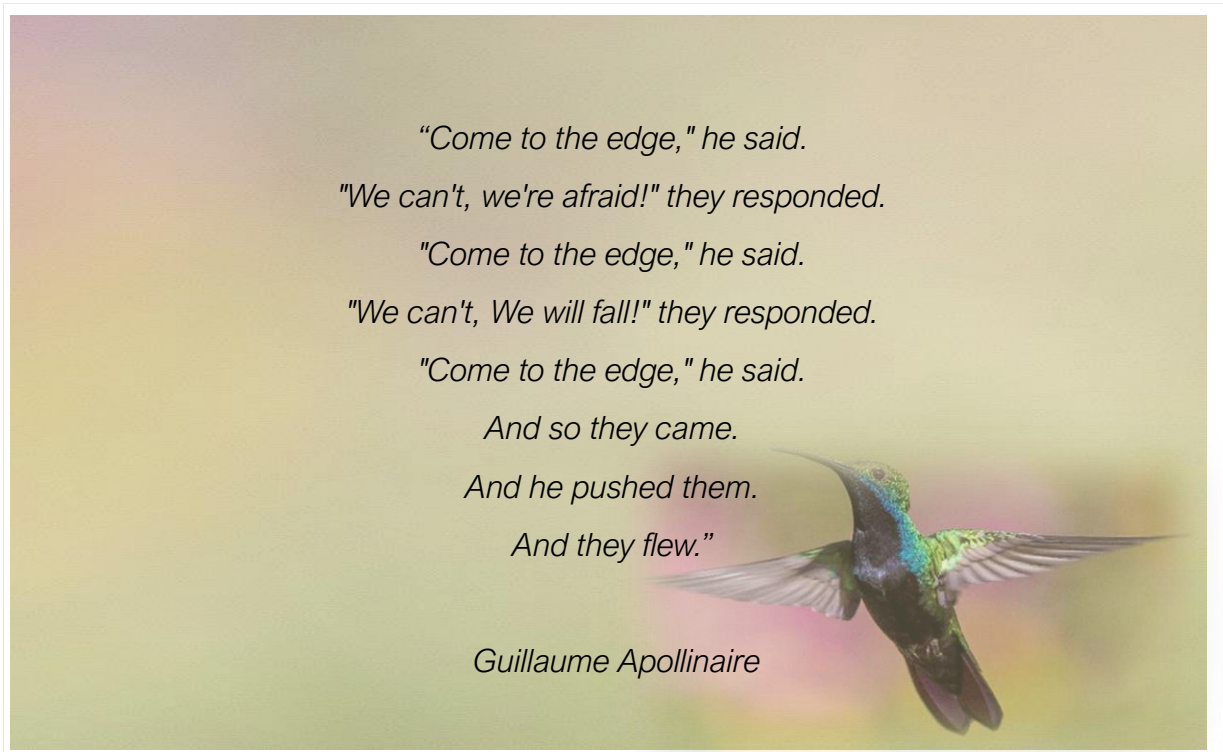


Meeting 6

Allowing and Letting Be



In the first part of training we have mainly been learning to focus our attention on the breath, on the body, on sounds and on becoming aware of wandering thoughts and automatic reactions of preference and dislike. That's the foundation for the second part of training. In the coming weeks, the focus will be on how to apply these skills to deal with stressful and difficult situations differently.

In practicing mindfulness, our intention is to become aware of our moment-to-moment experience. This is actually the first step in allowing or accepting our experience. The second step has to do with the way we deal with our experiences. Often we can become aware of a (recurring) thought, feeling or physical sensation, but in a non-allowing, reactive way. If we like the experience, we tend to hold on to the experience; we're getting attached to it. If we dislike an experience because, for example, it is painful, unpleasant or uncomfortable, we tend to do the opposite; we want to push the experience away. Both holding on and pushing away are ways in which we do not allow our experience to be as it is at that time.

