

# Objects as Focusing Anchors

## *Ideas For Mindfulness Teachers*

When initially learning mindfulness it helps to have a vivid anchor as a focus for the attention as this creates a starker contrast when the attention wanders elsewhere. A vivid anchor also beckons the attention out of sticky mental loops whereas it is easier to stay lost in those loops with a vague anchor. The fingers and hands are one of the most sensitive areas of the body. This sensitivity can be coupled with holding objects that offer strong sensations, such as temperature, texture or movement and/or are engaging to look at, resulting in objects (such as those listed below) that are very helpful as vivid focusing anchors.

We find the metaphor of running uphill or downhill useful. Practicing with a vague anchor is like running uphill as it takes continual effort to bring the focus back to a vague anchor. Practicing with a vivid anchor is like running downhill is much easier when learning mindfulness - getting familiar with the experience of practicing mindfulness is difficult enough at the beginning. It can be helpful to guide participants by using contrasting anchors to explore how 'vivid' and 'vague' is experienced (usually very variably by different people).

The other important feature of using objects is the fun-factor. We find most participants enjoy using these anchors - there is often a lighter atmosphere in the session when they are used. Having practiced with one or more objects, we then usually make the same objects available in subsequent sessions so participants who found them helpful can use them again as anchors when the practice offers a choice of focusing anchor. Many people find that having something to fiddle with in their hand helps soothe mental agitation (such as the anxiety caused by being in an unfamiliar group).

For any one object some people will like it, some will not like it and some will not be bothered either way. These contrasts are great to bring out in the inquiry process.

### Reusable Gel Heat Pads



Reusable gel heat-pads are activated by flexing the internal metal disk and can be reused by boiling them for 10 minutes. Many people find the heat released offers a soothing focus for the attention. The heat tends to bring the awareness into the warming skin, offering a clear helpful guidance language includes '*letting what you are sensing fill your awareness*', '*feeling your way into the sensations*' and '*bringing what you are sensing into the foreground of your attention*'. By repeatedly changing focus between the heat-pad and another anchor (e.g. sound or feet on floor) there can be an experience of how attention

intensifies what is in the foreground of the awareness while what is in the background fades. Focusing the attention into the heat-pad and then widening the attention out to the whole body as well as the sensations of holding the heat-pad offers a helpful way to begin to practice open awareness. The crystallisation process that releases heat and the texture of the heat-pad also add to the vividness of the anchor.

### 'Reusable' Ice Cubes



'Reusable' ice-cubes are plastic shapes filled with water. Kept in a food flask before use, these offer a no-mess alternative for those who prefer cold to heat and can be substituted in the same practices as the heat-pads. The cold, however, also offers a mildly aversive experience for many people and this can be a good metaphor for being mindful of physical or emotional pain. Having a heat-pad in one hand and an ice-cube in another can offer a vivid and accessible experience of holding different experiences in open awareness. There are a range of shapes available that can add visual interest to the anchor. 'Real' ice cubes can be used but the water leakage is messier (though wrapped in a paper towel or put in a

snap seal bag this is reduced). The cubes can also be used as a short-lived hot anchor if placed in a flask of hot (not boiling) water. *Those with Raynaud's syndrome etc. should not use ice-cubes as an anchor – do check for this.*

### Glass Pebbles



While genuine polished stone pebbles can be a good focus for a practice they can be expensive. Instead, consider using cheaper glass 'pebbles' often available in garden centres as 'pot toppers'. These tend to be larger than the glass pebbles used for home décor and come in interesting shapes. Being glass they catch the light so offer an attractive visual anchor and, if shaped, offer contrasting and engaging textures as a tactile anchor. Ask participants to check the pebbles for sharp or broken edges as soon as they receive one and dispose of any that are damaged.

