

Instructions for Mindful Mission Work

Developing the skills of mindfulness and compassion while doing volunteer work on mission is of great benefit for oneself and others. The ever-changing and, at times, challenging conditions of the clinic or orphanage provide ideal practice opportunities for mindfulness. Daily sitting meditation practice helps to create the clarity and stability of mind in order to use mindfulness in our work. Mindfulness can help us stay present, relaxed and centered. It can also help us to be more attuned to the internal conditions (within our own body and mind) and external conditions (other people, animals and the environment). Mindfulness coupled with compassion allows us to take better care of ourselves and others. As with formal sitting meditation practice, mindful mission practice requires a commitment to regular and repetitive practice. We also have to be realistic in our short and long term goals for practice. It is best to start with simple practices and build upon them over time.

There are two parallel aspects to developing mindfulness of the daily activities we will encounter while volunteering. In the first practice, we choose one or more mindfulness markers or reminders. These are ordinary activities that are done repetitively throughout the course of the day. Some examples from daily life are opening a door, going to the bathroom, tying the shoelaces, walking or brushing the teeth. We can experiment with being mindful of repetitive tasks at the clinic and orphanage such as holding a stethoscope to a patient's chest, picking up the pen to write, taking a patient's blood pressure, smiling while looking into another's eyes or holding a child's hand.

Choose one or more markers to work with. Each time you engage in the activity, set the intention to be fully present for it. As best as possible, put aside any mental chatter, analysis or commentary about the activity. While engaged in the activity, the attention can be split roughly 50:50 inward:outward. That is, there is understanding of what the body is doing in the external environment but there is also an internal awareness of the body while doing it. We intentionally cultivate mindfulness of the sensations, thoughts and emotions that arise within the body while doing the activity. It is helpful to relax the body and to pay attention to any physical sensations of the activity such as the feel of the pen or stethoscope,

contact with another's body or the feeling of your body in contact with the floor or chair. You may also want to turn the attention to the sensations of breathing.

When the mind drifts off of being present for the activity, take the same steps as when the mind wanders during sitting meditation: recognize that the attention is no longer with the activity, let go of whatever it is that has caught the attention, and return to being aware of the activity with kindness and patience. Doing this over and over develops the mind's ability to stay present for what it is doing. Often subtle aspects of experience which were previously unnoticed become more apparent. This can lead to a shift in the depth of one's engagement with life. The experiences of the senses can become more vivid and life can take on more meaning.

Another aspect of daily life meditation practice involves periodically checking in with our internal experience. Every so often throughout the day, stop what you are doing and focus the attention inward. Try taking short 'mindfulness of breathing' and 'mindfulness of the body' breaks. These can last for just a few breaths or for several minutes. In these mindfulness breaks it is helpful to pause from doing activities such as talking or moving and become stationary and calm. The eyes can be open or shut. The body can be sitting or standing. It helps to take a few deep breaths and to let go of thinking and doing for a brief spell. During this time, practice only the "activity" of being aware of the breath. Allow the breath to become calm and the mind to be at ease. Focus the awareness on the physical sensations of the inbreaths and outbreaths. Follow your breathing for several minutes, bringing the attention back each time it wanders off.

In addition to being mindful of the breath, it can be helpful to open the awareness to the body. You can notice the body globally, focusing on whatever sensations are most prominent in any given moment. Alternatively, you may choose to do a brief scan of the physical sensations of the body by going through it section by section. Starting with the feet in contact with the floor and progressively feeling into the sensations of each section of the body all the way to the head. If any areas of holding or tension are noticed, these can be intentionally softened and relaxed. It can also be helpful to notice if there are accompanying thoughts or emotions present and relax and release them if you can. If it is not possible to relax or if the

body and mind are in too much pain to let go of the tension, see if you can acknowledge and accept the conditions of the body and mind just how they are in the moment. After a few moments of mindfulness practice of the breath, body and mind return to your regular activities, perhaps setting the intention to be more relaxed and present with what you are doing.

While on mission it is useful to take these mindfulness breaks often in order to maintain healthy postures, to keep the body relaxed and to help calm and balance the mind. We may find ourselves in a bustling, chaotic location or experience an environment that is hot, humid, dusty, smoky or permeated with diesel fumes. We may be stuck in traffic, trying to cross a busy street on foot or traveling down a bumpy road. Regardless of the conditions, taking regular mindfulness check-ins can ease stress and prevent fatigue and burnout before our internal and external conditions become overwhelming. Greater body awareness lets us know when to take in some nourishment, to drink, to take a restroom break or to rest for a while. Physical and mental attunement can also guide us in making wiser choices. Mindfulness can alert us earlier to potential danger and help us to connect more fully to our patients and fellow volunteers. As meditative awareness becomes integrated into all of one's activities, ease, skillfulness and harmony become the default setting of one's inner and outer life.

Another useful practice on mission is the cultivation of compassion. While working in the clinic or orphanage or touring the country we may be faced with individuals undergoing immense distress and despair. At times we ourselves may be suffering too. Rather than turn away from the pain and heartache of human (or animal) misery, compassion practice helps us to face it mindfully. The compassionate heart is present for whatever is happening, striking a balance between being consumed and overwhelmed by suffering on the one hand and by being apathetic and indifferent towards it on the other. To practice compassion in action while on mission, it helps to begin to cultivate it before hand during formal sitting meditation periods.

When you are with someone who is suffering, be it a patient, a child, another person or yourself, see if you can be present for their experience while staying connected with you own body and mind. Place your awareness in your heart area

while looking them in the eyes and/or interacting with them. Wish the other and yourself good will and well-being. Saying the compassion phrases quietly in your mind, while being with suffering can help maintain the connection. You may want to say to yourself such phrases as: "I see and care for your suffering" or "May you be free from suffering" or "May you be safe and happy" or use phrases of your own. Notice if you start to feel uncomfortable or to develop aversion towards the person, the situation or yourself. As best as you are able, keep the awareness in the heart area and your good wishes. When the mind wanders, try to gently bring it back. If you find that being with suffering is overwhelming or that you are repeatedly irritated, zoning out or distracted, let go of the compassion practice and return to mindfulness of breathing and/or the body sensations. You can always return to compassion practice at a later time. It is important to not force yourself into being with difficulty to the point that you are being self-critical or feeling hostile towards the person who suffering. We don't want the compassion practice to create more suffering. It is a slow and steady practice that will evolve over time if it is given patient, persistent effort.

Jeff Hardin

rev. 12/12