The easiest way to allow experiences is to stop trying to make things different. Allowing an experience simply means allowing space for what happens, rather than trying to create another state or situation. Through allowing, we become able to rest in the awareness of what is now. We let it be: we just notice and observe everything that is *already* there.

Allowing/Letting Be

Considering letting be, some people think about resigning, resigning, giving up. Still, those are different things. Letting be means that you *actively* respond to and deal with feelings, by allowing them and acknowledging, validating, that they are there. That requires effort and commitment. Resignation is usually accompanied by passivity and powerlessness.

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,

still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.



From: Barks and Moyne (1997). The essential Rumi. San Francisco: Harper.

The importance of Allowing/Letting Be

Letting be is the opposite of non-acceptance. Such an automatic resistance to unpleasant experiences can quickly lead us to getting frustrated, angry, or bored. We can also fall into the trap of old thinking patterns. 'I'm stupid to think like this' or 'I can't stand this!' or 'I can't do anything right' or 'I should be strong enough to cope with that'.

On the other hand, if we deliberately focus our attention on unwanted experiences and allow them with openness and mildness, we can break through these kinds of automatic reactions. Then we can also see if our thoughts are actually true, for example.

One way to further develop the skill of allowing/letting be is the following. Suppose, during an exercise, our attention is constantly drawn to certain sensations in the body that have to do with physical discomfort, emotions or feelings, then the first step is to become aware of the physical sensations or the emotions and deliberately move the focus of our attention to that part of the body where we experience these sensations the strongest.

Once our attention has been directed to the physical sensations and we've brought the area of discomfort into the field of our awareness, we can tell ourselves:

"It's OK. Whatever is there, let me be open to it. Just let me feel it." Then we just stay aware of and present with these physical sensations and our relationship with them, while we breathe with them and let them be as they are. It might help to repeat:

"It's OK. Whatever it is, let me be open to it. Just let me feel it.", while we use every outbreath to soften and open up to the sensations we become aware of.

Bringing our attention as much as possible, in a friendly way, to the area of discomfort. Exploring the sensations. Allowing them to be there just as they are. What exactly can be felt, where exactly are the feelings located, do they change? Is there a (natural) tendency to resist, cramp, suppress? Can we feel these reactions in our body? If we like, we can breathe in towards the sensations in our body and breath out, away from them. This way we can use our breathing to bring our attention to the sensations.

The pitfall may be that our mind, by allowing/letting be, still *secretly hopes* that the unpleasant feeling will go away. When that is the case, allowing/letting be then becomes a strategy of *DOING* mode, which wants to solve or achieve something. This desire to stop the unpleasant experience can also be acknowledged and validated. Then we have the choice, to redirect our attention to the unpleasant experience as best as possible or to consciously focus our attention on the physical movements of breathing.

Feelings only want to be felt. Nothing else. They are not problems to be solved. Nothing needs to be done about them...

~ Christiane Michelberger



Allowing/letting be is therefore neither a strategy to not feel anything, nor passive surrendering. We don't become a doormat or let all experiences wash over us passively without acting on them. *'Allowing difficult feelings to be in awareness means that we register their presence before making a choice about how to respond to them.'* (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013, p. 272) Acceptance is about allowing *this* moment and *this* experience to be as it is. Acceptance allows us to remain present with discomfort, fear, unhappiness, or judgment without identifying with, or fleeing from these reactions. *'Acceptance is for the mind what is relaxation for the body.'* (Koster & van den Brink, 2020, p. 7) We allow ourselves to become fully aware of difficult or awkward situations and feelings and then, if that is appropriate, respond to them in an adequate way, instead of responding in a knee-jerk way, by automatically using one of our old (often unhelpful) strategies to deal with difficult or awkward situations and feelings. Not accepting our experience of the present moment often takes a lot of energy because we fight and resist the moment that already is and that we cannot change. If we let go of resisting, if we allow our experience of that moment, however unpleasant it may be, often more space and clarity appears to see what has to be done or to not be done.

