? And I'm really delighted, in a way, this has been my life's work and it's my vocation and I really love it. And I consider it delightful to have been able to do this.

Although the program is called Mindfulness-Based Pain and Illness Management, **compassion is also absolutely central**. And there's a gorgeous image from the Buddhist tradition that evokes how **mindfulness and compassion, ideally are balanced**. The image is of a great bird. And I always think of a great eagle soaring high above, really magnificent:

- One wing is **mindfulness**; the other wing is **compassion**.
- One wing is **awareness**; the other wing is **kindness**.
- One wing is **wisdom**; the other wing is **love**.

And this great eagle has these two wings perfectly balanced, perfectly poised. So this is what we're cultivating in this program, in this approach. It's called mindfulness but **deeply implicit within mindfulness is compassion and love, kindness**.

This program, Mindfulness-Based Pain and Illness Management, is taught to many, many people around the world, both online and face-to-face in clinics and hospitals and private courses. It's called 'Mindfulness for Health' here in the UK and in the USA, it's called 'You Are Not Your Pain'. And the Breathworks program is what we call secular. It's offered to anybody regardless of their faith—whether they have a faith or are of no particular faith—because of course, these are great universal qualities of the mind and the heart that we're cultivating. But I'm really delighted in this program for *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, to bring in the Buddhist roots of this whole approach, because everything that we do at Breathworks comes from the lived experience of the Buddha and the teachings

of the Buddha, combined with my own experience, of course. **We're finding the teachings that really are most effective for living with pain and illness.**

The example of the Buddha

And I've gained an enormous amount through the lived example of the Buddha. He was a human being like us who lived in Northern India about 2,500 years ago. He wasn't a god. And through his own individual efforts, his faith, his confidence, his exploration, he managed to completely free his mind. He completely freed himself mentally from any kind of contraction, constriction, reactivity. He completely freed himself emotionally. That's really amazing. And **he learned to rest in wide open, vast awareness, and then to live his life from that perspective.**

“But what's very, very interesting about the Buddha is it's clear that he lived with physical pain as he aged.”

The Buddha gained enlightenment, as it's called, this point of freedom, when he was about 35 and he died in his 80s. And there are many stories of how he would sometimes ask his attendant to take over the teaching because **his back was hurting**. He talks about his body, when he's an old man, being **like an old cart held together by straps**. And then when he died, it seems **he died of food poisoning**. And of course, that would have been very painful.

So this is very interesting, isn't it? Because **I used to think that I would only be mentally free and emotionally free with the eradication of all suffering: if I didn't have any physical pain anymore**. So I used to fantasize about my physical pain just disappearing, evaporating. And then I might have the possibility of being more at peace. But it's obvious from the example of the Buddha that it's much more mysterious than that, that it's inevitable if we've got a human body, that we're going to have sickness; we are going to have old age, if we live to an older age. Many of us will have accidents. These things are unavoidable in the human condition. So in the example of the Buddha: **because he got old, he had physical pain; and yet he was mentally and emotionally free**.

That gives us something much more subtle and much more realistic to work with. Yes, I've got my injuries. I've got a broken back. I've had spinal fusion. I've got disability. I've got paraplegia. Those things I will have for the rest of this life...

“And yet how enticing, how tantalizing that it's possible to completely free ourselves of reactivity towards that experience: to be human—with the inevitable physical difficulties that will

arise for all of us—and yet this possibility of an open heart and a free mind.”

In a way, that's what we're going to be exploring on this course together: **how to accept those things that are difficult in the moment and how to free the mind around that.** And I can't say that I've achieved that completely by any means. Of course, I still have times of reactivity, times of despair, times of sorrow. And yet I see there's a trajectory. If I compare my experience now with 40 years ago, before I learned to meditate: yes, I am more alive, I'm more present, I'm more awake, I'm kinder, I'm more tender, I'm more light-hearted. And that's enough. I'm on a trajectory. **This change is happening and, in a way, that's enough.** It's enough to give me confidence that this is a good path. This is an honorable path. This is a noble path. It is a dignified path. And it doesn't matter where we are on that path. If we're a little bit less contracted today than we were yesterday, then that's a really wonderful and profound thing.

So in this online program, we're really going to be resting in the mystery, delving into the mystery:

“What does it mean to free the mind even when the body hurts?”

And I'm so excited to be sharing this journey with you.



Keep Calmly Knowing Change: The Satipatthana Sutta

Vidyamala unpacks one of the most important teachings on mindfulness ever given...

In this talk, we're going into the *Satipatthāna Sutta*. This is one of the key and seminal texts on mindfulness in the Buddhist tradition about 2,500 years ago.

There is actually a place in northern India where there's a plaque saying, "This is where the Buddha taught the *Satipatthāna Sutta*." Amazing.

The Four Satipatthanas

So what does "*Satipatthāna Sutta*" mean? It means something like:

- the four ways of **attending mindfully**
- the four ways of **cultivating the mind of a Buddha**
- the four **presences of mindfulness**.

The four that are being referred to here are the four objects of awareness, four ways, or **four things that we can attend to in our direct experience** to become more mindful.

FOUR AREAS IN WHICH WE CULTIVATE AWARENESS

The body

The first of these four objects is the body. The Buddha gives a lot of very detailed instruction on how to cultivate awareness of the body:

- awareness of **breathing**
- awareness of all of our different **activities**
- awareness of all the different positions of the body, the **postures of the body**
- awareness of the body as **elements**
- awareness of all the different **organs in the body**, all the different anatomical parts of the body.

