



The Practice of Mindfulness Meditation

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In this series, we will be exploring mindfulness meditation: what it is, what are the benefits and how to practice.

Part I

What is mindfulness meditation?

The Pali (language in the Buddha's time) word for mindfulness is *sati*. According to The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, *sati* is commonly used in meditative contexts to refer to the ability to remain focused on a chosen object without forgetfulness or distraction.ⁱ "The emphasis on mindfulness is one of the most distinctive features of Buddhist meditation theory. Consequently, the term appears in numerous lists of virtuous qualities, especially in those pertaining to meditation. For example, in perhaps its most popular usage, right mindfulness is the seventh of the eight aspects of the noble eightfold path."ⁱⁱ One of the Buddha's most famous teachings is the Satipatthana Sutta, The Four Foundations of Mindfulness.ⁱⁱⁱ Mindfulness meditation describes the process of practicing mindfulness

Today, mindfulness is a very popular term with varying meanings: To quote one reporter, "I am not — and I may be the last person in America to admit this — mindful. At least not in the modern sense of the word, which has mostly been understood in Western society as participation in a meditation practice. Its popularity has been spreading like wildfire.... In fact, mindfulness is now so pervasive that even researchers who study it professionally find it hard to get their hands around it. "What I've found," says Jeff Wilson, a professor of religious studies at the University of Waterloo in Canada and author of "Mindful America," "is the mindfulness movement is so vast, so diverse and so unstoppable that it's hard to even have an opinion about it as a whole. It's a gigantic American story of charlatans and quacks and guardian angels and good Samaritans and ... you name it. It's all going on."^{iv}

A similar perspective from a participant in the a Naropa University mindfulness course^v: "As with most other cultural things adapted by the West, the essence tends to get tweaked by the adoptive practitioners and continues to be filtered and watered down by generations of would be practitioners. I have seen this in acupuncture, qigong, and yoga where the ancient wisdoms have been brought to the masses by students of students of students, etc and tweaked so much that the original teachings are unrecognizable. It is important for western practitioners to hold the essence and teach the truths of the master's and continue to seek the truth themselves without spinning their own interpretation as a new truth."

With that in mind, we are going to focus on the Buddha's teachings, the dharma. Bhante Gunaratana, a revered Buddhist monk and Abbott of the Bhavana Society defines mindfulness as **paying attention**

from moment to moment to what is.^{vi}..In his new book, *Start Here, Start Now: A Short Guide to Mindfulness Meditation*, he explains mindfulness: “Mindfulness is a form of mental training that will teach you to experience the world in an entirely new way. You will learn for the first time what is truly happening to you, around you, and within you. It is a process of self-discovery, a participatory investigation in which you observe your own experiences while participating in them. You’ll find yourself observing things objectively, exactly as they are — flowing and changing from moment to moment. Life then takes on an unbelievable richness that cannot be described. It has to be experienced.

Through this practice, we train ourselves to see reality exactly as it is. This process of mindfulness is really quite different from what we usually do, tending to see life instead through a screen of thoughts and concepts, which we mistake for reality. We get so caught up in this endless thought-stream that reality flows by unnoticed. We spend our time engrossed in activity, caught up in an eternal pursuit of pleasure and gratification and eternal flight from pain and unpleasantness. We spend all of our energies trying to make ourselves feel better, trying to bury our fears, endlessly seeking security. Meanwhile, the world of real experience flows by untouched and untasted.”^{vii}

Chogyam Trungpa, a Buddhist meditation master stated: “Meditation is extremely down to earth, irritatingly down to earth. It can also be demanding. If you stick with it, you will understand things about yourself and others, and you will gain clarity. If you practice regularly and follow this discipline, your experiences won't necessarily be dramatic, but you will have a sense of discovering yourself. Through the down-to-earth practice of meditation, you can see the colors of your own existence. The earth begins to speak to you rather than heaven sending you messages, so to speak.”^{viii}

How can you benefit from mindfulness meditation?

