The Observer Meditation

One core process that may be positively impacted by mindfulness practice is the ability to observe thoughts, emotions and sensations. Rather than being completely immersed with them, individuals learn to see these thoughts, emotions and sensations as transient states. Through observing states, one can notice that there is a difference between the states themselves and the person observing them. By entering this observer mode, one can “step outside of one’s immediate experience, thereby changing the very nature of that experience” (Safran & Segal, 1990, p. 117). This process has been referred to as decentring (Safran & Segal, 1990), reperceiving (Shapiro & Carlson 2009) and deautomatization (Deikman, 1982). This meditation can help clients to enter this observer mode.

In this meditation, after inducing a relaxed focus, the practitioner directs the client’s attention to different domains with which they may have become over-identified. At different moments, the practitioner asks to focus on the content of a particular domain, for instance sights, sounds and feelings. Next, the focus is shifted to noticing that someone is noticing this content. This shift in perspective can generate a brief but powerful psychological state in which there is a sense of transcendence and continuity at the same time. One may experience a self that is aware of content but not defined by that content.

Goal

The goal of this meditation is to allow clients to enter an observer mode that allows them to view oneself and one’s experiences from a distance and at the same time connect to something that is deeper than the experiences themselves. In this way, clients may learn to gain some distance to domains in life with which they have become over-identified (e.g. certain roles).

Clients can experience that life experiences that used to evoke anxiety or other negative states can be received peacefully and tranquilly when one enters this observer mode. They may notice that they lose their problematic nature when perceived as transient states and not as defining the self per se.

Advice

After the exercise, it is recommended to spend some time evaluating the experiences of the client, but without analysis or interpretation. Simply focus on what the client experienced. Was it possible for the client to get in this observer mode? Were there any particular qualities of the experience of connecting with the “you”? What can be done to enter this mode more often?

Although some clients may report a sense of tranquility or peace, other experiences are possible as well. It can be strange to experience a separateness between events and the self. Inform clients that they are always allowed to stop during the meditation if they feel it becomes too overwhelming.
Do not read the instructions aloud during the meditation. Clients often notice when the words are your own or someone else’s. Rather, practice and construct your own phrases. Also, you are encouraged to meditate together with your client. Timing and tone of voice are usually improved when the instructor is meditating as well rather than giving instructions.

**Suggested Readings**


In this exercise, you are going to experience yourself without any kind of conscious effort. We will be looking at the thoughts and emotions that arise within you spontaneously without planning it. There's no way you can fail at this exercise. Whatever you feel and think is right.

I want you to start by closing your eyes and settling into your chair. Follow my voice. If you find yourself wandering at any point, gently find your way back to the sound of my voice. Take this moment to turn your attention to this room. Picture yourself in this room, sitting exactly where you are. Now begin to move inwards into your skin. Try and feel your skin as you are sitting in the chair.

Can you see the shape being made by the parts of your skin touching the chair? Notice any bodily sensations that you feel are there. With each feeling, acknowledge its presence and allow your consciousness to move on from it (pause). If an emotion arises, acknowledge that it is there and allow it to move on at its own pace (pause). Now I want you to notice any thoughts you are having in this moment. Quietly observe them for a few moments (pause). As you watch your thoughts, I want you to notice that you are noticing your thoughts. There’s a part of you that is watching yourself.

There is a part of you now noticing your sensations . . . your emotions . . . your thoughts. We will call that part the “observer you”. There is a person in there, behind those eyes, who is aware of what I am saying right now. And it is the same person you've been your whole life. In a deep sense, this observer is the "you" that you refer to when you are referring to yourself.

I want you to remember something that happened last summer. Raise your finger when you have an image in mind. Good.

Now look around. Remember all the things that were happening then. Remember the sights . . . the sounds . . . your feelings . . . and as you do that, see whether you can see yourself noticing what you're noticing. See whether or not you can catch the person behind your eyes watching, hearing, and feeling. You were there then as you are here now.

I'm not asking you to believe this nor am I trying to make a logical point. I'm just asking you to notice the experience of this awareness and to ask yourself whether it is or isn't so that in some sense, the person who was there last summer watching and feeling is also here now.

The person that is aware of what you are aware of is just as here now as then. There's an essential continuity where in some deep sense, at this level of experience, not belief, you have been “you” your whole life—is this what you’re experiencing at this height of awareness?

I want you to remember something that happened when you were a teenager. Raise your finger when you have an image in mind. Good.

Now look around. Remember all the things that were happening then. Remember the sights . . . the sounds . . . your feelings . . . take your time with it. As these sensations become clearer, I want you to, if just for a second, find the
person behind the eyes that was soaking in each moment. The person who was watching, hearing, and feeling. You were there then as you are here now. There is an essential continuity between the person who is aware now and the person who was aware of yourself as a teenager in that situation. You have been "you" your whole life.