The King's Story

There is a story told of a king who had three sons. The first was handsome and very popular. When he was 21, his father built a palace in the city for him to live in. The second son was very intelligent and also very popular. When he became 21, his father built a palace in the city for him as well. The third son, neither handsome nor intelligent, was unfriendly and unpopular. When he was 21, the king's counselors said: "There is no further room in the city. Have a palace built outside the city for your son. You can have it built so it will be strong. You can send some of your guards to prevent it being attacked by the ruffians who live outside the walls." So the king built such a palace and sent some of his soldiers to protect it.

A year later, the son sent a message to his father. "I cannot live here. The ruffians are too strong." So the counselors said, "Build another palace, bigger and stronger, and 20 miles away from the city and the ruffians. With more soldiers, it will easily be able to withstand attacks from the nomadic tribes that pass that way." So the king built such a palace and sent 100 of his soldiers to protect it.

A year later, a message came from the son: "I cannot live here. The tribes are too strong." So the counsellors said: "Build a castle, a large castle, 100 miles away. It will be big enough to house 500 soldiers, and strong enough to withstand attacks from the peoples that live over the border." So the king built such a castle, and sent 500 of his soldiers to protect it.

But a year later, the son sent another message to the king. "Father, the attacks of the neighbouring peoples are too strong. They have attacked twice, and if they attack a third time, I fear for my life and the lives of your soldiers."

And the king said to his counselors, "Let him come home and he can live in the palace with me. For it is better that I learn to love my son than spend all the energy and resources of my kingdom keeping him at a distance."

From: Segal, Z.V., Williams, J.M.G. & Teasdale, J.D., (2013). Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression second edition, New York, The Guilford Press.

The Dark Pieces

All through my childhood, my parents kept a giant jigsaw puzzle set up on a puzzle table in the living room. My father, who had started all this, always hid the box top. The idea was to put the pieces together without knowing the picture ahead of time. Different members of the family and visiting friends would work on it, sometimes for only a few minutes at a time, until after several weeks hundreds and hundreds of pieces would each find their place.

Over the years, we finished dozens of these puzzles. In the end I got quite good at it and took a certain satisfaction in being the first one to see where a piece went or how two groups of pieces fit together. I especially loved the time when the first hint of pattern would emerge and I could see what had been there, hidden, all along.

The puzzle table was my father's birthday present to my mother. I can see him setting it up and gleefully pouring the pieces of that first puzzle from the box onto the tabletop. I was three or four and I did not understand my mother's delight. They hadn't explained this game to me, doubtless thinking I was too young to participate. But I wanted to participate, even then.

Alone in the living room early one morning, I climbed on a chair and spread out the hundreds of loose pieces lying on the table. The pieces were fairly small; some were brightly colored and some dark and shadowy. The dark ones seemed like spiders or bugs, ugly and a little frightening. They made me feel uncomfortable. Gathering up a few of these, I climbed down and hid them under one of the sofa cushions. For several weeks, whenever I was alone in the living room, I would climb up on the chair, take a few more dark pieces, and add them to the cache under the cushion.

So this first puzzle took the family a very long time to finish. Frustrated, my mother finally counted the pieces and realized that more than a hundred were missing. She asked me if I had seen them. I told her then what I had done with the pieces I didn't like and she rescued them and completed the puzzle. I remember watching her do this. As piece after dark piece was put in place and the picture emerged, I was astounded. I had not known there would be a picture. It was quite beautiful, a peaceful scene of a deserted beach. Without the pieces I had hidden, the game had made no sense.

Perhaps winning requires that we love the game unconditionally. Life provides all the pieces. When I accepted certain parts of life and denied and ignored the rest, I could only see my life a piece at a time - the happiness of a success or a time of celebration, or the ugliness and pain of a loss or a failure I was trying hard to put behind me out of sight. But like the dark pieces of the puzzle, these sadder events, painful as they are, have proven themselves a part of something larger. What brief glimpses I have had of something hidden seem to require accepting as a gift every last piece.

We are always putting the pieces together without knowing the picture ahead of time. I have been with many people in times of profound loss and grief when an unsuspected meaning begins to emerge from the fragments of their lives. Over time, this meaning has proven itself to be durable and trustworthy, even transformative. It is a kind of strength that never comes to those who deny their pain.