Benefiting from mindfulness meditation means following the path that the Buddha prescribed. He called it the Eightfold Path. The eight steps in the Eightfold Path are divided into three general components: gaining understanding and wisdom, leading a skillful life and practicing mindfulness. Bhante G. called these components, the three integral factors in Buddhist meditation. Below, we will discuss the practice of mindfulness meditation but be aware that to achieve full benefit, practicing the other two components is necessary.

Those who have practiced mindfulness meditation have experienced many benefits. Judith Simmer-Brown states three common benefits:

The first benefit is that mindfulness meditation **shifts us to a different and wider perspective** of our experience. Normally we tend to focus on small parts of our experience and forget that the emotion that we are experiencing is just temporary (impermanent) and that we are not that emotion. For example, when we are experiencing anger, that is not who we are. Anger is just arising and will fall away. This shift in perception makes the emotion much easier to deal with. As a result, we become more resilient, able to chart a steady course through the waves of life.

The second benefit is that we **develop a different interpretation of suffering**. Because as noted above, we realize that emotions are impermanent, we don't resist the suffering because we accept that this is the way it is. We are not hard on ourselves by adding more suffering to our suffering. For example, if we

are feeling physical pain, we work with that pain rather than feel sorry for ourselves that we have the pain or blame the conditions that caused the pain.

The third benefit is that mindfulness practice causes us to **shift from focusing exclusively on ourselves as the star of the show to others**. We realize that others are suffering and having the same problems. This brings out our true nature of gentleness, loving-kindness and compassion.

Another benefit is **improving our relationships**. In another of his teachings, the Buddha stated the four Brahma Viharas as the four divine abodes for relationships: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. With mindfulness meditation practice, we realize more of the abodes and less of their opposites:

- Less ill will and more loving-kindness
- Less harmfulness and more compassion
- Less resentment and more sympathetic joy
- Less irritation and more equanimity

Here is a fake Buddha quote which nevertheless contains some wisdom:

Buddha was asked: "What have you gained from meditation?" He replied: "Nothing." "However", Buddha said, "let me tell you what I lost : Anger, Anxiety, Depression, Insecurity, Fear of Old, Age and Death."^{ix}

Next, we will explore how to achieve these benefits with mindfulness meditation practice.

Part II

How do we achieve these benefits?

Becoming more mindful is developing a habit that will stay with you for life. How do we develop this habit? In the book, *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg, outlines the theory and the steps to develop skillful habits.^x The root of the process is the brain forming a sequence of actions into an automatic routine. “This process within our brains is a three-step loop. First, there is a cue, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use. Then there is the routine, which can be physical or mental or emotional. Finally, there is a reward, which helps your brain figure out if this particular loop is worth remembering for the future.”^{xi}

To develop the habit of meditation practice, we need to create a cue that will remind us to practice (routine) and a reward that will keep us motivated to continue that routine. For me, the cue is the time of day. After breakfast, I am reminded that my next activity is meditation practice. When I am reminded of this, I also have a pleasant anticipation of the rewards of the routine which are for me, letting go of my constant thinking and doing, practicing loving-kindness/compassion, and just being. I realize that the practice will have long term effects of increasing my moments of awareness. As Chogyam Trungpa notes, we start by appreciating our intention to follow the path. “Genuine appreciation is acknowledging yourself as a person who is committed to the practice of meditation and to the basic mindfulness and awareness that arise from the practice and continue throughout the rest of your life.”^{xii}

The Practice

Mindfulness meditation can be practiced both in formal meditation (termed on the cushion even though we may sit in a chair) and as we go about our daily life (off the cushion).

Mindfulness Meditation on the cushion

There are many ways to meditate. We start by adopting certain techniques. As Trungpa notes: “In the beginning we are very focused on the technique but eventually we may find that we are just there, simply there.”^{xiii}

One recommended way is to follow the instructions of Bhante Gunaratana in his new book, *Start Here, Start Now: A Short Guide to Mindfulness Meditation*^{xiv} It is a short book that is worth purchasing for continued reference.

