



The “Turning Toward” Meditation for Physical Pain (transcript)

For the audio recording, see [*The Turning Toward Meditation*](#)

This meditation can be done either sitting or lying down and it’s specifically designed to work with difficult physical pain, including migraines, recovery from injury or surgery, back pain, or chronic pain.

1. Beginning with Awareness and Kindness

As we begin, noticing the support you are receiving from what you’re sitting or lying on, paying special attention to the sensations of support. If you’re sitting, noticing how your feet are making contact with the floor, how your buttocks are supported by the chair or cushion, how your arms and hands are resting... If you’re lying down, noticing how you are supported by the floor or bed, how your upper body, arms, legs, and feet are making contact with the bed or mat. Whether sitting or lying down, allowing your weight to sink down through these points of contact, and wherever possible, letting any tension drain down into the support and beyond... And as you’re sitting or lying here, letting any thoughts or images go, just feeling supported by what’s beneath you...

When you’re ready, noticing the breath...actually feeling the breath, through the movement of your belly or chest or shoulders, noticing how the whole body expands a little on the in-breath and relaxes a little on the outbreath, just letting your breath be your breath, knowing you’re breathing just fine (you could even observe your breath the way you’d watch waves at the seashore... watching them go out and come back in, and flow back out again, smoothing the sand as they come in and out... you know, you wouldn’t demand that they go faster or slower, or that they be bigger or smaller... you’d just enjoy watching them)... and seeing if, in the same way, you can allow the breath to be just as it is, letting the breath just breathe itself... (pause)

2. Turning toward the Difficult: softening, allowing...

In a moment, we’ll turn our attention to a physical condition or sensation that’s troubling you, something that’s not the way you want it to be physically

It could be a chronic pain, something that is almost always there (something in your back, your neck, joints...), or it could be a painful injury or surgery that hasn’t yet healed, or just a simple ache or pain, like a sore wrist or elbow... and taking your time, letting yourself get a sense of an area of the body you could choose to work on... there’s no wrong choice, whatever you choose is going to be right for this meditation...

Once you’ve found an area of the body, see if it’s possible to get curious about this area, dropping the natural tendency to move away from it, but paying attention in a special way, with kindness and gentleness, the way you might if you were with a loved one who was having this kind of physical discomfort...

How would you describe it? Saying it’s “painful” isn’t at all descriptive, so see if you can identify specific types of sensation. For instance, sharp, cutting, dull and throbbing, burning, constricted, pressure or tightness, achiness... noticing sensations simply as sensations, and seeing if you can explore this area with an attitude of tenderness and kind curiosity.

... you could ask yourself: How big is this area of discomfort (is it the size of a marble, or a baseball, or as big as a football)?... how thick or thin is it (as thin as a piece of paper, as thick as a book, or maybe it varies in thickness)... if it had a texture, what texture would you say it had (is it hard like concrete, rigid but with some give like wood, soft like a sponge, or fluid like water or oil)... what is its shape?... it has a certain geometry... and where are the boundaries?...

Spending a moment at the boundaries, at the edges, that area where if you went further out, there’s less or no discomfort, experimenting with being right at the boundary... seeing if you can let the area just beyond the edge soften or relax, this area around the difficult part... (pause) you’re not trying to change the area of discomfort itself, but just putting your attention at the edges, letting there be a softening there...

...as you are beginning to pay close attention to the physical sensations and the images associated with them, seeing if you can identify the feeling you have about this physical condition. Is there Anger about having this condition? Does

it feel unfair? Is there Fear that it might not get better, or that it will get worse? Sadness about how it's limiting you? Impatience? Confusion? What would you call this feeling in your own words?

...if it's possible for you, seeing if you can **soften** your reaction to the physical condition with gentle breaths, seeing if you can be with it the same way you'd be with a child or a pet whom you love and who is in distress... and you know that if that were the case, you would do this with tenderness, with gentleness, you wouldn't demand that your loved one respond differently than they are...

And if you like, you might even place your hand where the discomfort is, **or**, on your heart or belly, meeting this experience with kindness, recognizing that this would be difficult or painful or challenging for anybody, holding it and yourself gently and with compassion ... and taking your time with this, there's no rush... (pause)

This is **softening and allowing**. Softening of your reaction to the feeling that you're having, allowing that reaction to be there, allowing the feeling to be there... all the while knowing that allowing it to be there doesn't mean that you like it, it's simply an acknowledgment that this **is** what you are feeling right now.

...as you do this, you may feel sensations and feelings coming and going, and you may notice, if you pay close attention, that there is movement, change from moment to moment, perhaps a tightening or loosening, you may notice heat, waves of energy, or images or impressions may emerge... through all of this, seeing if you can bring a sense of kindness, curiosity, and compassion to your exploration...

...and spending enough time here to make contact with what you're noticing and feeling, but not so much that you become overwhelmed...

When you do this on your own, or at any time during this meditation, if you do feel overwhelmed, you can return to breath, or simply sense into the physical support that you have from the chair, or bed, or floor. And if it is still too much, you can always pause or stop the meditation, open your eyes and look around the room to orient yourself...

