



CONTEMPLATING MINDFULNESS

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Benefits of Mindfulness

- Reduced stress and anxiety
- Increased self-awareness
- Reduced negative self-talk
- Increased inner-harmony
- Increased mental concentration
- Increased emotional wellbeing
- Increased calm
- More harmonious connection with others
- Increased personal balance and autonomy
- Increased physical wellbeing
- Enhanced creativity
- Increased Self-Confidence

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of cultivating awareness of what our minds are perceiving and creating and how best to utilise that awareness for the purpose of achieving harmony, peace, clarity, and for making effective and appropriate choices in our lives.

Mindfulness is a form of “on the go” meditation that is designed to enhance our ability to take effective control of our minds and therefore our lives. Its strength is in giving us the ability to stay in touch with our greater potential anytime and anywhere.

Over the last 30 years, modern psychology practitioners have been exploring, studying, and

practicing the ancient meditation techniques of Buddhism, Hinduism, as well as similar practices in other cultures, and finding out for themselves the benefits of such practices and how to incorporate them into our modern life-styles. With the benefit of this research, the practice of mindfulness is empowering our understanding of psychology and how to more effectively access our potential.

Mindfulness is usually initially taught through various guided meditation exercises to enable students to familiarise themselves with the process and to build confidence in their practice. Even though standard meditations can go for 20 to 30 minutes or more, and often with eyes closed, mindfulness practice mostly consists of smaller, more frequent “moments” of meditation that can be done wherever you find yourself, such as waiting for the bus or train, walking to get somewhere, pausing on a park bench, sitting at your computer at work or home and so on. It is about learning to bring the power of awareness into your everyday moments of life.

The simple, yet effective power of awareness

The Problem of Judging/Condemning what is around us.

When we observe the world around us, we can always see what we regard as wrong with the world and the misguided things that people are doing. Sometimes we can make a difference by advocating for change or doing practical things to improve the world, but all too often, and problems are too big and we are too small to make a difference. If we find that we are getting angry at the world and those around us, our mind is getting caught up trying to control what cannot be controlled. Ultimately we cannot control anyone else with anger or force without causing conflict and creating stress and unhappiness for ourselves. It is human nature to want to be free, whether exercising that freedom is constructive or destructive. If we want peace and harmony in our lives, then we need to recognise what we can and can't control. When it comes to others, we can only invite and inspire others to change, if we want that change to be real and permanent. Laws can certainly be passed that force people to change, but then those laws must be policed, which then becomes very complicated. That is beyond the scope of an individual. A clear indication that we are trying to control the uncontrollable is suffering. If I am suffering, my mind is usually trying to indulge in a futile exercise of trying to control something or someone one that is beyond my control. Judging and condemning others is a form of this futile controlling. It is also a form of hate/violence. Ultimately all we end up doing is burning up a lot of energy, causing stress and conflict, and achieve nothing constructive. We are creating our own suffering. So learning to observe the world without judging/condemning is very important for our own peace of mind. We can't control what can't be controlled, but our unconscious mind does

not always understand this. Our own suffering is what reveals the self-defeating thinking. We can still do our bit to make world a better place, but we don't have to suffer in the process. Letting go of our attachment to "self-righteousness" is the key here.

We live our lives in the present moment. We can only act in the now. We can only interact and connect with another person in the now. Our lives are created by what we do now, which is, in turn, determined by what we think and feel in each now moment. The more we can consciously harness our mind in the now, the more effectively we can live our lives. This is Mindfulness, or having a mind full of awareness.

The practice of Mindfulness is not new in our culture. For years now, we have been practicing forms of Mindfulness to enhance our ability to play sport, for example. It is common knowledge that you can't perform to the best of your ability if your mind is not focused and aware of your intentions and actions in each moment.

The same applies to our everyday lives. For example, how much time do we spend regretting what we have done in the past or worrying about what is going to happen in the future? Indulging in such thinking causes us stress, which interferes with our ability to manage our day and be happy. There are many other ways our thinking creates pain and confusion in our lives, often without us realising what we are doing to ourselves. Often we think there is nothing we can do about this, but that is not so. The simple practice of Mindfulness offers us a way to rise above old problematic thinking habits to a place of peace, where we can then be aware of our habitual thinking, rather than be lost in it.

While accessing this state of peace, our natural potential of awareness is dismantling our old ineffective ways of thinking. This is because so much of our thinking operates below our conscious-awareness, like a dysfunctional old government department that has been running for years without being accountable to anyone. Once the workings of this department come under review, it becomes obvious why it is not working well, and the solutions are often also obvious as a result.

Ineffective thought habits are usually created during childhood, when we had limited access to our awareness. Our mind was just randomly accumulating this information. We rarely had the opportunity to step away from these experiences so as to see them with perspective. Because of this ongoing lack of perspective, we end up going through life thinking that that is just the way things are. Some of these unconscious perspectives on life work well for us, but many get in the way of our peace and happiness, and they restrict our potential.

Revealed within the light of our new awareness, many of these ineffective thought habits simply start dissolving because they don't stand up to basic reasoning. We have those marvellous "aha" moments that shift our reality for good. The simple practice of Mindfulness, therefore, enables the light of our natural potential of awareness to shine on

our old ineffective thought habits, allowing us to tidy them up with the abilities that we already have. That is just the beginning of what Mindfulness can achieve.

The Mindfulness Technique

To find that place of peace and also activate the power of awareness, it is important to centre our attention in the present moment. Every breath we take, we take in the present moment, so this is what is used to bring our awareness into focus. Furthermore, we can access our breath anytime, anywhere. This technique of centring our awareness provides a contrast to the mind, which tends to be all over the place like a playground full of unruly children.