Topics covered:

Why Bother with Meditation

Some Misconceptions about Meditation

Introducing Mindfulness

Ten Tips for Effective Practice

The Practice Itself

Finding the Breath

What to do with the Body

What to Do When the Mind Wanders

Where, When, and How Long to Sit

Bare Attention

Walking Meditation
The Inevitability of Problems
Physical Pain
Legs Falling Asleep and Other Odd Sensations
Drowsiness, Inability to Concentrate, Dullness
Fear and Agitation
Trying Too Hard, Expecting Too Much, and
Resistance to Meditation
Mental Maneuvers to Dealing with Distraction
Working with Thoughts, Judgments, and Self-Criticism
Five Flavors of Hindrance
Work with All States Equally
The Final Factor: Ethical Action
Some Slogans to Encourage Mindfulness

Below are some general tips and a suggested technique that I have found to be useful.

Commitment: “The most important rule here is this: When it comes to sitting practice, the Middle Way applies. Don’t overdo it. Don’t underdo it. This doesn’t mean you just sit whenever the whim strikes you. It means you set up a practice schedule and keep to it with a gentle, patient tenacity. Setting up a schedule acts as an encouragement. If, however, you find that your schedule has ceased to be an encouragement and become a burden, then something is wrong.”^{xv}

Setting: A quiet place if possible.

Posture: sit upright, eyes closed, hands on thighs. If you must move, do so with mindfulness

Timing: Determine what is comfortable for you and decide before you meditate. No need for a timer. Just check the clock as needed.

Sequence:

The following is a sequence that I practice. Think of the sequence as if you were in a gym going around to various exercise stations to work on a different part of your body. In meditation, you are working on concentration, calming the mind, letting go, loving-kindness, and compassion.

1. Set aside your current problems
2. Scan the sense organs (body, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, mind) to get a present sense
3. Take three deep inbreaths holding each for a long as you can and then letting the breath out slowly.
4. Practice mindfulness of the breath: Focus on the breath: the inbreath and the outbreath without controlling the depth or rate. If distracted, label that distraction, thinking, and go back to the breath.
5. Practice loving kindness by thinking of yourself and whomever comes to mind wishing them to be happy and peaceful, safe and protected, filled with contentment, free from suffering.
6. Practice compassion by thinking of yourself and whomever comes to mind wishing them to live a life of ease even in the midst of pain, misfortune or difficulties.
7. Just be and observe whatever arises. Note the impermanence.

Develop your own routine and see if it works for you. You can vary your routine; however, it is recommended to do a thorough mindfulness of breath meditation (#4) each time.

Part III

Reflections on Mindfulness Meditation

Here are some reflections on mindfulness meditation from Chogyam Trungpa in his book, *Mindfulness in Action: Making Friends with Yourself through Meditation and Everyday Awareness*

“Mind is just awareness that exists within our being.” Chogyam Trungpa^{xvi} Awareness is the consciousness of consciousness.

No matter what arises, everything is labelled as thinking. “Regarding everything as a thought pattern is quite demanding. It requires a certain amount of bravery, or heroism. When you take the approach that everything is thinking, you begin to realize that right and wrong, good and bad, safe and not safe, actually don’t exist. Therefore, it is also a very freeing experience. So, regard whatever arises in meditation as thinking. Let the thought pass through. “Easy come, easy go” could be our motto.”^{xvii}

“Sitting in a chair or on a meditation cushion, feeling your body and experiencing your breathing: This experience is yours to appreciate. You just sit there, experiencing your form, your atmosphere, experiencing a sense of life, purpose, time and temperature. The unnecessary complications should be simplified into one-pointedness. Appreciating your experience in this simple way is the development of peace, which is the starting point of the practice of meditation.”^{xviii}

“When you practice meditation, you have a choice. You can take the attitude that you are just doing it, or you can take the attitude that you are waiting for something to happen.” The latter is a trap. Just sit and be.^{xix}

“To begin with, every aspect of the practice reflects the continual manifestation of gentleness. You begin to realize that the sound of the meditation bell or timer, to signal the beginning or the end of meditation practice, is the sound of gentleness Your meditation cushion or the chair that you sit in to meditate is the embodiment of gentleness.