This is a very detailed investigation of this experience that we label "body". Finally, we're also asked to be aware of what happens to the body when we die: the way it all just disappears to nothing. So that's obviously a very deep and profound practice. We're not going to be doing that in this course, you might be pleased to hear!

Feeling tone

We're also asked to be aware of what's called *vedanā*, which is usually translated as something like "feeling tone". It's the very initial arising of whether something is **pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral**. We usually experience this through the body. This is a very, very important part of mindfulness practice because usually we don't catch that initial arising. Before we know we're into full blown aversion, pushing away things that are painful; or grabbing hold of things that are pleasant; or maybe we just get confused with things that are dull or neutral. We're going to

	<p>be exploring feeling tone in the second unit of this course, which is all about <i>vedanā</i>.</p>
<p>Mind & heart</p>	<p>The third thing to be aware of is <i>citta</i>, which means mind and heart. It's a broad feeling tone of the mental-emotional continuum. Generally speaking, are we moving towards states that are contracted and tight and closing down? Traditionally, that's greed, hatred, and delusion. Or are we moving towards states that are open and expansive: a vast mind, a liberated mind and unsurpassable mind, a free mind? So we're learning to get quite sensitive and subtle around whether our mental-emotional continuum is moving toward closed-down or broad, open states.</p>
<p>Dhammas</p>	<p>The fourth area that the Buddha is referring to is called <i>dhammas</i>, a refined understanding of experience. Dhamma can mean many different things. It's a word that can mean "the teaching". It can mean "the path". In this instance, it's bringing in a more detailed, or refined, or granular sense of our experience.</p> <p>Two lists constitute the heart of the dhammas section: what's known as 1) the hindrances and 2) the awakening factors...</p>

The hindrances

The hindrances are like veils that cover our awareness. They are a kind of filter that means we're not able to be awake and present and wise. Sometimes it's said that the hindrances keep us on the surface of things. Another description is that they're like flypaper. We tend to get stuck to these states. I'm sure you going to recognize them when I describe them.

1. Sensuous desire

The first hindrance is what's called sensuous desire. This is where we get really drawn into things, we really get addicted to our sensuous experience. There's a lovely image for this, which is water mixed up with dye. Imagine water that's dyed with all of these gorgeous colors. We get very drawn in and caught up with our desire.

There's nothing wrong with pleasure. There's nothing wrong with enjoying life. The Buddha strongly encouraged that. But it's where **we get drawn in and attached and addicted, that's the problem.**

2. Aversion

The second hindrance is aversion, or hatred, or ill will. Traditionally, this is water that is boiling. We've all had that experience. We're so churned up and full of anger and irritation and even hatred that it's like boiling water.

3. Sloth and torpor

The third hindrance is sloth and torpor. I really love that description: sloth and torpor. Sloth is in the body and torpor is in the mind: these are dull, heavy, sleepy states. The image here is water mixed with algae: all sludgy and stuck and heavy. And I'm sure we've all had that experience when we just feel very dull and lethargic. Again, this is considered one of the states that blocks us from being more awake and wise and clear.

4. Restlessness and anxiety

The next hindrance is the opposite of sloth and torpor: restlessness and anxiety. The image here is of water that's whipped up by the wind. It's turbulent. Restlessness is in the body and the anxiety is in the mind. And it's the same kind of energetic state of disturbance. You can see that sloth and torpor and restlessness and anxiety are opposite states of low energy and agitated energy.

5. Doubt and indecision

The fifth hindrance is doubt and indecision. The image here is of dark and muddy water. It's all heavy and sluggish and dark and muddy. **Doubt and indecision in some ways is one of the most difficult hindrances to work with** because we're doubting what we're doing. So maybe you're sitting here watching this talk or engaging in this course and there's a little voice saying, "Oh, I don't know if I believe in this", "I don't think I can do it. Other people can do it but I can't", "It's fine for her to talk about it but I don't get it."

So doubt is very corrosive, very undermining, of course. And it's a hard one to work with because we need confidence to overcome it. But of course, we doubt our confidence. So... dark and muddy water.

And the Buddha is saying **we can work with all of these hindrances and we can overcome them all with mindfulness.**

The awakening factors

The good news is that the dhammas section of the *Satipatthāna Sutta* includes another list, known as the awakening factors. These are, in a way, the states that arise when the hindrances are absent. This is a very beautiful list of qualities.

1. Mindfulness

The first awakening factor is simply mindfulness, being aware. That's what we're going deeply into in this unit of the course.

2. Investigation

The second awakening factor is *dhamma vicaya*, which means something like "investigation of subjective experience." And again, we're doing that in this program. It's where **we get very curious and we learn how to look inside and really tease apart our experience, and get a bit closer to our experience:** what's actually happening, what's actually going on. And then we can be free of our compulsive habitual reactions.

3. Energy

The third awakening factor is energy. If we're mindful, if we're able to investigate our experience without reactivity, then energy starts to arise. Energy starts to bubble up. Maybe you're experiencing it on this program.

