

# Warm Hands Practice



## Why?

For many people, having a warm object in contact with the hands or the body offers a very helpful focus for mindfulness practice (for those who prefer cold an ice-cube could be substituted in all the guidance below). When the mind is very busy, especially when brooding or bothered by something, having a strong physical sensation can act as a vivid or strong for the attention. While we can never stop the attention wandering off and getting caught up with what is on the mind, having a vivid focusing anchor makes it easier to notice when the attention has wandered and also a little easier when it comes to returning the attention to the focusing anchor. Mindfulness practice with a vivid focusing anchor is therefore helpful when the mind is very unsettled.

While there are many types of vivid focusing anchor, for many people contact with a warm object activates nerves that produce a very particular soothing effect on the brain. This adds a soothing quality to mindfulness practice that can be very welcome in stressful times.

## What?

There are a range of possibilities to choose from for the source of warmth including:

- At home a hot-water bottle next to the chest, belly or back can be a great focusing anchor when sitting or lying down, perhaps with hands resting on the hot-water bottle.
- As a hot drink fits into so many social situations, this can be an easy-to-use warm focusing anchor.
- When the sun is out, the feel of warm sunlight on skin can be a pleasant warm anchor.
- Warmth from your own or someone else's hand can be a very effective warm vivid anchor.
- Hand-warmers can be very convenient - these come in 2 main varieties:



1. There are **reusable gel** hand-warmers that release a few minutes of heat when a metal disk is flexed. They need to be boiled to be reused: placing them in an old stocking or on a steamer submerged in a pan of boiling water ensures they don't melt. Keep boiling until they go clear then leave to cool in the pan for 20 minutes or longer. They come in many shapes and sizes. Amazon, eBay and pound-shops are good sources. It is worth getting a few if you like them so you can boil them in batches.



2. There are also '**Hotties**' (and other brands like Grabbers) which are single-use packets of harmless powder that produce 8 hours or so of warmth when the outer plastic wrap is removed. 'Hotties' are great as you can pin them to the inside of clothing or have them in a pocket or glove and have a warm focusing anchor that will be there all day or all through the night. They are sold in pairs in pound shops and many other stores. You can get them in packs of 40 pairs at Costco in the Autumn and on Amazon and eBay.

## When?

Depending what you choose for the source of warmth, you can use contact with warmth as a focusing anchor in a wide variety of situations.

One thing to be aware of is that the soothing effect of warmth will easily make you drowsy in your mindfulness practice. As mindfulness is just about being open to each moment as it is, then all this means is you may have more drowsy moments to be aware of in the mindfulness practice – this is as valid as having moments of bright alertness to notice in mindfulness practice. It can be very restorative to drift off into sleep while practicing mindfulness. If you prefer to be more awake to what is present then moving or squeezing the heart pad a little helps generate sensations. Really focusing on the specific physical sensations of heat, texture, pressure and/or movement and letting these sensations fill your awareness helps stay more alert as opposed to lingering more in the periods of drift when you are away with where the attention has wandered off to. If you need to be alert after the practice you may find using a warm anchor just for a short period is best.

If you are troubled by disturbed sleep, having a warm focusing anchor such as a hot-water or 'Hottie' available can be very helpful as you can do a gentle mindfulness practice instead of struggling to make yourself go back to sleep. Even if you don't go back to sleep, your body and mind will still be more rested by the period of mindfulness practice as opposed to getting agitated by being caught up with worrying or irritation about not sleeping.

All this is very individual, so be guided with what you discover is most helpful for yourself. Quite a few people find that warmth or heat is not helpful and so may use other vivid anchors such as moving with the breath.

## How?

1. **Check-In:** Notice the body position and make any adjustments for comfort. As you let an out-breath go, allow your muscles to loosen a little, easing around any tightness or tension.
2. **Tune-In:** What stands out as you make contact with the warm object? What are you also seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and/or making contact with? What is the air like on your skin? What is the texture, weight and temperature of the warm object? Notice the fine detail of your different senses.
3. **Notice and Return:** Gently bring the 'torch-beam' of your attention onto the experience of the warm object. Notice the physical sensations of touch, texture, warmth and possibly movement. Allow the physical sensations present to fill your awareness. You may notice that the rhythmic movements of the body as you breathe work with the attention in some way. Be guided by what you find to be helpful.

Acknowledge when the attention is pulled and captured by other things. Allow what tries to hook the attention to be a 'passenger' accompanying you in the background during the mindfulness practice. Keep gently returning the attention to the physical sensations of the warm object each time a 'passenger' takes the attention away.

Some people find combining movement with the contact with warmth helpful, possibly in time with the breath while others prefer not to. Try different ways of moving - opening, closing the fingers, squeezing and releasing the warm object and see what works for you.

4. **Broadening & Ending:** Notice what arises as you move towards ending the practice. Begin broadening and opening out the attention out to include physical sensations present in the rest of your body. Then include in your surroundings. At the end of the practice begin to move your body and fully engage with what is happening around you.

Of course, if you are happy to drift into sleep then you can just let this happen. The drowsiness that tends to arise with longer contact with warmth and just build and the practice may merge with sleep at some point.