

How to Meditate

Mindfulness: The Most Direct Path

By James Baraz, Shambhala Sun, 2010

The Buddha spoke of mindfulness as the most direct way to overcome sorrow and lamentation, end pain and anxiety and realize the highest happiness.

That's quite a claim!

What is so special about mindfulness? Of all the fifty-two mental factors listed in Buddhist psychology, mindfulness possesses a unique power. It weakens all the negative or unwholesome states that cause us suffering such as attachment, aversion and confusion, and strengthens the wholesome mind states that lead to happiness such as kindness, generosity, and wisdom. It can even develop the penetrating awareness that opens the mind to full awakening.

When I first learned about the transformative power of mindfulness, and experienced it for myself, I wanted to run down the streets telling anyone who would listen, "You just have to be mindful!" I've since learned that there are other important strategies that can help when life throws us a curve—compassion and loving kindness practices, reaching out to friends, teachers and guides for wise counsel; trauma modalities where necessary. But after all these years, mindfulness still seems to me the primary tool for working with life's difficulties.

Mindfulness trains us to be more conscious and awake to what's going on in our world. Mindfulness helps us respond with greater clarity and a kind heart to whatever situation we find ourselves in. It helps us to be more present for our lives.

However, as any student of Buddhism will tell you, mindfulness takes practice. It's one thing to have the intention to be present. It's quite another to actually do it. That's why formal mindfulness meditation is so crucial to being more mindful in all our daily activities. As with developing any skill, practicing mindfulness in a formal way will help it arise more naturally and spontaneously.

In the Theravada tradition which I am most familiar with, mindfulness meditation is called *Vipassana*, which means "to see things clearly." When you are mindful you know what is actually happening in your present moment's experience without judging how it is or wishing it was different. If you have an itch, for example, mindfulness feels the sensation of itching with no agenda to get rid of it. It is the bare knowing of experience. When you're fully mindful, the mind is fully present for what's actually happening. You are not lost in thought.

How exactly do you practice mindfulness meditation? As one of my teachers used to say, if you want to understand the mind, sit down and observe it. To begin, find a comfortable posture, sitting in a chair or on a meditation cushion or bench. Your posture should be a balanced expression of alertness and ease. I like Thich Nhat Hanh's suggestion of thinking of yourself like a mountain—strong, worthy of respect, here for any changes in the weather system. At the same time, allow any

places of tension or holding to release, letting go of anything that you don't need. Feel your connection to the Earth. Let the Earth support you. It's here for you.

Mindfulness training usually begins with awareness of breathing. You collect and focus your attention on the breath wherever you feel it most clearly—the in- and out-breath at the nostrils, the rising and falling of the abdomen or the whole body expanding and contracting. This is easier said than done because the mind will soon wander into thought. Anyone who has ever tried to meditate knows this. You may be lost for five seconds or five minutes. When the mind is gone, it's gone and there's little you can do about it. This is not bad. It's just the way it is. The eye sees. The ear hears. The mind thinks. The mind is not the enemy. And it can be trained.

The key moment in the meditative process is the moment you realize you've been wandering. How you respond to that fact determines how you will relate to meditation practice. If you react with frustration and judgment, you will strengthen those qualities. If you get hooked by the thought and say, "Oh, let me go with this interesting thought," you'll be lost once again and, in a little while, feel more frustration. The secret to skillful meditation is bringing your attention back with great patience and kindness. Instead of feeling frustrated because you've been lost, you can appreciate that you've woken up from your daydream. In doing so, you will develop a healthy relationship with your mind, as you cultivate patience and kindness along with mindful awareness.

After establishing the breath as your connection or “anchor” to the present, you can then include any other part of your experience as a subject of your mindfulness meditation. There is nothing outside the meditation field. Whether the breath, sensations, sounds, images, emotions or the thinking process itself, you simply are aware of what is happening now, allowing your experience to be just as it is. When a loud sound calls your attention, mindfulness knows that, in that moment, hearing is happening. If you’re restless, mindfulness knows that restlessness is here. If you are calm, mindfulness means simply knowing you are calm. Mindfulness does not try to fix anything.

Along with kindness and patience, it’s important to let the mind be as relaxed and spacious as possible, so that it’s not contracted or tight. This allows you to more easily open to anything that arises. At the same time, if you bring a natural curiosity to what is happening, you will be more engaged and less likely to get bored or sleepy. Of course, when boredom or sleepiness come, they too are part of the moment’s experience, so rather than trying to get rid of them, just include them.

Practicing mindfulness in formal meditation with this relaxed, interested, non-judging awareness, will help you develop these qualities in the rest of your life. You will see for yourself why the Buddha called mindfulness the most direct way to overcome suffering and realize great happiness. Good luck!