4. Piti, bubbly joy

The fourth awakening factor is energy that's even more light and delicate and bubbly, and it's swirling up in the body. This is called *prīti* or *pīti*. You might be sitting here and you have just a sense of "Oh, there's a sort of opening in the heart." Maybe there's a little tingling in the body. At its most expansive, *pīti* takes the form of rapture. But very often it's just a little tingly opening, a sort of bubbly quality, joy around the heart. Very, very lovely. So it can be quite mild or it can be very intense. But the main thing is that we notice it when it arises.

In my case, I tend to experience it on the milder end of the spectrum, but I've learned to really cherish and pay attention to these moments. "Oh yes, everything's opening and I feel a bit more buoyant, a bit more upright."

5. Calming down

The next awakening factor is calming down. It's as if we're present, we're investigating, energy arises, energy arises even more, and then out of that comes a refinement and a distilling and a calming. There's calming down.

6. Absorption

The next awakening factor is absorption. We've come into the present, we know what's going on, energy has bubbled up, energy has calmed down. Then there is this quality of everything gathering in: all of our chaotic, dispersed energies all coming together and we become more absorbed. A very, very beautiful quality.

7. Equanimity

The last awakening factor is equanimity. And equanimity might sound a bit boring or bland or dull. But equanimity in this sense is a very, very refined state.

It's a very advanced, wise state where we're no longer thrown about by life. We're able to maintain equipoise. We're going through life, life is happening, we're engaging with life... but we're not knocked about, we're not buffeted about by life's events: we're able to maintain stability. Calm isn't even quite the right word: it's a dynamic, vibrant aliveness, a present wakefulness—but we're not thrown about by things.

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So it's a very, very beautiful list. With our practice we're diminishing the hold of the hindrances and we're increasing the felt experience of the awakening factors. This is what the *Satipatthāna Sutta* teaches us.

Attitudes we bring to practice

We're also asked to bring certain attitudes to our practice...

Balanced effort

The first attitude is balanced effort. We're learning how to apply our attention to our mindfulness practice without pushing for results or pushing at experience, nor are we backing off and just being vague, all over the place, and distracted. **So it's a balanced effort, a very appropriate effort: we're engaging without straining.** And again, it's very, very beautiful when you get a taste for that.

Intelligence and clarity

Another attitude that the Buddha is saying to bring to our awareness, our practice, our waking up, is intelligence and clarity. We remember why we're cultivating awareness. Yes, we're cultivating awareness to manage our pain and illness better: that's a very important motivation. And ultimately we're maintaining awareness so we can liberate the mind from the afflictions: all these ways it closes down and gets all tangled up and knotted. **We can cultivate a mind that is free and boundless and loving and liberated, even luminous as it's often described.**

Knowing right now

Another essential attitude is present moment awareness. We not only know why we are aware, but also we are in touch with what is actually happening moment by moment. We cultivate presence. This is really important. We are only going to be able to change our responses to experience if we know what is actually happening in our body, mind, and heart moment by moment – as well as in the world around us. This immediate knowing is one of the crucial keys to freedom.

Letting go of likes and dislikes

Finally, we're asked to cultivate an attitude where **we're letting go of being a slave to likes and dislikes**. This is where we're going through life just bouncing off experience, thinking, "Oh, don't like that", "Oh, I want more of that." Then we're just caught up in this compulsion of trying to avoid pain and to hang on to pleasure. And the Buddha is very, very clear that this is one of the main ways that we create suffering for ourselves. **So we learn how to play with pain kindly, tenderly, and to let go of aversion. And we learn how to really enjoy pleasure without grasping and clinging.**

The Satipatthana refrain

And then finally, in this text, in this wonderful sutta, there's what's called the chorus or the refrain. It's like a drumbeat that keeps on repeating throughout the whole sutta. There'll be a little bit of teaching and then the drumbeat will come back in; a bit more teaching, and the drumbeat comes back in. The refrain communicates the insight dimension of practice, we might say the *liberating* dimension of practice.

Be aware of these phenomena in self and others

So whether it's referring to the body, feeling tone, the mind and heart, or dhammas—the refrain asks us to reflect or **be aware of this internally, externally, and both internally and externally**. The scholars generally agree that this means in self and other. So we're not just becoming aware of these things in ourselves but we're also aware of them in others and we're seeing our common human experience.

Be aware of arising and passing

The refrain then asks us to be aware of the arising, the passing, and both the arising and the passing in these different aspects of body, feeling tone, mind, and so on. This means seeing into the fluid and changing nature of everything. We'll go into this aspect of practice very, very fully in the fourth unit of this course where we'll look at arising and passing. This is a very, very important, profound insight from Buddhism.

Be mindful enough for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness

The next invitation is to become mindful enough for **bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness**. So again, we're talking about purpose. The point of our mindfulness is so we can know and have continuous mindfulness.

Often what's raised in this dimension is the question: is a sniper mindful? Because of course a sniper is very, very present. A sniper has to be very aware of the wind, their posture, their breathing, themselves, the other—not in a good way, of course. But from the Satipatthāna point of view, a sniper isn't mindful

because the sniper has a very impure motive. Whereas if we're practicing for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness to move towards liberation, then our values and our motives are aligned with the good, they're life-enhancing, and in line with the way things are in the world: fluid and open and boundless.

Abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world

Finally, the invitation is to **abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world**. It doesn't mean independent as in separate: it means **free from all the ways that we get entangled with our experience** and knotted up around our experience. And abiding, independent, not clinging to anything in the world is synonymous with enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition.

