

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

Beginning Mindfulness meditation is often likened to sitting blindfold on the kerb of a very busy road. There is a huge amount of noise but we have no idea what it is or where it's coming from. When we take the blindfold off what we see can be quite alarming. The traffic is our thoughts, feelings, emotions and sensations; it is not unusual to want to jump into the road and stop the noise and the commotion. The mistaken view that meditation stops thinking begins here in the overwhelming desire to escape from all this hubbub.

But, we soon learn that meditation is not about stopping thinking. Quite the contrary, because trying to stop thinking by thinking 'I've got to stop thinking' is completely self-defeating. The first thing that meditation teaches us is that our thoughts are not under our control. Thoughts and feelings have a life of their own: they appear in our consciousness and then disappear from whence they came. They just flow through us and we cannot stop them. Trying to stop them creates frustration; like trying to dry a fish with a wet sponge.

Rather than controlling our mind meditation helps us develop the skills we need to simply observe our thoughts and leave them alone. It's about getting used to and learning about our mind rather than trying to change it. We begin by learning to be in the here and now, in the present moment, without reacting to thoughts whether good, bad or indifferent. We just watch what goes on with detached interest. The goal is to just let thoughts come and go and not interfere or get tangled up in them.

Surprisingly, not interfering with thoughts is not a passive affair. In fact, we find ourselves using lots of energy to resist being pulled into doing something about all this chaotic thinking. Being human we want to enjoy pleasurable thoughts and feelings, and avoid the painful ones. Our tendency is to attach to the pleasurable ones and avoid the nasty ones; but this just adds another layer of mental activity that creates more turbulence. So, we neither attach to good thoughts nor avoid the bad ones; we just watch them come and go.

The Roots of Mindfulness

Two thousand five hundred years ago Lao Tzu, the Chinese founder of Taoism, said that to dwell on the past is to live in depression, and to dwell on the future is to live in anxiety. Better, then, to be present in the here and now and let the past

and future go. If we want to find freedom and live a healthy life we need to be fully present in the here and now.

Around the same time, the Buddha gave detailed instructions on a meditation practice he called Mindfulness. Mindfulness practice has two roots: Shamatha, which means tranquillity; and Vipassana, which means insight. Mindfulness begins with the development of tranquillity. By learning to hold our attention on an object of concentration, for example our breath, we calm and stabilise the mind.

Vipassana is awareness of the qualities of our experience. These are our feelings, sensations, emotions and sense of physical presence in our body. Vipassana is often referred to as Insight Meditation, because it helps us see the nature of our experiences for what they are. It requires the mind to be very alert but very still, allowing insight into the body to observe how our experience affects us.

Mindfulness is the art of being *calm* and *alert* simultaneously. It is different from just relaxing because our mind is sharp and focused along with being relaxed. When we just relax we feel drowsy and laid-back, which can almost send us to sleep. Being alert is often accompanied by a tense feeling that can be stressful. Meditation, over time, gradually develops a state where each of these moderates the other, so that we feel relaxed without drowsiness and alert without stress: Body still and relaxed, mind concentrated and alert.

So, let's look at the basics of practice, which are deceptively simple:

- Sit upright, comfortably; try to keep your back straight
- Remain still throughout the session
- Rest your hands on your thighs
- Focus attention on your breathing: watch your breath
- Do not entangle yourself with thoughts, feelings, emotions
- When you are dragged away by thoughts, return to breath
- Do not judge your thoughts and experiences as they arise
- Do not try to change or interfere with your experiences in any way

To help us watch our breath it can be helpful to observe the sensations on the surface of the skin as your abdomen rises and falls with the in and out breath. The rhythmical rise and fall of breathing is where we rest our attention. The

moment you are aware that you have wandered off from the breath, without fuss just bring your attention back to the rise and fall of your abdomen.

Importantly, do not punish yourself for being pulled away from breath by the pleasures of seductive thoughts, or fight with thoughts you hate. Just notice that you've been pulled away from focus of breath and gently, without fuss, return your attention to breath. Judging a thought to be good or bad is pointless; a self-defeating waste of energy that creates more chaos. Let your thoughts be what they are and simply let them go.