## Bubble Wrap



Small squares of this offer many sensory experiences – each side looks and feels different; its transparency can be looked through; in addition to the pops, sound is generated as it is moved between the fingers. It offers a fun urge surfing practice by inviting participants to hold back from popping (and from stopping popping before the whole piece is completely ‘popped’). ‘Good pops’ and ‘duds’ can evoke contrasting flares of thought and feeling to notice and explore. There can be an invite to do a pop each time the attention is brought back from wandering. Note that some participants may not like popping so it also has possibilities as a mildly aversive experience to attend to with warm curiosity. We find a square of approximately 5-6cm has enough bubbles to work with but not so many the practice goes on too long (unless the aim is to explore participants letting go of incompletely popped sheets). Another use for bubble wrap is to lay down lengths for mindful walking – kids (and adults) tend to really enjoy this.

## Stretchies



These cheap party bag fillers come in a range of shapes and colours. We prefer the yellow smiley face ‘Stretchies’ Taos Gifts supply. These work very well as an external anchor for breath-related practice. Many people find bringing attention to the torso when the breath is used as a focusing anchor aversive, especially when intense emotions are felt churning in this region. Having awareness of the rhythm of the breath while looking at a daft looking ‘Stretchy’ can be a safe stepping stone to breath focused practice. Stretching the toy’s arms with the in-breath; releasing them back with the out-breath works well. Getting in to the packets is also a chance to notice thoughts and feelings of frustration! Look on YouTube for ‘*Peter the Pandiculator*’ to see a movement based approach to breath training with a ‘Stretchy’ (Peter Mackereth is the originator of using them linked to a breathing practice). Latex free elastic bands are a cheap alternative. Breathing through straws or using windmills are other ways to take the focus away from the torso in mindfulness of breath practices.

## Stress Balls



These come in a range of shapes and sizes. We find the 5 pointed star ones offer many tactile possibilities over round shapes. Squeezing them offers a vivid set of sensations that can be mentally steadying and these movements can be coupled with the rhythm of the breath. The main issues with these are expense and cleaning (they often take in water when washed). Their expense may make giving them away prohibitive. Alcohol wipes can be used but this is time-consuming. Disposable snap seal or other bags can be used as a barrier but this may reduce the tactile pleasure. Substitutes include tennis balls, kids squishy toys etc. but all these have cleaning issues.

## Skittle Magnets



These offer a great metaphor for the way in which the attention gets caught by ‘attention magnets’ and for the feeling of mental effort felt when drawing the attention away from ‘sticky’ mental experiences. The repulsion effect of trying to force the same poles together can be likened to directing the attention to an unwelcome experience. The repetition that builds ‘mental muscles’ in mindfulness practice when returning the attention when it’s wandered to the chosen focus has a resonance with how our muscles would strengthen if we were to repeatedly pull the magnets apart. As our muscles strengthen, pulling the magnets apart becomes easier to do but would always take some effort, just as unhooking the attention away from thoughts becomes easier with practice but always requires intention and commitment. The 12 x 21mm size works well – but do warn participants not to nip their fingers or other body parts between the magnets (and, theoretically, anyone with a pacemaker should avoid handling them). The smaller 13 x 19mm could be used to minimise this risk of nipping but these do not hold together so impressively. For ease in teaching it is best to get 2 colours and divide each colour into groups of the same polarity. Then in a class just use one ‘polarity group’ of one colour and the opposite ‘polarity group’ of the other colour. In this way you can ensure that, by handing out one of each colour, everyone will get a pair that attract. They can swap with a neighbour to have 2 of the same colour which will then repel.

## Cleaning & Infection Control.

The heat-pads, reusable ice-cubes, magnets and glass pebbles can all be boiled (heat and cool slowly with glass). If this is not enough for infection control then the objects can be placed in a small snap-seal bag for the practice and this bag can then be disposed of. The Stretchies, ice-cubes and glass pebbles are low cost so are more feasibly given away.

**Electronic copies of this information sheet** are available at [www.attentioncycle.com](http://www.attentioncycle.com)

**Suppliers:** Amazon, ebay and pound shops are the main suppliers we use for these objects.