From there, the experience of gentleness begins to affect the rest of your life. Whatever you do in life, you can always find a soft edge, rather than sticking with the hard edges. You find that the entire world is being transformed. In fact, the world stays the same, but you are transformed. And that transforms your experience of the world. It can be done.”^{xx}

Mindfulness Meditation off the cushion

Off the cushion is where we spend most of our time. How do we integrate mindfulness meditation into all of the things that we do?

From Gary Sanders, meditation teacher at Portland Insight Meditation Community: “Last night, I led my local sangha with an equanimity practice and discussion and then came home to walk my bulldog before I went to bed. For awhile now, my personal daily practice has included, sometimes even exclusively for periods of time, walking practice. I do it so much that I now mentally note my steps when I walk my dog, it’s become second nature.

As I headed down our neighborhood paseo, being mindful of the sensation of walking, IT hit me. It was one of those moments that shows you how deep your practice has gotten. Everything seemed to have slowed down, my awareness felt expansive and huge, I saw so many vibrant shades of black, grey, blue and purple in the night sky, the stars jumped out at me and oh yeah, I was filled with peace and contentment, equanimity even. I was mindful of SO much....and it was beautiful.

So this is the hope, right? We practice mindful meditation with the hope that we take our practice off the cushion and into the world. We notice more, appreciate more, make more skillful choices and the quality of our presence deepens. We get to rejoice in the fruits of our efforts and last night, I got my money's worth, figuratively."^{xxi}

From Joan Satterfield: "Formal meditation practice is the ground of training that influences all we do at other times. As an outgrowth of the concentrative awareness developed by our meditation practice, there is a natural seeping of wakefulness into our daily life. We begin to notice what we're doing while we are seated, walking, lying down, or assuming some sort of posture.

But our mind training doesn't have to stop when we are not in a seated meditation posture, because most of the time we are in some sort of posture without actually naming it as such. For instance, sitting at the desk and craning our neck forward toward the computer is a posture, albeit not one of very good alignment. If we're standing in front of a crowd and giving a talk, we are in a posture, depending on how confident we feel, and if we simply walk through a crowd of people we don't know, our body mirrors our self-consciousness by assuming some sort of posture called the way we carry ourselves. A posture is a posture whether we give it a name, practice it in a class, or abide in it unconsciously.

So how are we occupying the posture we are in? By simply locating our breath at any given moment, we begin to develop an intimate relationship with our body, its posture or shape, and the way it is reflecting our thoughts and emotions. In the Buddha's discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness (Satipatthana Sutta), he asks the monks to notice the breath, whether it be short or long, and he says: "He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to the entire (breath) body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to the entire (breath) body.'" We can notice what our breath is doing and, just as importantly, how it is reacting to what is going on both internally and externally, especially if we are sensitive to the entire body."^{xxii}

Practicing mindfulness is the key to integrating our awareness into everyday life. Bhane G. defines mindfulness as "paying attention moment to moment to what is." This is easier said than done! We have to keep practicing to stay in the present to pay attention. As you go through the day, keep going to the breath. When driving, you might do this at a stoplight. This is an example of using cues to form the mindfulness habit.

There is the rubber band technique. Put a rubber band on one of your wrists. When you remember to practice mindfulness of breathing (paying attention to two or three breaths), do so and then shift the rubber band to your other wrist. When you notice the rubber band, practice mindfulness of breathing and then shift the rubber band.

In *7 Easy Ways to be Mindful Every Day*^{xxiii}, Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S. gives some tips. Here are three:

- Practice mindfulness during routine activities. Try bringing awareness to the daily activities you usually do on autopilot, said Ed Halliwell, mindfulness teacher and co-author of the book *The Mindful Manifesto*. For instance, pay more attention as you're brushing your teeth, taking a shower, eating breakfast or walking to work, he said. Zero in on the sight, sound, smell, taste and feel of these activities. "You might find the routine activity is more interesting than you thought," he said.
- Practice mindfulness while you wait. In our fast-paced lives, waiting is a big source of frustration – whether you're waiting in line or stuck in traffic. But while it might seem like a nuisance, waiting is actually an opportunity for mindfulness, Halliwell said. When you're waiting, he suggested bringing your attention to your breath. Focus on "the flow of the breath in and out of your body, from moment to moment and allow everything else to just be, even if what's there is impatience or irritation."
- Pick a prompt to remind you to be mindful. Choose a cue that you encounter on a regular basis to shift your brain into mindful mode, Lucas said. For instance, you might pick a certain doorway or mirror or use drinking coffee or tea as a reminder, she said.

