

MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

by David Gardiner, February 2014

Method: The practice described here derives from over two thousand years of Buddhist tradition. What we translate as “mindfulness” comes from the ancient Pali *sati* or Sanskrit *smṛti*. In general, mindfulness practice represents a middle way between cultivating an intense, single pointed focus (tight), on the one hand, and free and easy mind or even trying to let go of mind (loose), on the other. We usually start with our attention on one thing or process, such as the breath. Yet this is not to produce a straining effort to concentrate hard on the breath. Rather we work to pay attention, to resist the wandering, distracted impulses of our mind, while also trying to be at ease. Thus it's sort of a balance we seek, between focusing and relaxing, avoiding going far into either direction

Some basic instructions for practicing include:

- Sit in a quiet and uncluttered space (on chair or cushion) in a comfortable position, preferable with a relatively erect spine.
- Eyes can be open or closed; if open, a relaxed and downward gaze is helpful, not focusing on any particular visual object.
- Begin with a few slow, deep breaths, to calm body and mind. As breath returns to normal, gently bring attention into the body by following the sensations of breathing. Gradually let the body overall relax a bit; soften into gravity's force.
- Doing a body scan can be helpful: From top of head to toes (or in reverse order), let your attention lightly touch different spots in your body, left/right/front/back/interior, pausing for several seconds to note what sensations are there: comfort? warmth? tension? pain? no particular feeling at all? Allow yourself to simply notice and experience each part of the body, without judging it/yourself and without trying to alter anything. Just let it be, held lightly in your gentle awareness. Be sure to keep breathing naturally. Feel free to linger on a place if something seems to want to keep you there. You should feel no rush to run through the scan quickly.
- After a few minutes, you will likely begin to feel more “grounded” in your body. That is, some of the energy associated with our habitual busy thinking tends to settle a bit and gets replaced with simple body awareness. Notice whether this is the case or not. If not, it's entirely fine and nothing is wrong. See if you can take note then where your awareness/attention/thoughts seem to be if not very grounded in the body. Without judgment, you can softly try to bring awareness to the nature and “texture” of your thoughts at this time: what occupies your mind, and how do you feel – how does your body feel – to be with these thoughts? There is no right or wrong here. Just notice, patiently and kindly.
- If you do sense that your attention becomes more grounded in body and breath awareness, then allow yourself to softly sink into this comfortably. *Let go to relax into a natural mindful awareness.* Don't be surprised if your body seems to feel odd at times, as if larger or smaller than usual, or as if vibrating, or even as if

pulsing with energy or with light. These experiences, and more, are very common and natural results of a settled mind that attends to the body. It's best neither to worry nor to get excited by such "appearances." Simply allow yourself to be aware of whatever seems to arise in your experience, as you continue to breathe easily. It is very common for a moment of relatively calm body awareness to shift to a sudden thought, often about something in a different time or place, and for the awareness of body to then disappear. There can follow a long train of thinking, rather like daydreaming. Again, this is perfectly natural, and there is no need to feel like you ought to "scold" yourself for getting distracted, nor to feel you are somehow therefore "not good" at mindfulness practice. Noticing the mind's natural tendency to wander *is* a core part of mindfulness practice. There is nothing better or worse about the mind wandering very little or wandering a lot. It's like a dog in the back yard: she might sit next to the patio quietly, or she might move about in circles throughout the yard, sniffing this and that. Your aim is to simply watch her movements, without judging them. (She can be rather cute at times, even if naughty.)

- When you do notice that your mind/thoughts have strayed from attention to the body, before bringing your attention back to the body, first notice *what* you are attending to and *how* you feel (in your body) when absorbed in this/these thought/s. If something makes you want to stay with a thought for a bit because you want to understand it better, or because you feel that clearly noticing it seems to teach you something about yourself, then feel free to stay with it some. It is also "not a sin" to allow yourself to think something through then if it seems important to do so, even if just for daily life purposes. This is all OK. However, it is important to note that mindfulness practice in general is not about trying to solve life's problems. There is an infinite number of problems that arise in our lives and this practice is not directed at fixing things. You may find other occasions to work on this. You might even make a "mental sticky note" to think more about some issue later.
- Thus for most people the practice involves a series of moments of attention placed on many different things, since it is not at all easy to keep our attention on our body and breath. We simply continue to gently bring our attention back to the body, via the breath. Again and again, even if a hundred times during a session. To repeat, this is all perfectly naturally. The aim is to gradually develop greater awareness of these movements of the mind. This awareness is actually a *skill*, and one that that is very helpful when you are not sitting still but are active "out in the world." We can learn to become much more attentive to how our mind shifts, and to the complex of feelings and sensation.
- While we are developing some new skills here, it is not a matter of "adding" anything to experience. Our awareness is always naturally, inherently mindful. We are just strengthening this often-neglected aspect, relaxing into it with a gentle but persistent effort.
- It can be helpful to commit to a time span – maybe ten or fifteen minutes – for one's practice period. It's good to start with a relatively easy span so one doesn't get too tired or annoyed. Like any new skill, mindfulness becomes more comfortable as one becomes familiar with it over repeated practice. Be easy on

yourself to build your own regular practice gradually over some weeks and months. No one learns how to play the piano well after just two or three brief lessons. Once or twice per day is great, but if you cannot do it every day, try to sit at least three times a week. You can slowly increase the time span as seems right.