- from Kitchen Table Wisdom by Rachel Naomi Remen

*Give us courage to change what must be altered,
serenity to accept what cannot be helped,
and the insight to know the one from the other*

~ Reinhold Niebuhr



Mindful Walking

We can also use walking to focus our attention. During the mindful walking exercise we walk while we *know* that we are walking and *feel* that we are walking. We walk for the sake of walking itself. Mindful walking can be supportive, especially when we feel hasty and rushed.

To practice mindful walking we can follow the instructions described after the home practice suggestions or use the audio recording. To get used to mindful walking, we can maintain a slow pace at first. This makes it easier to register the movements of our feet and keeping our attention focused. When we feel tired or rushed, it can be helpful starting at a faster pace and then, after unwinding, gradually slowing down the pace.

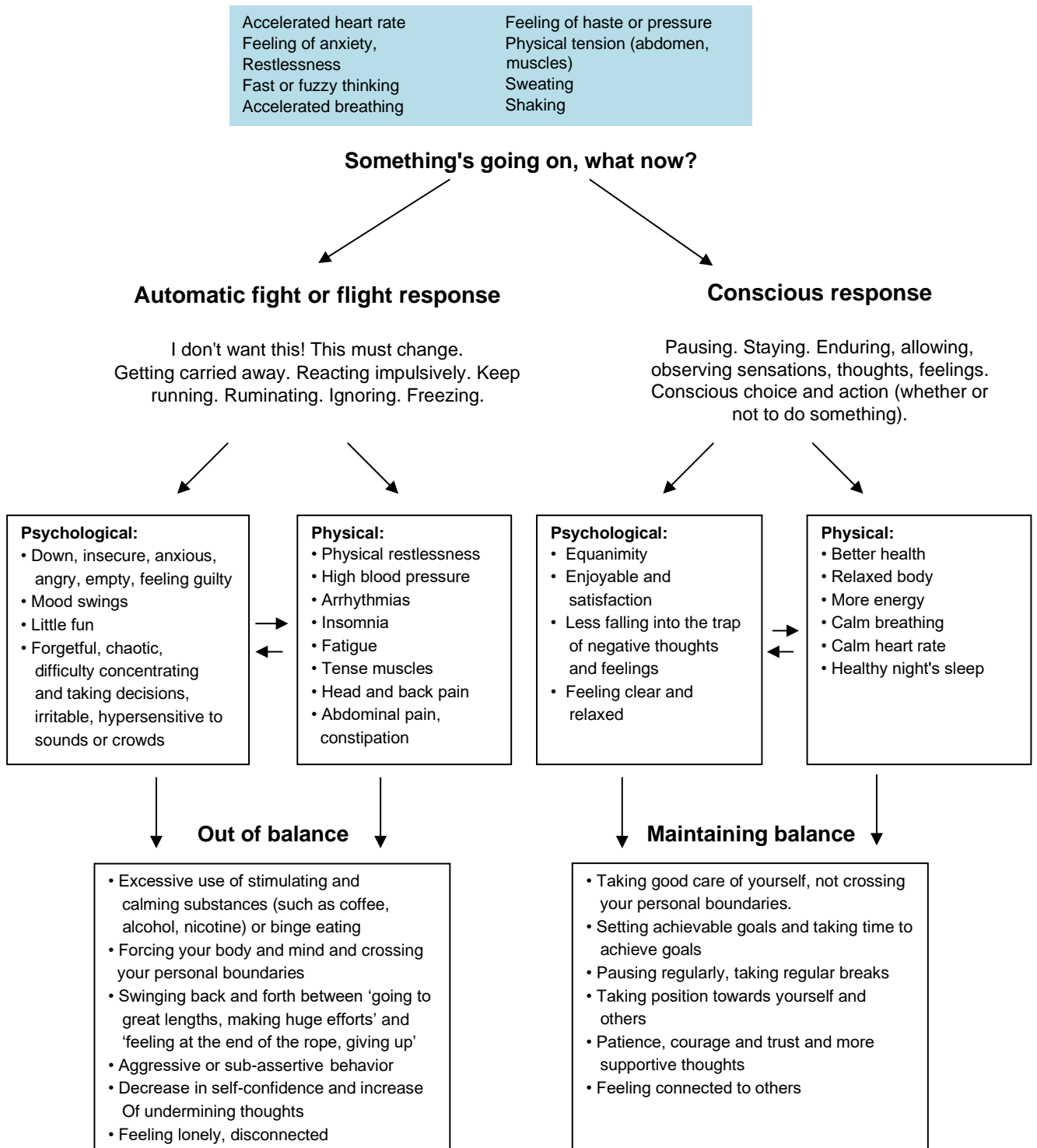
In addition to this formal walking exercise, we can also regularly focus our attention on walking in our daily activities. As we walk at our normal pace, we become aware of the touch of the feet with the ground, the movements in our legs and in the rest of our body.