Part IV

How do you make the practice of mindfulness meditation a part of your daily life?

Laura Good

I first heard the concept of mindfulness in college, when I took a class about different kinds of meditation. The example the teacher used was that mindfulness is a simple shift in your attention, or simply being careful. He had a handout he had copied and it was kind of crooked. He said if had been more mindful, he would have paid more attention to how he had lined up the original, taken more care.

An intention to be mindful would mean you are carefully moving your fingers, placing the paper, trying to align the guides so that the copy comes out straight. Does the world end if it's not straight? No! But it's the type of thing that one only notices when it's crooked. There's an assumption that a copy is supposed to be straight and though there could be a host of reasons why it isn't, (you were in a rush, the copier was not working, you didn't have glasses on, etc.) there is a subconscious sense of ease and "rightness" when a task is done as it should be or at least how we expect it to be.

We usually don't notice we were not being mindful until after the fact, when we sort of "wake up" and snap out of our un-mindful moment. But just like a copier, the quality of one moment (or copy!) affects the next and so on. This is not meant to be daunting but instead, good news. We do not have to micromanage every moment but develop mindfulness as the ground of being instead.

Let's explore the idea that mindfulness is not something outside ourselves that we have to reach for or acquire. It is state we all have access to that can be developed and deepened so we can live a life with

more ease and less suffering. Making mindfulness a “default state” is not difficult and we’ll talk about how make an integrated part of your life.

How? Have a Daily Practice

Even if it’s five minutes a day or doing walking meditation on a break. Note any resistance to doing something that is for your benefit.

It’s like learning to play a musical instrument. If there is one thing I hear from parents all the time, it is “I wish I would’ve stuck with the (fill in chosen instrument here).” You do not have to be a virtuoso to learn enough to enjoy it or reap the benefits. But often what makes someone stop has little to do with it’s hard or easy but the circumstances (being forced to practice, having a bad teacher, etc.). No one is forcing you to be mindful, but you need to do it to feel its positive effects.

Mind Starts with The Body

Your body is providing the vessel for mindfulness, so while we think mindfulness is a thought process, it is your body that allows it to happen.

For example, you bring your body here to the sangha every Wednesday night. You did all the things necessary to get yourself here, you found your keys, you got in your car, etc. All the while, your body is breathing and because of that, your brain is doing all the calculations to get yourself here. So, in comparison, just sitting at home is easy.

Wherever you are, sitting or walking, all you have left to do is pay attention to what your body is already doing: breathing. In/out breath thoughts In/Out Easy. Come and go. This is training your brain/mind.

Sense Clues

We can use other sense clues: bell, incense, lighting a candle, lowering lights, chanting. Or every morning after coffee or getting the family ready. Or at night when it’s quieter.

We are biologically designed to respond to things we do over and over. We don’t have to fight it, We don’t even have to have a belief system for it work. With a simple inclination or resolve to practice, mindfulness produces results independent from an emotional state or belief system. We provide the proper circumstances: a breathing body paying attention and the mindfulness follows.

Science Beyond Mindfulness

All sorts of scientific studies are proving the benefits of mindfulness. Humans are not just motivated by a Negativity Bias: humans are also motivated by reward. Remind yourself of the benefits of shifting to mindfulness whenever you can.

Not only can it calm our fight/flight bias or state, but in every interaction, we have mindfulness to help let it be what it is. Not that every moment is perfectly peaceful or beneficial but if our default state is mindfulness, it has a better chance.

Positive Moments

Another way to reinforce our inclination to mindfulness is by letting positive moments really sink in. Some years ago, I took a workshop by neuro psychologist Rick Hansen and neuroscientist Rick Mendius in California. Here is an exercise they developed to help us “root” ourselves with positive emotions:

“We’ll going to suggest various things for you to bring to mind that could evoke positive feelings in you. Whatever comes up for you is fine, but if you can, also try to help yourself feel good.