A four-word summary of the Satipatthana Sutta

This is a really, really wonderful text and I encourage you to study it more if you can. But I've said a lot of words and it's quite a lot to take in. So I'm going to help you now by giving you a four-word summary from the Buddhist scholar Bhikkhu Anālayo. It's really, really wonderful. He sums the whole text up in four words:

“Keep calmly knowing change.”

—Bhikkhu Anālayo

That's fantastic isn't it? Keep calmly knowing change. We're able to maintain a **continuity** of effort, a continuity of purpose. We're **calm**. We're not getting tangled up in things and flustered by things. There's a **knowing** dimension: the wisdom, insight, intelligent dimension. And what we're knowing is **change**. We're knowing the impermanent, changing, fluid nature of everything. And it's not as if I'm observing change in myself, but it's as if I know that I am change. Change is everything. Change is my essence. So it's not like there's something fixed that's looking at change, but it's more that we realize, "Oh, change is the nature of everything." And **if we can bring that attitude to our experience of pain and illness, it can be profoundly transformative. What is pain? What is illness? It's a flow of experience.** It's not a thing. It's not an object to get caught up with.

We rest inside the flow of experience and we can begin to let go of identifying quite so strongly with the label of pain and illness. And we just have a flow of experience that we're learning to be with—with kindness, with love, with care, and with wisdom.

So let's bring these wonderful invitations into the rest of the course, these wonderful words: **keep calmly knowing change.**



From Fighting to Flourishing

Vidyamala describes four phases in the journey from denial to flourishing.

In this talk, I'm going to look at the four major phases of my own life with this spinal injury. Over the past 45 years I can see how I've gone through very distinctive phases. And I'm sharing this because I think it may be helpful to you. You might recognize them in your own experience and hopefully you might find this encouraging and give you some kind of hope that **with these practices we can really turn our lives around.**

The four stages are **denial, bargaining, acceptance, and flourishing.** I'm going to connect each of these to breathing. In the *Satipatthāna Sutta*, one of the elements we're asked to be aware of is breathing. And **breathing is a very, very powerful practice.** We'll come back to that again and again in this program. What mindfulness can help us do is to move from tight, constricted breathing to more wholesome breathing, whole body breathing, more fluid breathing. As we begin to open and release and settle and cultivate calm, energy, positivity, even happiness, then **our breathing will quite naturally ease** in the body because the mind and the body, of course, are very, very connected.

The four phases

Denial

"I was in denial in the sense that I could not come to terms with what had happened. I'd gone from being very sporty, very active, and then really quite suddenly over a period of months of treatment and surgeries, I lost that identity. I was no longer that girl, and I became a girl who was living with disability and living with pain. So I went into denial in the sense of 'this isn't happening', pretending that it wasn't happening, pushing against it and then trying to have this this life that I used to have. I kept trying to do the things that I used to do. And then of course, I'd get exhausted. The pain would flare up. I'd get heartbroken, I'd get upset, I'd get distressed, and the pain would get worse. Maybe I'd have to stop for a little bit and then I'd go back into pushing again,

pretending it hadn't happened, trying to shoehorn myself back into my old life when actually my life had changed.

If I think back to my breathing during those years, it was very high in the body. It was very tense, shallow, tight, because I was tense and shallow and tight. That was my default setting."

"I got into this very big tussle inside my mind between two sides. One part of me was saying, "I cannot do this. I will go mad." And another part of me was saying, "But you have to"... Eventually a third voice came in—very clearly, actually—that said **"You don't have to get through to the morning. You just have to live this moment, and this one, and this one, and this one."** And something in me relaxed. I wouldn't say it was a pleasant experience or that there was complete relaxation at all. I was still sort of tormented but there was something very, very significant that changed. It was partly that I knew in every cell of my being that this was true. **I knew that the absolute truth of things is that we ever only live life one moment at a time.** So that awoke in me an enormous curiosity. 'Well, what does it mean to be present? What does it mean to live life one moment at a time?' It doesn't mean that there isn't past or future. Of course there is, we've got memories and we plan. But the only time that we actually live is *now*. And the future arises out of now. And the now, to some extent, is a consequence of the past. So the only moment that we can experience ourselves directly is now.

So obviously I did get through to the morning. And ever since then this has been one of my overriding passions: what happened that night? **What was that kind of knowing that I experienced and how can I really embed that in my awareness and how can I live from that place?"**

"Another experience I had while I was in hospital was realizing that I could consider taking responsibility for myself, which I hadn't really done at all until that point. I just wanted someone else to fix me, or I wanted to pretend that nothing had happened. It was this idea that how my life unfolds is—to a very large extent—going to depend on me. There wasn't any medical solution to my difficulties, and the medics were saying, 'You really need to learn how to manage, how to how to adapt your life, how to self-manage as best you can.' And so I took that on board. I thought, 'Well, yes, I can. I'm willing to give that a go.'"

