

Session 2: Stress

Stress is an unavoidable feature of modern life. Prolonged exposure to stress leads to impairs many of the body's functions. Handling stressors involves development of outer and inner resources for dealing with them. Meditation and mindfulness help you to develop your inner resources in two main ways:

- (1) providing an oasis of calm and relaxation in which we can recuperate;
- (2) teaching you how to perceive clearly what's going on and how we feel.

When we encounter stress, we don't act out and we don't suppress it – we simply remain aware without judgment. Mindfulness centred on the body helps to identify and alleviate stress and works on many deep levels. Hence we can learn to change our response to stressors.

In this session we have introduced the following concepts:

1. **Stress** – “the non-specific response of the organism to any pressure or demand” (Hans Selye).
2. **Stressors** – external (work, relationships, etc.) and internal (thoughts, feelings, etc.). Some stressors are good!
3. **The classical stress reaction** – three stages: (1) fight or flight (immediate survival under threat); (2) slower resistance action (escape the situation); (3) exhaustion (rest and recovery)
4. **Polyvagal theory – mind-body connection**
5. **Prolonged stress** impairs digestive system, reproductive system, suppresses the immune system, leads to burn out, breakdown, depression, etc.
6. **Response to stress** – the “ultimate effect on our health of the total psychological stress we experience depends in large measure on how we come to perceive change itself in all its various forms, and how skillful we are in adapting to continual change while maintaining our own inner balance and sense of coherence” (Jon Kabat-Zinn).
7. **Awareness** allows us to move from an unconscious stress reaction to a conscious stress response.
8. **Fusho, your unborn mind meditation practice**: no particular focus on anything, ‘sitting like a mirror’. Open presence.

Homework: Practice Fusho meditation once a day and note down your experiences in your meditation diary. Take a few minutes each day to note down stressors – events that caused you stress.

Fusho meditation reminder: Come into a comfortable seated position with a stable triangular base. Sway side to side to find that middle position where your spine is as upright and erect as it can be with the neck long. Tilt your head down as if you were holding a rubber ball beneath your chin. Have your eyes lowered and either open or closed, hands in your lap, and your tongue broad and resting on the roof of your mouth.

In this silent stillness you just allow anything at all to arise and pass and you just remain aware and present in the way that a mirror is just present with all that is reflected in it. Fusho means “unborn”, referring to all of these things that arise and pass – thoughts, memories, sights and sounds. By the fact that they arise, they are born, but this mirror-like awareness itself is unborn. Just rest in this open awareness, this quality of presence, reflecting all that arises and passes. Anytime you feel yourself getting involved in these things that arise and pass then just let go, and come back to the quality of awareness, the quality of presence itself. If you're aware and relaxed, allowing things to arise and pass, and doing your best to let go when you feel yourself attaching or getting involved with things, then you're doing this meditation correctly.