You may notice some resistance to feeling good, perhaps expressed simply as a tightening in your body, and becoming more aware of that resistance is part of the exercise.

But as much as you can, try to be on your own side and let the good feelings grow inside your mind and heart and body, filling you. You are existing inside a field of good feelings.

recall or imagine a place you like being

recall or imagine being with someone you like being with,

recall or imagine doing something you enjoy.

recall or imagine a sense of different positive feelings. For example, see if you can get a sense of calm, peacefulness, or tranquility. If you like, see if you can get a sense of ease, of contentment, of things being alright. If you like, see if you can get a sense of friendliness, or caring, or even love for others. If you like, see if you can get a sense of happiness, even mild happiness .

Let it sink in. What does it feel like in our body?

What was that like? How do you feel now, compared to when we began?

Did you encounter any inhibition of or resistance to positive emotions? How was that experienced by you? What did you learn about experiencing or evoking positive emotions?”^{xxiv}

Bhikkhu Bodhi notes: “(The Buddha) calls his Dhamma ehipassiko, which means “Come and see for yourself.” He invites inquirers to investigate his teaching, to examine it in the light of their own reason and intelligence, and to gain confirmation of its truth for themselves. The Dhamma is said to be paccattam veditabbo viññuhi, “to be personally understood by the wise,” and this requires intelligence and sustained inquiry.”^{xxv}

Being mindful is really about letting go of expected outcomes and relaxing into a curiosity and friendliness with whatever is arising. Make it a habit, breathe and let go.

Finally, offer your practice as a gift to yourself and others. Meditation is the greatest state of non-harming we have.

ⁱ Buswell Jr., Robert E.; Donald S., Jr. Lopez. The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Buswell Jr., Robert E.; Donald S., Jr. Lopez. The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism

ⁱⁱⁱ Satipatthana Sutta (the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness): Frames of Reference translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu <https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/MN/MN10.html>

^{iv} Cindy Dampier “[Mindfulness is not just a buzzword, it's a multibillion dollar industry: Here's the truth about the hype](#)” Chicago Tribune July 2,2018

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- ^v Naropa University offers a free mindfulness course, [Mindfulness: What It Is, Where It Comes From, and How to Practice It](#), taught by Judith Simmer-Brown.
- ^{vi} Gunaratana, Henepola. Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness: Walking the Buddha's Path (p. 193). Wisdom Publications.
- ^{vii} Gunaratana, Bhante. Start Here, Start Now: A Short Guide to Mindfulness Meditation . Wisdom Publications.
- ^{viii} Chogyam Trungpa Mindfulness in Action: Making Friends with Yourself through Meditation and Everyday Awareness Shambhala 2015 p. 6
- ^{ix} <https://fakebuddhaquotes.com/buddha-was-asked-what-have-you-gained-from-meditation-the-buddha-replied-nothing-at-all/>
- ^x, Duhigg, Charles. Power of Habit Random House Publishing Group.
- ^{xi} Duhigg, Charles. The Power of Habit (p. 19)
- ^{xii} Trungpa p. 71
- ^{xiii} Trungpa p. 34
- ^{xiv} Gunaratana, Bhante. Start Here, Start Now: A Short Guide to Mindfulness Meditation . Wisdom Publications.
- ^{xv} Gunaratana p. 57
- ^{xvi} Trungpa p. 66
- ^{xvii} Trungpa p.74
- ^{xviii} Trungpa p. 75
- ^{xix} Trungpa p. 72
- ^{xx} Trungpa p. 38
- ^{xxi} <https://www.sharonsalzberg.com/mindfulness-off-cushion/>
- ^{xxii} Jill Satterfield [Meditation in Motion How to be present in your body](#)
- ^{xxiii} [7 Easy Ways to be Mindful Every Day](#) Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S.
- ^{xxiv} <https://www.rickhanson.net/train-brain-positive-emotions-taking-good/>
- ^{xxv} Bhikkhu Bodhi [The Buddha and His Dhamma](#)