"I took my mind back to the Southern Alps of New Zealand, where I'd been ecstatically happy before my injuries: super fit, out in the wilds, absolutely glorious. And then he brought the meditation to a close and I felt different. I felt

very significantly different. And the only thing that had changed is what I had done with my awareness, what I'd filled my mind with. **And I'd filled my mind with beauty, I'd filled my mind with happiness and I'd filled my mind with this notion of choice: that I could choose what I did with my awareness. I felt much happier, much more positive.**"

Bargaining

"I started doing things that were good for me. I started meditating. I did some rehab, swimming, started doing yoga, started taking responsibility for nutrition, all these kind of things. And still I had pain. Still I had a fused spine. Still I had a broken spine. And the problem with the bargaining phase is you do the right things, but you do the right things with a false agenda. My fantasy was that if I did these things, all my back pain would go away and somehow, miraculously it would be cured. My spine would suddenly be as it had been before my accidents. And I know that sounds ludicrous, but I think many of us do that. Maybe for some of you on this course, if you're really honest, there's some little fantasy: 'If I do this course, then I'm going to be miraculously cured from anything difficult in my life and my life is going to be perfect.' Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you but that's very unlikely. But **what you can do is heal your attitude to what you're experiencing. There's an interesting distinction between healing and cure. We might not be able to cure ourselves of our illness or our pain, but we can heal our attitude. That's a very different thing.**"

"Bargaining is quite tricky in the sense that it's not as deluded as denial, but it's still very delusional and very painful and very, very confusing. You think, 'I'm doing all the right things. Why aren't I getting my desired outcome?' Well, the issue is that your desired outcome is the thing that's at fault, not the practices themselves."

"If I think about my breathing in the bargaining phase, it was still quite tight. It was still quite high and my body was still quite constricted because there was struggle. I kept doing these things and thinking, 'Oh, it's not working. I've got to try even harder, got to meditate even more intensively and do more and more yoga.' There was still this tight, strained breathing and there was still an inability to be with what is. I still couldn't quite be with my situation, even though on a scale, I was able to do it way more than when I was in denial. So they're not completely sort of discrete phases: bargaining is more wise than denial, but there was still an inability to be with myself fully."

Acceptance

"I realized two things. The first was that I'd been using my spiritual practice—my awareness practice, my kindness practice, my Buddhist studies—I'd been using all those things to try to escape my experience rather than coming closer to my experience. I was still using all those things to get away from this life that I didn't like in order to have this ideal, fantasy, perfect life over there. And I'd got very good at that. But of course there was still a sense of strain. I got quite accomplished at trying to get from here to there. I'd definitely grown and developed, but I was still caught up on that impossible goal of, 'I just want to have this perfect life over there. And I don't like this life here that I've got.'

So I realized that I needed to quite profoundly change my attitude. **I needed to use all my practice, all my awareness, all my kindness, all of my turning to the Buddha's wisdom to help me land in this life just as it is** and profoundly change my attitude from one of, 'Ugh, I don't like it' to one of, 'Ah, here it is. Let me love it as best as I can. And let me let go of all these layers and layers and layers of tightness and contraction and grasping and confusion.'

And the other thing I really needed to develop much, much more strongly was **how to take my practice into all the moments of my life, not just when I was meditating.**"

"As I moved into the acceptance phase some of my breathing did start to change. My voice dropped and became more resonant, and my breathing was going much deeper in my body. It was landing right down in my belly, landing down in my pelvis, landing in my lower back—which is a place I really did not want to go, of course, because that's where all the trauma, all the pain was. It was a bit like I'd been using my practice to avoid that part of my body, but now awareness was very gradually coming closer—dropping, dropping, dropping, kindness, soothing, resting, opening, breathing—**I was able to come into relationship with my lower back with this healing attitude rather than fantasizing about cure.** That's been very tender—exquisitely tender—and very beautiful, very healing."

Flourishing

"I'd always seen acceptance as being, in a way, the ultimate state—that I might one day taste a little more acceptance. Wouldn't that be nice? But to my surprise, out of acceptance has come this new phase which I call *flourishing*. And it's as if by letting go of the battle, letting go of fighting with my experience so strongly, then more energy has been allowed to rise up—more energy of growth, of abundance, of looking up and out again, and being able to move into new possibilities, move into new life."

"Flourishing is something that I like to tell people about. When we have pain and illness, yes, it's very, very important that we come to terms with it; very important that we do what we can to help ourselves; very important that we accept as best we can. But then out of that can come a new lease of life, a new way of being that's more open, more abundant, more positive, and more open-hearted, more light-hearted, more good-humored and kind of wondrous because I never expected this."

"I notice my breathing in this flourishing phase: it's whole body breathing. It's breathing in the belly and the back and the chest, and the whole body, because all of myself can be brought into this flourishing phase."

So those are the four stages of denial, bargaining, acceptance, and flourishing. And who knows what will come next?

We move between phases

Before I conclude, just to say that although I've described this as four phases—I definitely see them as phases of about ten years each—**there's also movement between the phases**, of course. I do believe and I do experience that generally I'm in a flourishing phase, but I still have really low times, down days. I go back into denial, go back into a bit of bargaining and then, "Oh, yes," I can go back into feeling more boundless and open again. So it isn't that you do a phase and it's complete, then you do the other and it's complete, and then the next, and the next. **It's more that the general trend of your life moves through these phases and then you go in and out of the different phases depending on your circumstances.** That's inevitable and that's very human.

