***upgrading the 'breathing space'***

***meditation 3: embodied values***

*(This handout, with web links, was posted on www.stressedtozest.com on 17.05.17)*

I have already written a couple of blog posts *"Upgrading the 'breathing space' meditation, some research-based suggestions (1st post): mindfulness & naming"* and *"Upgrading the 'breathing space' meditation, some research-based suggestions (2nd post): touch & affectionate releasing"* where we have taken our attention inwards, noting & naming our internal state/our internal weather, and responding to this inner state with settling touch, self-compassion & relaxation. These posts have introduced nine suggestions that potentially upgrade a more standard breathing space practice. In this third post I add a tenth, and in the fourth & final post of the sequence a couple more, making a total of a dozen research-based ideas that you can explore to see what works best for you.

So now we've come to the *last four-breath sequence*. I don't usually continue with the gentle touch through this third section of *the twelve-breath exercise*, but see what feels best to you. This last section of the *twelve-breath breathing space* typically involves values & goodwill (although, as described in the next blog post, I occasionally shift to action planning or appreciation). The first breath of the *second four-breath sequence* was made up of an initial soothing-touch breath and then three breaths where we scanned through our bodies with self-compassion. There's a somewhat similar structure in the *third four-breath sequence* which starts with an initial connection-to-values breath and typically goes on to three breaths where we channel goodwill & compassion out to other people.

***10.)*** What are the values we connect to with the first breath of this third section? Well they're the personal values that matter most to us, the values that remind us how we want to live our lives. Personal values are so important for our health. It's no accident that grandfather-of-positive-psychology Professor Ed Diener, in *his recent evidence-based overview* of how we can best improve our wellbeing, suggests we start with clarifying & connecting to our values. This point is also well made in the post *"Purpose in life: reduces dementia risk, increases life expectancy, treats depression and builds wellbeing"* and then extended in *"Purpose in life: reconnecting to meaning & values".* Values (unlike goals) aren't something I intend to work towards in the future ... they are about how I want to live right now ... more like a compass bearing I use to direct my journey by than like a destination that I have to travel towards to reach. They are *"the way I want to drive"* in the coping-skills/emotion-regulation overview provided by the *"Bus driver metaphor".*

So how can we clarify what our key values are? It may be we simply know already, or we become clear very quickly once we start to think about it. You may not have specifically thought this through very fully before, but you will be leading your life guided by values (whether you have already consciously considered this or not). A fun & worthwhile way to explore this more is to try out the *"Respected figures"* exercise. Here is a downloadable *PDF worksheet* for doing this (and here's the same sheet as *a Word doc*). What we're looking for with this exercise is the emergence of two or three key values that really resonate with how you want to be in the world. The exercise typically throws up clusters of related personal qualities & values. You can group what feel like the most important of these into two or three areas and then find words that feel like they describe these main quality/value clusters well. The *"Purpose in life: reconnecting to meaning & values"* blog post, that I've already mentioned, discusses this approach to values clarification a bit further.

You can start using the *third four-breath chunk* of the full breathing space exercise without spending a great deal of time looking more deeply at values (and at how we'll word our goodwill/compassion breaths). However, it's very likely that you'll get a good deal of benefit from investigating these areas more fully at some point. So, a couple of further ways to throw light on this question of personal values are Shalom Schwartz's fascinating research and also the impressive body of work by Seligman, Peterson & colleagues on identifying one's character strengths. Although character strengths are not quite the same as values, they overlap to a large extent and are very relevant to the twelve-breath breathing space exercise that we're discussing. For more on this see the post *"Strengths of character: head, heart & gut"* and do consider taking the VIA assessment questionnaire. As I wrote in the post *"Twelve practical suggestions for exploring our character strengths" - "Even more practically, go to "The VIA Institute on Character" website and complete their 10-15 minute survey. I suggest you then bite the bullet and spend $20 downloading the "VIA ME! Report". Although you can get a basic free report about your survey answers, if you're going to use the results seriously you're much more likely to benefit from the considerably fuller, 20 page or so, "VIA ME!" response. There are a number of other reports you can buy, but - at least initially - they probably only add a modest amount to what you'll learn from "VIA ME!".*

Probably the best researched way of clarifying values though is via the insights emerging from the work of Shalom Schwartz & linked research groups. I've described this more fully in the blog post *"Most people agree on the healthy key values they want to live by and this is real grounds for hope".* There are a variety of ways of assessing one's value profile on Schwartz's intriguing *Growth/Self-Protection, Personal Focus/Social Focus* distinctions & the ten central values of *Universalism, Benevolence, Self-Direction, Stimulation, Hedonism, Achievement, Power, Security, Tradition & Conformity.* A good questionnaire to begin with is the 20-item *TwIVI* (downloadable here as *a Word doc* or as *a PDF file*, and here is *some relevant background).* Of course, there is considerable variation between different individuals in the values that they most strongly hold to. However, I find it so reassuring and encouraging to see that hard research highlights, across the nations, that most people probably do agree to a surprisingly large extent on the healthy, self-directing, altruistic values that they want to live by. This ubiquity is probably caused by interlinked cultural & genetic factors. Humans usually survive better if they are part of well-functioning groups. Certain ways of behaving will promote this adaptive functionality and by & large, these qualities & behaviours will be more evolutionarily successful. Value surveys across country after country demonstrate that *"Benevolence, self-direction, and universalism values are consistently most important*". Most of us both want to act with kindness towards others and also to act with courage to express our own truths & dreams.

This is a lot of background information & exploration for what is going to be one breath ... *the 9th* ... of *the twelve breath exercise*. And it's certainly very possible to give values more time ... see, for example, the earlier version of *the twelve breath sequence "To reach the other shore with each step of the crossing": a brief embodied cognition meditation exercise".* So, the values breath is such an important one and it's potentially rather wonderful to link to the values that matter most to us several times each day. It's fine to start using the full *twelve breath sequence* before you've made time to explore this area of values as fully as I'm describing. But if it looks interesting to you, do make the time to try out the various exercises & questionnaires that I've mentioned in the previous three paragraphs. Knowing our values and being true to them is of key importance for wellbeing. The three approaches ... *Respected Figures, VIA Strengths* and *Schwartz Values ...* inform each other and it may well produce a more nuanced, more helpful values clarification when we look at these issues from several vantage points. It is very likely to benefit you, as well, if you take a bit of time to write about one or more of these key values ... see, for example, the post *"Therapeutic writing & speaking: inspiration from values (how to do it)".* And linking the values to parts of one's own body can also be helpful ... for example one might feel kindness or caring in one's chest area, while courage or determination might be seen as more 'gutsy'. See the post *"Embodied cognition: what to do"* for more on this. Remembering Shalom Schwartz's finding that benevolence, self-direction & universalism are the most commonly espoused values across surveys of multiple countries, it's no surprise that the three values I personally work with are compassion, courage & curiosity. So, when I come to this *9th breath*, I silently run my attention through my body noting-feeling-encouraging courage in my belly, compassion in my chest, and curiosity in my head. Experiment, see what feels right for you. I would suggest working with two or three personally central values. Allow your body posture & face to be informed, shaped by these qualities that you're nourishing, encouraging to flourish from inside. The interaction between posture and emotion is two-way. As the great teacher Thich Nhat Hanh put it *"Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy."*

For the last post in this sequence, see *"Upgrading the 'breathing space' meditation, some research-based suggestions (4th post): compassion & implementation intentions".*

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