3. Seeking the Pleasant, the "good things"

Now, without trying to push the difficult sensations away, we're going to begin an exploration for somewhere in your body that's not in pain, seeing if you can find neutral or even pleasurable sensations somewhere in your body... expanding your awareness beyond the area of discomfort, beginning by bringing awareness to the movement of breath, allowing your discomfort to be soothed by the rhythm of the breath... allowing your body to rest deeply into what's supporting it... (pause) and as you begin the exploration, scanning your body, noticing what's there and pausing when you find something pleasurable or pleasingly neutral: sensing into your toes, your feet, your lower leg, your thighs, your hips, stomach, chest, shoulders, your arms, hands, your neck, your face and your head...

...as you scan, you are looking for pleasant sensations, no matter how subtle they might be. It's as if you are an explorer looking for hidden treasure. It could be a sense of warmth in your hands, a pleasant tingling somewhere in your body, maybe a sense of release as you sink into your support... or maybe you're just now noticing your right big toe or lower arm is pain-free. Spending some time moving through your body with your awareness and pause there when you find something pleasurable...

If you're having difficulty finding someplace that feels okay, you might gently place your hand somewhere, for instance, on your shoulder or chest or head, the way you might to comfort someone you cared about, and if that touch felt comforting, sensing into that area. ...Or, you might recall someone you know, or have known, who was loving and kind to you, and imagine that they're close to you now, holding or supporting you, and how that feels in your body (maybe warmth in your middle, or softness around your heart...) ...Or, you could even open your eyes for a moment and look around you for something that's beautiful or pleasant in your immediate environment. It might be a plant, or a ray of sunlight coming through the window, a piece of art, or a photo on the wall...

Letting yourself spend some time here with this part of your body or room that feels pleasant... (pause)

When you do this on your own, you can stay here as long as you want, whatever feels right for you...

...and if you find yourself being drawn back to the painful area, don't fight it, but allow yourself some soft breaths, breathing into this area of your body with gentleness and kindness, and when you're ready and able, gently bringing your awareness back to the pleasant or neutral area of your body... you could even let the breath be between those two areas, the pleasant and unpleasant, just feeling the rhythm of your breath, the soft breath, breathing into both areas with gentleness and kindness...

...as you do this, you may notice that things may feel differently than they did before, that they are actually fluid and dynamic, not solid or fixed...

4. *Broadening Awareness*

...and when you're ready, seeing if you can broaden your awareness, like panning out with a wide-angle lens, including both the pleasant area and the difficult area, so wide that there's enough space and room for both of them, without pushing the difficult away or clinging to the pleasant... shifting to an even wider, more inclusive perspective that includes both the pleasant and the unpleasant... and including the entire body and all of its sensations.... and when you're ready, moving wider still, to include in your awareness the room or area you are sitting or lying in... you might notice that by widening your awareness, there's a sense of space, of freedom, a capacity for change and movement...

Letting yourself spend a moment here with this wider perspective... (pause)

If it's not too much of a stretch, seeing if you can expand your awareness to include the building or natural setting you are in... and even wider, to include your neighborhood, your town or city... even further to your region of the country ... The physical discomfort may not have diminished significantly, but now it's part of something much bigger ...

...and as your awareness expands even further, to include the entire world, if that's possible for you, recognizing that at this very moment, there are others who are experiencing the same kind of pain or discomfort as you have been, and, in this way, you are not alone ... out of the many millions, billions, of people included, it's certainly true that some of them are experiencing the same sort of pain or difficulty you are, with the same or even more intensity... The pains, the fears, the worries, are not yours to bear alone, they are, in fact, shared by others. There are others feeling the very same thing at literally the same time as you... you're not alone...

... if it seems possible to do this, you might see if you can imagine your awareness expanding even further, seeing the earth from space the way an astronaut might, that beautiful blue/white sphere against a velvety black backdrop, with no visible borders, seamless, whole, alive, and so precious...

When you're doing this on your own, you could stay here for a while if you like, seeing the earth as this beautiful, glowing jewel, suspended in space...

...when you're ready, letting your awareness gradually return to your part of the world... to you, your body... how you are right now, feeling and sensing how it is to be in your body, right here, right now... coming back to "just" you, but with awareness still wide enough to hold both the difficulties and pleasures of your body and your life... (pause)

... seeing if you can bring gentleness and kindness to whatever you're feeling right now, holding yourself with compassion and understanding... and spending the next few unguided moments resting deep in the body, in the breath, and allowing any discomfort or unease to be soothed by the rhythm of the breath again, and again and again... (pause)

5. *Opening... and the possibility of Responding rather than Reacting*

We're near the end of the meditation, so if you would like to stay here longer, you can pause or stop the recording...

When you're ready, slowly opening your eyes if they've been closed, letting your attention move to the outside world, taking in sight, sound, sensation, beginning to gently move your body and re-engage with the world... and in the minutes, hours, and days that follow, seeing if you can bring a fresh sense of curiosity, openness, and kindness to all that you encounter.

(bell)