I hope you find this helpful and I hope you found it encouraging and I hope that it gives you hope. If I'd heard someone talking like this 40 years ago, I would have really loved it and I would have felt that person was talking to me. **So that's my wish: that you feel that I am talking to you. And that we're on this journey together.**



Reflect

1. What does a balanced effort look like for you?
2. Is there kindness in your practice of mindfulness?
3. Do you have doubts about yourself or this program? Perhaps it's worth allowing these into awareness but not necessarily believing them.
4. "Keep calmly knowing change." Is this a practice you would like to take on?
5. Vidyamala described four stages in her journey: denial, bargaining, acceptance, flourishing. How would you describe your own journey so far?

You may wish to make notes in a journal.



Meditation 2: Body Scan

Welcome back. We're going to do a body scan meditation together. This is one of the meditation practices that has really, really **helped me on my journey of learning to live in this body**. It's very much what it says on the tin. It's a body scan practice where we'll use our awareness to drop very deeply inside the body. And we're going to rest our awareness in all the different parts of the body. **Just do this as best you can**, engage with this as best you can.

Mind-wandering is normal

As you go through the practice the chances are your mind will wander. That's perfectly normal. That's what minds do. But when you notice you've wandered you've got this choice point, you've got this magic moment of mindfulness, of awareness. And **you can choose to very gently guide your awareness back inside your body and reengage with the practice**.

Choose your position

The first thing to do is to choose your position. If you can, I'd recommend that you do this lying down. But if lying down is very uncomfortable for you, then of course, choose another position. Choose a position where you'll be as comfortable as possible.

If you get very uncomfortable during the practice and need to move a little bit—if you're lying on your back, maybe rolling onto your side, or something like that—that's completely fine. And again, it's a choice point. **You can choose to do that if you feel it would help you stay with the practice and stay engaged with the practice.**

So, let's get ourselves set up, if you need to pause the recording to go off and get pillows or cushions or blankets or anything like that, then by all means doing so. And if you're lying down, you might like to put a couple of cushions behind your knees or put your legs up on a chair. This can take the strain off the lower back. It's completely up to you. Covering yourself with a blanket if you're likely to get cool.

Settling into the position

When you're ready, beginning to settle into the position that you've chosen, **allowing the body to become still and allowing the body to rest down into the support beneath us**, whether it's the floor, or the bed, or the chair. If you want to, you can take a deeper in-breath and on the out-breath release, let go a little bit more. Do that a few times if you'd like to.

And then when you're ready, **allowing your breathing to find its own natural rhythm**. There's an opening phase in the body on the in-breath and a subsiding, yielding, releasing phase in the body on the out-breath. Seeing if we can allow ourselves to be held and supported by the surface beneath us so we don't have to grip and hold on to the body, the body can settle.

Awareness of the feet

In this body scan meditation, **we're going to move from the feet all the way up through the body to the head.**

We're doing this experientially. We're not thinking about the different parts of the body but we're seeing if we can rest our awareness inside the different parts of the body.

So first of all, let's allow our awareness to pour all the way down through the body, all the way down to the feet and the toes so they become **drenched and saturated in awareness**. Being aware of sensation, temperature, contact with the socks or the floor. Or, maybe you're aware of an absence of

sensations. **Maybe there's a numbness. If that's the case, being aware of that, that's your awareness practice.**

Awareness of the legs

Now allowing awareness to pour up through the ankles to fill the legs: the lower legs, the knees, and the upper legs. What's it like to inhabit the legs with awareness? And **if you've got pain or discomfort anywhere in the legs, notice any tendency to push these experiences away**, push these sensations away, to harden and tense and tighten and resist.

In the noticing, **seeing if we can soften** a little bit. Just allowing these sensations to be part of the flow of awareness, moment by moment by moment. **Allowing the experience we label "pain"—as if it's a thing—to become a flow, something flowing through the moments.**

Maybe there are parts of the legs that feel warm or pleasant. If that's the case, **enjoying it, and then letting it go**; enjoying it, letting it go.

Or maybe the legs are numb or there's a sense of absence, maybe due to a health condition. If that's the case, being aware of that with kindness and tenderness.

Awareness of the buttocks

Flowing up to the buttocks now. If you're lying or sitting, seeing if you can allow the buttocks to rest into the bed, or the chair, or the floor. If we're standing, allowing the buttocks to be soft.

Awareness of the torso

And now let's invite our awareness to pour up inside the torso: the front and the back and the sides. Coming in a little more closely now, into the belly: the whole soft front of the body between the pelvis at the bottom and the base of the ribs at the top. Resting our awareness here. Maybe having a sense of the belly swelling a little bit on the in-breath, subsiding on the out-breath, but **being careful not to force or strain.**

Coming to the chest: the ribs expanding and retracting, the lungs filling and emptying, and the breastbone rising and falling, gently, with a natural breath.

“We're learning how to be with experience, without interfering with it, without forcing or straining: engaged, receptive, curious.”

If it feels agitating to be in this part of the body—which it can for some people to be around the heart area—you could choose to move your awareness somewhere that feels more stable: maybe the buttocks, hands, feet. **Stabilize and ground**; moving back to the chest if and when you feel ready.

Now, let's allow our awareness to pour down inside the lower back, perhaps checking back in on the buttocks first of all, that they're still soft. Yielding, resting. And then coming into the shape of the lower back, the length and the breadth of the lower back.

Maybe there is breathing showing up in the lower back; maybe there isn't. **Being curious without expectation or judgment.**

Now the middle back and the upper back: the back of the ribs, the back of the lungs, the spine, the shoulder blades—all being breathed. An opening phase and then a releasing, subsiding, yielding phase.

