

Introduction to Mindfulness Practice and Meditation

Mindfulness practice is bringing full, non-judgmental awareness to what is happening in the present moment. It is very simple, but it can be hard because our attention is normally focused on whatever we are thinking. The mind constantly generates thoughts, opinions and judgments, about every aspect of our experience. We very rarely simply observe our experience without thinking or judging. We are addicted to paying attention to whatever we think, having done so for billions of moments. Fortunately, paying attention to thinking is a choice. We can learn to notice thinking and choose to let it go for a few moments, and attend instead to our actual experience. That choice is made one moment at a time.

Our simplest handle on the present moment is physical sensation, which only occurs in the present moment. At first, when we bring attention to sensations just as they are, the mind eventually gets busy, generating thoughts about the sensations, the practice, and pretty soon, everything else under the sun. That's what the mind does; it generates thoughts, particularly judgments, about our experience. Mindfulness practice is just developing a new habit of letting go of the thinking over and over (and over and over...) and returning attention to present sensation. You can't force the mind to be quiet, and trying to force it actually generates even more judgment and thinking, but with patience and repetition, letting go of thoughts over and over, the mind gradually settles down on its own.

This ability to notice thinking and let it go is a skill that can be learned, like any other skill, simply by repeating it. Like learning to play a sport or a musical instrument, or learning to type, thinking about it doesn't help; you have to actually practice. At first, as with any new skill, it doesn't work very well, and you have to keep calling yourself back and starting over. With enough repetition, it starts to work better. With more repetition, it starts to feel natural, and with a lot more repetition, it happens automatically. Formal practices (body scan, yoga, sitting meditation, walking meditation) provide lots of repetition. Being relaxed is a frequent side effect, but it is not the point, nor is it

necessary to be relaxed to benefit from the practice. Your mind may be wild at times, but every time you NOTICE that your mind is wild, that's good practice. The object is not to become good at meditating, or to be perfectly peaceful, the object is simply to practice recalling the attention so many times that it becomes a habit, and starts to happen during the rest of the day, when you are not doing formal practice. That is the real payoff – having moments of present awareness, of clarity, in the rest of your life, when it counts. We will consider some of the practical applications of mindfulness practice for reducing stress, increasing mind-body awareness, mindful eating, dealing with information overload, and communication.

For starters, there are two practical reasons that almost anyone might want to try this out. First, there is no such thing as multitasking. The mind is only capable of having one abstract thought at a time. When we think we are multitasking, we are really using a lot of extra mental energy to keep track of switching attention back and forth between two or more things, which actually slows us down and makes us less competent. So, quite literally, if you are worrying, you are not working. If you notice yourself worrying, you have a choice. You can feed the story (we really are very attached to our thoughts, even unpleasant thoughts), or you can notice that you are thinking and let it go. If you bring full attention to sensations occurring in that moment, the story can't be sustained, and you can then get back to doing some work.

Second, and more importantly, once our physical needs are met, most of the stress we experience is not due to the conditions we encounter, but to our reaction to the conditions. It is not your workload or other life conditions that create stress, but your reaction to the conditions. It is possible to make a choice about those reactions as well, one moment at a time. We may have little or no control over the conditions, but we have a choice in each moment about how we respond. Every moment we spend thinking that we have too much to do is a moment we don't spend doing it. Every moment we pay attention to thoughts about the past or the future instead of engaging with what is right in front of us just strengthens the story in the mind. Whenever you notice that that's where the attention has gone, simply recall the attention to the body. Feel your feet on

the floor, the sensations of the breath coming and going. Allow your attention to settle on where you really are, then bring full attention to taking care of the one thing in front of you and move on. Noticing even one small stress reaction each day and letting it go can make a big difference in how you feel about yourself and your situation. Start with the small, simple stuff, and know that however quickly the mind wanders off again, you can always come back and start over.

One important lesson from mindfulness practice is noticing that the difference between unpleasant conditions and thoughts about unpleasant conditions is the difference between pain and suffering. Pain is inevitable, everyone has pain sometimes. Suffering is just the story in the mind; more specifically, the story that goes “I don’t like this, I want it to stop.” Everyone has a threshold for how difficult conditions will become before the mind resists, and there is suffering. The longer you practice, the higher your threshold becomes. Here’s a simple way to test this for yourself. The next time you notice that you are feeling impatient, recognize that impatience is simply wanting the moment to be different than it is. It’s just a mind state, and like any mind state, the moment you notice it, you have a choice. Here’s the two-cent version: You can be stuck in traffic and be ticked off about it, or you can just be stuck in traffic. Your mind state will have no effect whatsoever on the other cars, but it will have a tremendous effect on your experience.

Regular practice for short periods is much more effective and beneficial than one or two longer sessions per week. Simply follow the instructions for a while, without worrying about whether you are learning anything or changing or doing it right. Progress in developing mindfulness is not linear. You may practice for weeks and feel as if nothing is happening, you aren’t getting anywhere, but I assure you the time you put in doing formal practice is always worthwhile. Be patient and persistent. If you stay with it, you will eventually realize that you **have** learned something and you **are** seeing things differently. If you get bored or frustrated or apathetic and stop practicing regularly, it will be a VERY long time, if ever, before you get to that point.

Please feel free to email any questions or concerns.