Dealing differently with stress signals

Over the past week, you may have become more aware of signs that indicate stress to you. This is a first and important step in dealing with tensions differently. The next step is to respond to it in a conscious way.

One of the most difficult things about this is perhaps to pause as a first step. For that we can apply the three step breathing space. By inserting a break like that we can step out of automatic reactions and instead choose to respond consciously (see the model on the next page).

Stress-signals



Automatic reaction or conscious response. Customized drawing from Rob Brandsma. *Beter nu. Breng mindfulness in je leven. Uitgeverij Scriptum, 2007. Translated by Anja Boers, 2020.*

Acceptance

In teaching meditation, we often advise to develop a “soft and spacious mind”. But once when I used that phrase while teaching in Australia, I found that “soft mind” meant to people there something quite different from what I had intended. So it seems important to elucidate what we mean.

We mean by “soft and spacious mind” the quality of acceptance. For example, suppose you are watching your breath in meditation and you feel a sense of struggle or tension. This feeling of struggle may be a sign that something else is happening in your experience that you are not recognizing or allowing. Perhaps you are not opening to some other sensation in the body, some discomfort, or some underlying emotion. Or perhaps you have become caught up in expectations, with too much effort or striving, wanting the experience of the moment to be different from what it actually is.

Softness means opening to what is there, relaxing into it. At such a time, try this “mantra: ‘It’s okay. Whatever it is, it’s okay. Let me feel it.’” That is the softening of the mind. You can open to your experience with a sense of allowing, and simply be with whatever predominates: a pain, a thought, an emotion, anything.

Softening of the mind involves two steps. First, become mindfully aware of whatever is most predominant. That is the core guideline for all insight meditation. So the first step is just to see, to open.

For the second step, notice how you are relating to whatever arises. Often we can be with an arising appearance but in a reactive way. If we like it, we tend to hold on to it; we become attached. If we do not like it because it is painful in some way, we tend to contract, to push away out of fear, irritation or annoyance. Each of these responses is the opposite of acceptance.

The easiest way to relax is to stop trying to make things different. Rather than try to create another state, simply allow space for whatever is going on. If you sit down after being busy and your mind feels agitated or chaotic, try just seeing that state for what it is and accepting it. You might frame your whole mind-body experience with the mental note, *chaos, chaos*. Instead of having an agenda to change the quality of your energy, you enjoy the use of this simple key to just open to the energy that is there. This does not mean either spacing out or being entangled in your agitated thoughts. Rather, through acceptance we settle back into natural awareness of whatever is present.

Softening the mind is not so hard to do; it’s largely a matter of remembering to do it. “It’s okay, let me just feel this.” Then things settle down by themselves in a natural way. Struggle comes from not accepting what is present.

Often in meditative language we speak of letting go of things: let go of thoughts, let go of emotions, let go of pain. Sometimes that is not exactly the right phrase, because letting go suggests you need to do something. A better phrase to work with is, “Let it be.” Let it be. Everything comes and goes by itself. We do not have to do anything to make it come, or to make it go, or to let it go. We just have to let it be.