And broadening to be aware of the whole torso again: the front, the back, the sides, the inside, the surface. Allowing experience to flow through the moments.

“If there's pain, discomfort, tension, seeing if we can include it in our awareness with kindness and gentleness rather than contracting and hardening against it. Just letting it be part of our experience.”

Awareness of the shoulders and arms

Now allowing awareness to pour through the shoulders on either side of the torso. At this point, let's check the hands are supported in the lap if we're sitting, or on the legs. If we're lying down, the hands might be at the sides of the body or resting on the body. It's up to you. With the hands supported, the shoulders can release, they can release away from the midline of the body, maybe dropping down and back a little bit. Allowing awareness to pour through the shoulders all the way down inside the arms to the hands and the fingers, the thumbs. So the arms and the hands are drenched in awareness. **Being aware: temperature, sensation, dullness, numbness, whatever it is, letting it into awareness just as it is, moment by moment by moment.**

Awareness of the neck and head

And now let's allow our awareness to pour back up through the arms, through the shoulders into the neck and the head. If we're sitting, let's check the angle of the head. Let the head be poised on top of the spine so there's releasing through the base of the skull and yet openness in the throat. If we're lying down, checking that the head is heavy on the pillow or the cushion. **Letting the head**

be held and supported so that we don't need to hold on with effort whether we're sitting or lying.

Letting the lips, jaw, tongue be soft; the eyes soft, cheeks soft, forehead soft. Feeling into the physicality of the head as a limb of the body. It's not separate from the body.

Awareness of the whole body

Now broadening to be aware of the whole body. This whole experience we label "body"... it would be more accurate to label it with a verb: *embodying*, moment by moment by moment. This flow of experience: breathing, resting, yielding, **learning to meet any pain or discomfort with a little more tenderness, a little more openness, and a little less tightness and contraction.**

“Being open to everything in the body, whatever's arising, whatever's passing.”

Continuing to practice, or bringing the session to an end

You can continue practicing if you want to. And when you feel it's time to end, come out of the practice carefully and gently. If you're lying down, I suggest you roll over onto your side first of all, resting there for a few moments before coming over onto your hands and knees—if that's comfortable or possible—and then gently uncoiling the spine.

However we come out of the practice, doing it **mindfully and carefully**, taking care of your body and **seeing if you can take this quality of awareness with you** as we reengage with whatever's coming next in your day. Thank you.



Discuss

This is a space in which you can support each other and share your experiences of working with the material.

Suggested topics

1. If you wish to, introduce yourself and say hello to the community.
2. The Buddha was not exempt from physical pain and illness, yet his mind was free. What might this feel like?
3. Can you relate to Vidyamala's journey? Did it inspire you?
4. Why might the *Satipatthāna Sutta* suggest we "let go of being a slave to likes and dislikes"?
5. Are mindfulness and kindness the same thing?



In Daily Life

Vidyamala suggests techniques for bringing more and more awareness into the heart of everyday life. Work with these techniques, make them your own, and practice them daily.

As we bring this unit to a close, this unit on the power of awareness, I'd just like to give you a few pointers about how you can **bring awareness into your daily life** until we begin the next unit.

Create the conditions for awareness

Really, it's very simple. What I suggest you do is **create conditions where you can be more aware more of the time. Just dropping into the body, dropping into your breathing, noticing your emotional weather, noticing your thoughts, letting everything come and go.**

Set a mindfulness bell

You could try to do this once an hour. Just stop for a few moments. **Set a timer for once an hour** on your phone, watch, or a little alarm clock. **When the timer goes off just stop. Just stop. Feel your feet on the floor. Feel your bum on the chair. Drop down. Yield. Rest. Notice. Be receptive.** Allowing awareness of what you're experiencing.

This is training in present-moment awareness. This is training in knowing what's actually happening. Because if you know what's happening, you can choose how you respond.

Choose how to respond to what's here

So you stop. You tune in. And then you **choose how to respond.**

- If you've got a lot of pain when you stop and tune in, what could ease that pain? It might be lying down. It might be doing a body scan. It might be taking three deep breaths. It might be walking. It might be moving.
- If you're feeling really stressed, really in your head, really wound up: it might just be dropping your awareness into the soles of the feet on the

floor, yielding your bum onto the chair, resting into the chair, dropping out of your head, filling your body with awareness.

- If you're really tired, maybe you need to rest. Or maybe you need to do something to stimulate your energy. These are the wise choices that comes out of awareness.

So it's quite a simple home practice this week: **stopping regularly throughout your day, dropping into awareness, and then choosing how you want to respond.**

Look at the sky

Another thing you could do is looking at the sky. That's a lovely thing to do. **Drop into awareness and then just raise your gaze and look up at the sky.** If you're lucky enough to have a blue sky, all the better. But even if it's a gray sky, that can still be quite interesting, looking at the different textures of gray. Broadening your horizon, **broadening your awareness from being all tight and caught up with things.**

Celebrate your bravery

And also see this as a brave practice. **It takes a lot of bravery to be willing to be aware, so celebrate your own bravery** and celebrate your own courage.

Optional reading

If you want to do any reading, **you could look up on the Internet about the *Satipatthāna Sutta*.** There are lots of commentaries, various books, and so on. And that can be a really interesting thing to do if you want to. You certainly don't have to. My whole wish for this course is that it's highly experiential. So don't create a whole lot of work for yourself. The main thing is to learn how to be aware, how to befriend our experience and drop into our own courage, our own bravery, our own kindness, and beginning to open to this great mystery of life.