Begin with a daily ten-minute session in the morning, soon after getting up. If you are able, do two sessions a day, morning and evening. Time your session with an alarm if possible. Sit upright and let your body relax. At moments throughout your day try to find windows where you can practice even for a minute or two.

The Meditating Frog

The combination of alertness and relaxation perfectly describes a frog sitting on a rock in the middle of a pool. Just like the rock he's absolutely still and silent. Suddenly, a fly buzzes in and circles around the pool at terrific speed. Around and around it goes unaware that the frog is not a statue but is alive and well. Then, as the fly buzzes closely past the frog, with astonishing speed it opens its mouth, lurches upward and swallows the fly. The stillness of the frog did not give away his razor sharp attention; this is the perfect metaphor to describe the state of the meditator: still but very alert.

Why Develop a Mind That Can Watch Itself?

It can be quite a surprise to find that we know so little about our mind. It seems obvious that we know our mind because it seems to be what makes our experience possible. But that is an illusion. Knowing our mind is a very special kind of knowledge that requires a special kind of learning process: it requires us to bring conscious awareness to our experience.

Neuroscientific Evidence for the Benefits of Meditation

There is now a huge amount of neuroscientific evidence that the slow, deep breathing of Mindfulness meditation relaxes our body, quietens our mind and lowers stress. It quietens activity in the amygdala, part of the emotional brain responsible for fear and anger, and enhances activity in the hippocampus, which

is damaged by stress. Meditation promotes functioning and increases tissue mass in the frontal part of the cerebral cortex, where stress inhibits judgment, self-awareness and compassion. Meditation also makes it easier for us to connect with others who may provide comfort, intimacy and support. It gives us perspective; helping us see that what seemed insurmountable is manageable. It also promotes life-enhancing meaning and purpose.

Coping with our Ego

Our ego is a system of habits and patterns that generates the normality we know. It is the world we were conditioned to live in during childhood, the world we take for granted, the story of who we are and reality we live in. Until we begin to learn otherwise, our ego seems to be the sum total of who we are and everything we know. But, it isn't. Far from it!

The patterns of thought and behaviour that were forged during our childhood shaped the person we have become. We copied what our parents and our culture did because we learn by observation. What they believed and said, their values, attitudes and their behaviour were internalised by our developing brain. Early childhood experiences become the templates that shape our mind and the world as we know it for the rest of our lives.

Given that our ego developed under the all-powerful influence of our parents, we take on board not only the useful and good things they passed onto us, but all their unhealthy and unresolved issues too. Just like the old sayings tell us: acorns fall close to trees; we are chips off the old block; like mother like daughter; like father like son etc. Problems arise when we are faced with elements of our childhood conditioning that were unhealthy. But is there anything can we do about our unhelpful habits?

Most certainly the answer is yes, we can. Firstly we must identify our unhealthy habits and understand them for what they are. We can't hit a nail with a hammer unless we can see it. This is where Mindfulness meditation comes in as a beneficial support.

Know Thyself: The Mind That Can Watch Itself

Our experience of life can be likened to a river in which we are carried along through deeps, shallows and rapids; sometimes feeling the wonderful stillness of just floating along, and other times like we're drowning in turbulence. Meditation

helps us climb out of the river and sit on the bank. From this vantage point we can observe our changing experience and we discover that the mind has the capacity to watch itself. On the bank we are not 'in' the commotion of the mind, but observing it. Some refer to this as the internal witness, a level of awareness that can focus on experience itself.

The still and quiet mind is not disturbed by the changing fortunes of experience. We can look into the mind and observe our thoughts, emotions and sensations with all their subtle tones, without being pulled into them. As our practice develops we discover that trying to change any aspect of our experience is self-defeating, because it makes the commotion worse.

Holding Attention and Waking Up

Calming the mind by holding focus and concentration requires disciplined, regular practice to train the wandering tendency of the mind. It is useful to think of the mind as constantly falling into unconsciousness, disappearing from the present moment into a kind of dream-state. Most of the time we live on automatic pilot and we are half asleep. Being half asleep means we function below our potential and suffer as a result.

That's it. Sit, focus on your breath and let go of distractions.