Finally, remember something that happened when you were a fairly young child, say, around age 6 or 7. Raise your finger when you have an image in mind. Good.

Now look around. Remember all the things that were happening then. Remember the sights . . . the sounds . . . your feelings . . . and again try and catch the moment you were observing yourself seeing, hearing, and feeling. Notice that there was a person there behind those child eyes. You were there then as you are here now. The person aware of what you were aware of as a child is still here now. Every stage of your life you have been noticing yourself. This is the “observer you”. It’s always been watching you, taking in each moment. From that perspective, I want you to look at some areas of living.

Let’s start with your body. Your body is constantly changing. Sometimes your body gets sick. Sometimes your body is filled with energy and movement. Your body can feel rested and your body can feel tired. Your body can be strengthened or weakened. You were once a tiny baby, fragile and needing constant care, but then your body grew to stand on its own. Your body may have even faced challenges by having some of its parts removed in an operation.

The cells in your body have died, many of them staying with your infancy or adolescence, many cells not returning after last summer. Your cells come and go. These bodily sensations come and go. Even as we have spoken, sensations and cells have come and gone. Everything changes except the “you” that you have called “you” your whole life. It travels with you in your mind and emotions, adapting to its every change, existing beyond your body. Yes you have a body, but the “you” experiences your body. Now notice your body again, just for a moment. As you do this, every so often try to observe how you’re observing (give the client time to do this).

Let’s go on to another area: your roles. How many roles do you play? How many roles have you played in the past? Sometimes you play the role of a [fit these to the client; e.g., mother . . . or a friend . . . or a daughter . . . or a wife . . . sometimes you are a respected worker . . . other times you are a leader . . . or a follower, etc.].

In this world, there is always a role to be played. Even if you try not to play a role, then you would be playing the role of a person not playing a role. Even now you’re playing the role: the client role. Beyond each role you play, there is a role that is unchanging and unmoving. That is the “observer you”. The part that you call “you” that is always watching. It’s always aware of what you are aware of. There’s a you that does not change, it does not bend to fit other roles, it is not affected by those other roles. It stays in its true form. The observer you is not a part of your body and it is not part of a role you play - it simply experiences those roles and takes note. This is not about creating a new belief for you. I’m not asking you to believe this. I’m just asking to distinguish between what you are looking at and the “you” that is watching you looking.

Now let’s go to another area: emotions. Your emotions are always changing. In a span of a few minutes, you can move from feelings of love, to hatred, to calmness, to joy, to happiness, to sorrow. Even now you may be experiencing emotions. You could be feeling interest, boredom, relaxation. Think of things you may have liked before that you don’t like anymore. Think of fears you had that have now been resolved. The only promise emotions give you is the promise of impermanence. Waves of emotions come and go. And even then, the “you” does not change. The “you” observes from every tiny moment of joy to emotional tsunamis that take over your thoughts and body. But they always go, and the “observer you” is always there, remaining unaffected. You are not your emotions,
you are an experiencer of emotions flowing in and out of you. Realize that this is an experienced event. In a deep and important sense, your “you” is constant. You remain “you” through it all. So just notice your emotions for a moment and as you do, notice also that you are noticing them (allow a brief period of silence).

Now let’s turn our attention gently to the most difficult area: your own thoughts. Thoughts are difficult because they hook us and pull us out of our observer role. If this happens, gently come back to the sound of my voice. Notice how your thoughts change restlessly. Your thoughts used to lack knowledge and then you went to school and you learned new thoughts. These new thoughts created in you new ideas and knowledge. Sometimes you think about things one way and sometimes from a different angle. Sometimes your thoughts make little sense. Sometimes thoughts enter your head automatically without your control. Sometimes thoughts keep you up at night, even though your body is tired and ready to sleep. Thoughts constantly change. Look at what your thoughts were like when you came in today and how many different thoughts you had until now. And still, the “you” that watches you think is unchanging. Although you have thoughts, you are more than just your thoughts. Notice your thoughts, for the thoughts that they are. Notice that even as you realize this, the stream of thoughts continues. You may get caught up in them, you may become consumed by them, but there’s always a part of you that is standing back, watching each thought come in and leave again. So now watch your thoughts for a few moments - and as you do, notice also that you are noticing them (allow a brief period of silence).

So, as a matter of experience and not of belief, you are not just a body, a role to play, emotions, or thoughts. These things create experiences in your life, but you are the arena . . . you are the context . . . the space in which they unfold. As you see that, notice that the things you’ve been struggling with and trying to change are not “you” anyway. As this war continues battling on, you will be there, unchanged and watching. Can you take advantage of this connection and let go just a little bit more? Notice these domains that show up and as you do, notice that you are still “you”, watching and being aware of what you’re aware of (allow a brief period of silence).

Now again come back and picture yourself in this room. And now picture the room. Picture (describe the room). And when you are ready to come back in, open your eyes.