Summary: The Power of Awareness

We've started our journey using the BE AWARE acronym. This unit has been a deep dive into the foundational skill of mindfulness. Can we inhabit the present moment? Can we allow our experience to be here with kindness and curiosity?

BE

Be present

The first step is **being present**: learning how to be here with our experience just as it is, transforming our reactive tendencies.

A

Accept

The second step is **acceptance and kindness** around the pain or the difficulty.

W

Wake up to wonder

The third step is **waking up to wonder**. How beautiful, discovering that there's always something pleasant, even beautiful, that we can tune into when our awareness becomes more refined and sensitive.

A

Arising and passing

The fourth step is **arising and passing**: living with flow. This is important and profound. We realize that everything is changing, everything is process, including what we relate to as pain as if it's a solid object. That too, is process.

R

Relate and connect

The fifth step is **relating and connecting**: realizing that we're not alone and our experience of pain or difficulty can become a point of empathy rather than a cause of isolation.

E

Engage

Finally, the sixth step is to **engage** with all of our life. How can we bring this training into all the moments of our life?

Let's briefly recap some key points.

- Dipa Ma, a great Buddhist teacher, said that mindfulness and kindness are one and the same. **When we are present we are loving; and when we are loving, we are present.**
- In our simple practice of awareness **we are more interested in *the process of being aware* than in the *content* of awareness.** We're opening to what's happening with a kind and curious attitude. We're trying not to push experience away or cling to it.
- We heard Vidyamala's story and how she has learned to use the power of awareness to **change how she relates to pain, suffering, and difficulties.** In particular she related four stages of her life so far in which she has moved through broad periods of denial, bargaining, and acceptance into flourishing.
- We reflected on the example of how the Buddha was still subject to physical pain but had **freed his mind** so completely that he no longer suffered. This is a trajectory that we, too, can follow.
- We looked at the *Satipatthāna Sutta*, which teaches us to be mindful of **body, feeling tone, mind and heart**, and **dhammas**. This last category includes two very useful lists: the **hindrances** and the **awakening factors**. These provide a map that we can orient to when the mind is closing down into less wholesome states or when it is opening into more expansive, wholesome states.
- We also looked at the **attitudes** and **insight** dimensions of mindfulness practice. The attitudes include using **balanced effort, intelligence and clarity**, and **letting go of likes and dislikes**. The insight dimensions include being aware of these phenomena in **self and others**; being aware of **arising and passing**; being mindful enough for **bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness**; and **abiding independent, not clinging to anything in the world**. We might feel into this for ourselves: what way of being in the world are these teachings pointing to?
- For our second meditation, Vidyamala guided us in a **body scan**. We allowed awareness to flow through our bodies from the feet up to the head, learning how to be with experience without straining for it to be different, being open to everything in the body, whatever's arising or passing. At the same time, we acknowledged that this is a training and it's OK for us to move or to place our awareness elsewhere if we need to.



Practice and Inquiry

Formal practice

Vidyamala guided us in two formal meditations: a **simple awareness practice** and a **body scan**. You might find it helpful to continue with these practices, leaning into whichever of the two feels most helpful to you. Do what you can, and always be kind to yourself: don't push too hard. These practices will bear fruit in time if we keep returning to them with a gentle, relaxed, and curious attitude.

Audio from the guided meditations is available as a download to support you. Or you may wish to review the instructions in the workbook and undertake these practices at your own pace.

In daily life

Vidyamala suggested some techniques for bringing awareness into everyday life. We can use these techniques to gradually develop greater continuity of awareness, and to pick up the thread of mindfulness when we lose it.

- **Create the conditions for awareness.** This might be making adjustments in your life that make it easier to remember to be aware, and to continue being aware. Vidyamala recommended setting a timer as **an hourly mindfulness bell**. This will remind us to be aware.
- **Whenever you become aware, stop.** Feel your feet on the floor. Feel your bum on the chair. Drop down. Yield. Rest. Notice. Be receptive. Allowing awareness of what you're experiencing.
- Notice that awareness gives you the possibility of **choosing how you respond to your experience**. If you have a lot of pain, what would ease that? If you are tired, do you need to rest or stimulate yourself. Seeing what wise choices emerge from awareness.
- **Look at the sky.** Appreciate the view and broaden your awareness.
- If you wish, you could do some optional reading about *The Satipatthāna Sutta*, though you really don't have to if you would rather keep things simple. You can read the sutta itself at [Sutta Central](#) or [Dhamma Talks](#) or [Access to Insight](#). If you would like to hear more from Bhikkhu

Anālayo, a scholar of the *Satipatthāna Sutta*, you might read this [interview on the Spirit Rock website](#).

Next up – Unit 2: Acceptance and Kindness

In the next unit we explore the terrain of feeling tone. Vidyamala will guide us in meditations on "The Treasure of Pleasure" and "Experiencing Awe". We'll also investigate the negativity bias: the very human tendency to focus on the difficult aspects of our experience. We'll also tune in to some intriguing discoveries about the transformative potential of experiencing awe and beauty.

Vidyamala Burch, *Freeing the Mind When the Body Hurts* © 2023

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