When we centre our awareness in the now by focusing on our breath, we can get above the chaos, like placing a tennis umpire's chair in the middle of the play ground where we can then take it all in, without being so swept around by the noise and the chaos. Like the tennis umpire, we can then become the observer. The chaotic flow of our mind has to then push into this inner-focus, making it easier to be aware of it when it does.

One of the first things we tend to discover when practicing mindfulness, or any other form of meditation, is how little initial control we have over these subconscious habitual thought patterns that quickly grab our attention and sweep us into their busy and chaotic currents. Every time we are swept away by the seemingly countless distractions, it is then a matter and reconnecting to the breath and get back to observing.

The way we breathe is important as well. We can cultivate a state of peace by breathing slowly and a little deeper than perhaps we normally would. This is how we breathe when we are relaxed and calm. When practicing Mindfulness, we consciously and deliberately choose to breathe this way, even if our habitual thoughts may be distracting or stressful and our body may be tense and restless. Our open, relaxed, calm breath creates a cultivated environment that is naturally health promoting and different to stressful thoughts and feelings, which helps us to be aware of the stressful thoughts and feelings in comparison to our open, relaxed, calm breath, from where we are observing our mind.

Much of our stressful thinking has little to do with what is happening now – it is more about what we “imagine” might happen. Our mind is trying to get ahead of itself to protect us in some way, but in reality, we are only living in, and reacting to, our own imagination, which our mind forgets. It is like sitting in front of a scary movie that is created by our own mind. Our body naturally reacts to these scary thoughts like it does when we are watching a scary movie, which convinces us even more that the movie (our scary thoughts) are about something real, even when they are not. The movie ends and we walk out of the theatre knowing that it was not real, but we can't so easily walk out of our minds, which is a big part of the problem. We have a lack of perspective of what our minds are up to.

Breathing in this open, calm way sends a signal to our body, telling it that everything is okay. This also helps to reveal when our habitual thoughts are out of place with the present moment.

Now that we are consciously choosing a state of peace by focusing on our slow, open, calm breath, that is also helping us be aware of the present moment, we now consciously assume the position of the detached neutral observer of our own mind and body as thoughts, feelings and physical sensations pass through our awareness.

The way we act in any given moment is determined by how our mind reacts in that moment. Are our actions in that moment a balanced conscious choice, or an unconscious automatic reaction that may not be appropriate? Awareness of our mind's initial reactions is the key. Therefore, a key to Mindfulness is an open, non-judging observation of all that passes through our awareness. We are creating enough "space" in our consciousness to observe the way our mind reacts to our environment, our bodily sensations, and to our own thoughts and associated emotions. We are suspending the urge to act on that which passes through our awareness and are choosing to just observe it instead.

When we centre ourselves and observe our mind in this way, we are giving awareness a chance to simply do its job of being aware, which it is rarely given. In this way, we are able to increasingly "see" what is real in the moment we are in, rather than being "blinded" by all the noise that is coming from our habitually programmed mind.

It is normal for our thoughts to distract us from our neutral observer position. Before we know it, we are caught up in our thinking and have lost contact with our open, slow, calm breath. It is important to accept this as part of the experience. As soon we realise we have been swept away, it is a simple matter of reconnecting to our conscious breath and reinitiating our position as the observer. Being distracted is also something to neutrally observe. There is no standard of practice we have to reach, and therefore there is no failure to reach some standard. There is just the experience of cultivating increasing moments of peace and awareness amongst the often chaotic traffic of thoughts, emotions and physical sensations. As the practice of mindfulness continues, our ability to establish, at will, presence of mind, peace, and happiness increases.

Practicing Mindfulness – a summary

- Slower, deeper breath than normal.
- Focus attention on the breath to centre yourself in the present moment. Keep returning to this conscious-awareness of your breath whenever you get distracted.
- Be the open, neutral (non-judging), detached observer of all that passes through your awareness while you are staying in touch with the open, relaxed rhythm of your breath.

- When we do this, we are opening our awareness like we are opening a door, so the mind and body and the environment can flow through this door of awareness. As our practice continues, the awareness door gets wider and the space for awareness increases.
- Observe how your mind reacts to thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and the outside environment, but don't react with it. Let everything flow through you. Observe the experience of your mind as everything passes through your awareness.
- Practice Mindfulness anywhere and anytime and for any length of time.
- The more frequently you practice mindfulness, the more awareness that you establish.
- Don't expect your mind to behave itself. It is controlled by very powerful primal instincts that switch on automatically and have only limited awareness, and therefore easily get confused.
- Our primal instincts are like a child, and our conscious-awareness is like the parent of that child.
- The first stage of the process is just learning to be aware of the mind and what it is up to. Often the first thing we observe is how out of control our minds are. Don't judge yourself for having such an out-of-control mind. We are all basically the same. You are just observing basic human nature. It is very important to practice being patient, accepting and compassionate toward yourself as a part of the Mindfulness practice. It is like learning to be a caring and attentive parent.
- What we are doing is cultivating a potential (awareness) that we all have, but we all have to recognise it and deliberately switch it on.
- At first, the noisy mind may seem too strong and chaotic to get above, so patience is the key. Awareness is ultimately far stronger than the mind, but you have to get a "feel" for it, just like we do when learning a new sport, or learning to drive a car. You are learning how to consciously direct your mind.
- Any increase in awareness will make a positive difference to your life.
- As your awareness grows, old redundant, self-defeating thought habits will start to fall apart by themselves – you will have insightful "aha" moments.
- Being persistent with your practice is naturally important to develop skill.
- The practice of Mindfulness can become the foundation for unlocking our greater potential in many diverse areas of our lives.