In order to let it all be, we need to grasp a difficult but essential lesson for meditation practice, and indeed for all aspects of our life. Having pleasant feelings and avoiding unpleasant ones is not the purpose of our practice. The purpose of mindfulness practice is freedom. When we

purify our mind of the afflictive emotions of greed, hatred, and delusion, we come to the end of suffering. So the important thing in meditation is not whether we experience pleasant or unpleasant feelings, but rather how we *relate* to those feelings. If we relate with mindfulness – that is, simply noticing, simply observing – then in that moment of mindfulness we are purifying our heart, because in that moment we are free from greed for the pleasant, aversion to the unpleasant feelings, and delusion about what is really there.

The meditative journey is not about always feeling good. Many times we may feel terrible. That's fine. What we want is to open to the entire range of what this mind and body are about. Sometimes we feel wonderful and happy and inspired, and at other times we deeply feel different aspects of suffering.

It takes courage and determination to be willing to see all these parts of ourselves. There are some dark corners in the heart that we may not have been willing to look at before, or to explore. They will surely come up. Sometimes even the buildup of energy that happens in the practice can feel like an uncomfortable stretch. Such experiences of the unsatisfactory aspects of our life are all part of what meditation is about; freedom cannot happen without them. The practice is opening, it is stretching, and most important, it is liberating.

This lesson of right understanding is a very hard transition to make. Can you let in deeply, right now, this crucial knowledge that practice is really not about pleasant feelings? Can you begin to undo the strong conditioning in your mind that tells you that only pleasant feelings are acceptable? What happens in the meditation is something entirely different from this ancient conditioning that keeps us bound to suffering. Through meditation we open to both to what is pleasant and to what is unpleasant with genuine acceptance and balance.

Years ago I rented a little house for the summer months in one of the hill stations of India. It was a cottage high in the mountains, exquisitely beautiful and very quiet. There I planned to devote four months to meditation practice.

A few weeks after I arrived, the Delhi Girls, a kind of Girl Scout group, set up camp in a clearing below the house. They hooked up loudspeakers that blasted music from six in the morning until ten or eleven at night. I could not believe it. I considered complaining to the mayor of the town, and wrote him many angry letters in my mind. But the din did not seem to bother anyone but me.

It was a big challenge to my equanimity. After going through all the struggles, all the anger, all the resentment, at a certain point my mind surrendered. There was nothing to do about the situation. With surrender, it was okay. There was the sound, the noise. It was fine. Finally, I just let it be.

From: Insight Meditation, The practice of Freedom by Joseph Goldstein (1993, p. 39-41)



Home practice suggestions after meeting 6

1. Practice alternately
 - ∞ one day the **walking meditation**: see instructions in your workbook, p. 91 or with audio
 - ∞ the other day a sitting meditation where you practice **exploring the difficult**, choosing alternately:
 - focus on the body and
 - the visualization exercise

Each time you do the exercise, briefly write your experiences during the exercise on the exercise form. Practice in between as often as you like and can **walking (stairs)** mindfully during the day.

2. The **three step breathing space** (see instructions meeting 3 and 4):
 - ∞ practice 3 times a day at predetermined times
 - ∞ practice every time you discover unpleasant feelings (see also home practice suggestion 3)

Write down your experiences or difficulties in the exercise form.

3. Observing your reactions in difficult situations and observing what happens when you consciously respond to the situation: Be extra aware of a **difficult situation** this week *while* it happens. Pay attention to what signals tell you that you're stressed. Also notice **how you deal with the situation**: do you react habitual or can you respond consciously to the situation? **Practice switching** from automatic reaction to conscious response. You can use the three step breathing space for this. Use the schedule of stress signals: **automatic reaction versus conscious response** to guide you. You can also pay attention to this during the formal exercises. Write down your experiences in the **Stress Exercise Form**. Do everything with as much curiosity, gentleness and kindness as possible!!