Aims: Traditionally, the purpose of the practice is not just to develop concentration, nor is it merely to find some temporary peace from the often-frantic movements of our mind, from our nearly obsessive compulsion to always be thinking. (It is axiomatic in Buddhist psychology to acknowledge that "thinking" -- the concept-oriented, discursive, labeling and judging functions of our mind -- is only one way that we experience being conscious, and that it is not necessary to always be thinking because to be without thought is not to be asleep or unconscious but simply to be aware without engaging in particular *thought* structures.) The goals of concentration and relative peace and quiet are fine ones and can bring benefits to our lives. But the mindfulness practice mainly aims to cultivate a keen awareness -- commonly called "insight" or *Vipassana* -- of the habitual patterns of our thinking and feeling in order that we might learn better to improve the way we react to people and events. By "improve," I mean to learn better to see what "energies" or emotional and bodily responses trigger, or grow into, our more surface level thoughts and words and deeds. The assumption here is that often we are not aware of the relatively subtle nature of the relationships between body, mind/heart/emotions, thoughts and then our experiences in action, often with others. Gaining clearer, deeper awareness of these interdependencies can bring a rich understanding into fundamental processes that underlie much if not all of our life experience. It is this understanding or insight that ultimately we seek in mindfulness practice.

Thus it is a practice that aims to cultivate certain skills, ones naturally acquired only through discipline, and thus with effort. If one were to ask to state simply what is the single most important aim of the practice, it is to develop insight into the interdependent nature of all aspects of our lives: our body *and* our environment; multiple aspects of the natural world around us; our body *and* our mind/heart/feelings; our sense of well being in the world *and* our relations with others *and* with our environment *and* with what we consume and speak and think and do; and more. Basically the aim is to train ourselves to see, and thus to feel, more keenly the deep relational and dependent nature of all components of our life and world. Naturally, an outgrowth of this awareness or insight is an enhanced compassion or sensitivity to the struggles, stresses and pains of all the living beings with which we are directly or indirectly connected. And such compassion is also inclusive of our own self.

Although it might sound paradoxical, it is also true that strengthening our capacity for compassion can bring with it much more peace and ease in life. One reason this is so is that as our compassion grows, we become less inclined to be irritated by, and resistant to, the problems, the unskillfulness and the complexities of the lives and actions of those around us, and even of the natural turns of events in the world around us. Thus while on the one hand compassion can serve to bring tender attention to other peoples' pains, on the other hand it also helps to protect *us* from the pain that we cause ourselves by feeling

so isolated, so violated, so victimized by external circumstances. It can nurture a deeper patience or forbearance in diverse situations. In this sense, learning to cultivate mindfulness is a win-win skill: it benefits both self and other.

This relatively simple practice contains various dimensions, and if approached sincerely can have a broad impact on our quality of life.

Resources

Books: These are books by well-known, well-trained authors that I can recommend highly. Many, many other books and CDs are available and some are surely very good. But since “mindfulness” has developed a following in popular culture (recent cover article of Time Magazine and much more), some books are likely to be of better quality than others.

- Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening by Joseph Goldstein
- Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life by Thich Nhat Hanh
- Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment--and Your Life by Jon Kabat-Zinn
- Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation by Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield
- Mindfulness in Plain English: 20th Anniversary Edition by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana (This is probably the most extensive, detailed one of the group. Very thorough yet also a bit technical.)

Organizations: (Just a few for a taste)

Center for Mindfulness, University of Massachusetts Medical School

<https://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/stress/index.aspx>

- Perhaps the earliest and most influential in the mindfulness “movement,” this was founded by Jon Kabat-Zinn, M.D. It is famous for its Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (mostly known as MBSR) program that has been utilized to train tens of thousands of health professionals so that they can train patients. Many Universities now have such centers or at least programs, including Stanford, Harvard, Duke, Univ. California San Diego and at San Francisco, Univ. of Minnesota, Univ. of Wisconsin, and more. Also many hospitals all over the country have similar programs as well.

Center for Contemplative Mind in Society

<http://www.contemplativemind.org/>

- Originally founded to outreach into various professional fields including law, nursing and education, CCMS now focuses entirely on training staff and teachers

at universities and colleges and developing programs for higher education under the name Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE).

Mindful Schools

<http://www.mindfulschools.org/>

- One of various organizations dedicated to bringing the fruits of the practice to teachers and their children and adolescent students.

PassageWorks

<http://passageworks.org/>

- Group based in Boulder: *“Our mission is to support educators with practices and principles that integrate social, emotional and academic learning and create meaningful and rigorous relationship-based classrooms.”*

SMART in Education

<http://passageworks.org/courses/smart-in-education/>

(Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques in Education)

- Based in Boulder as part of PassageWorks. *“SMART in Education is an evidenced-based personal renewal program designed especially for educators working in K-12 settings.”* They have trained public school teachers in Boulder and Jefferson County, and are looking to start a program in Colorado Springs.

An Internet search will find lots more.