4. Review your expectations form. Are your expectations still the same. Have they changed? Maybe they've become more specific or nuanced? Which expectations have you achieved, which not? To what extend? Are you still connected to your first set intentions? If necessary fill in an **Adjusted Expectations Form**. Also complete the **evaluation questions** on the form.
5. Read the **information** belonging to meeting 6.
6. Keep a **daily record** of your homework. Fill it in as accurately and honestly as possible on the exercise form. Bring the form to the next meeting.

Walking meditation

- * Find a place where you can walk back and forth without having to worry about it if people can see you. It could be inside or outside.
- * Stand with your feet 10 to 15 cm apart and keep your knees slightly bent so you can make a feathery movement. Let your arms hang loosely alongside of your body or keep your hands loosely folded in front of or behind your body. Hold your gaze, softly, straight ahead, without fixating or trying to grasp what you see. So you don't have to look at your feet or look at the things around you.
- * Focus your attention on the bottom of your feet and feel the contact with the ground. Feel that the weight of your body goes through your legs and feet to the ground. Bend your knees a few times slightly, so that the feeling in your feet and your legs becomes clear.
- * When you're ready, transfer your weight to your right leg and notice the changing sensations in your legs and feet as your left leg 'empties' and the rest of your body rests on your right leg.
- * Lift the left heel slowly off the floor and feel the sensations in the calf muscles. Then continue to roll off your left foot until only your toes make contact with the floor. Feel consciously what is happening in your feet and legs.
- * Now slowly lift your left foot and move it forward. Feel your foot and leg move through the air and put your heel on the ground. Let the rest of your foot make contact with the floor while transferring your body weight to the left foot and left leg. Feel your left leg and foot become heavier and your right leg and heel lighter as it comes off the floor.
- * Once your weight has been transferred all the way to your left leg, lift the right foot and slowly bring it forward. Be aware of the changing sensations in your foot and leg. Focus on your right heel if it makes contact with the floor. Transfer the weight of your body to the right foot as you put it on the ground.
- * Walk back and forth slowly in this way. Pay particular attention to the sensations in the bottom of your feet and heels, while making contact with the surface. And to the sensations in your leg muscles every step of the way.
- * Stay aware of the complex movements your body makes when changing direction. Walk back and forth in this way and be as well aware as possible of the sensations in your feet and legs and of the contact that the feet make with the floor.
- * If you notice that your attention wanders away from the sensations of walking, then in a friendly way redirect the attention back to the sensations in your feet and legs. Use the contact of the feet with the floor as an 'anchor' to return to the present moment.
- * Take a 10 to 15 minute walk, or longer if you want.

STRESS EXERCISE FORM WEEK 6

Be extra aware of a difficult situation this week *while* it happens. Pay attention to what signals tell you that you're stressed. Also notice how you deal with the situation: do you react habitual or can you respond consciously to the situation? (See also the schedule of stress signals: **automatic reaction versus conscious response**) You can also pay attention to this during the formal exercises.

Day	What was the difficult situation?	How did you recognize you were stressed? (stress signals)	How did you deal with the situation? What happened to you: physically, emotionally, mentally, behaviorally?	Was this an automatic reaction or a conscious response?

Day	What was the difficult situation?	How did you recognize you were stressed? (stress signals)	How did you deal with the situation? What happened to you: physically, emotionally, mentally, behaviorally?	Was this an automatic reaction or a conscious response?

EXERCISE FORM WEEK 6

Keep a daily record of your homework every day. Fill it in as accurately and honestly as possible.

DAY	PRACTICED YES/NO	NOTES
DAY 1 Date:	Walking / Sitting with difficulty 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular 3x:• Responsive	
DAY 2 Date:	Walking / Sitting with difficulty 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular 3x:• Responsive	
DAY 3 Date:	Walking / Sitting with difficulty 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular 3x:• Responsive	
DAY 4 Date:	Walking / Sitting with difficulty 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular 3x:• Responsive	
DAY 5 Date:	Walking / Sitting with difficulty 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular 3x:• Responsive	