

Chapter 3: The Basics of Mindfulness Meditation

The way of the Buddha is to know yourself;
To know yourself is to forget yourself;
To forget yourself is to be awakened by all things

—Dogen

Mindfulness meditation practice is a commitment that many resist, but it requires far less time and effort than most people realize. For best results, mindfulness meditation should be practiced for 20 to 30 minutes twice a day in a quiet room with a closed door and no distractions. If you travel a lot, you can do it on a train, plane, or bus, or even in a waiting room or traffic jam. The more you practice, the easier it will be to center yourself amidst the distractions. You'll hear the phone ring, the children playing downstairs, or people walking in the hallway and talking just outside your office, and it will all be din. You'll observe it, note it, and categorize it as background noise that can be ignored.

One of the concerns about meditating that my clients often have is the fear that if they quiet down, a great idea will come to them and they'll have no way of capturing it before it leaves their consciousness. I recommend having a pen and pad of paper nearby in case you feel the urge to write down something that seems important, whether it's a creative idea or the sudden awareness that you've left an important task off of your agenda. The idea is to simply record that creative idea or important task but not give it attention until you're finished meditating. If you complete your meditation session, you'll

actually have more energy and creativity to work, and you'll be able to set aside any anxiety or frustration and explore your options. I've found that occasionally breaking the classic rule of never stopping the meditation, and choosing instead to jot down important thoughts, can allow you to focus better on the meditation instead of continually wrestling with a persistent thought. Most of the time, however, simply noting the thoughts or images and coming back to them later, after you come out of the meditative state, is the best course.

Many of my clients choose to start the day with a meditation session and do another before work, midday (perhaps on a lunch break), before dinner, or just before going to bed. The time of day isn't important; the regular practice is. It's better to start by doing 10 minutes once a day than aiming for the overall goal of two 20-minute sessions per day and falling short by meditating for 20 minutes one day and then not again until a few days later when you remember your promise to yourself. Use a timer to ensure that you meditate for as long as you planned. Aim for meditating at the same time in the same quiet and serene place, such as sitting down in your office chair for the first time in the morning, or sitting in your car, getting ready to drive home from the gym after your daily workout. Again, choose a time when distractions will be minimal.

Whenever you know that your schedule will be altered due to travel, having houseguests, etc., plan for how you'll work in your meditation. I travel a lot, and I always inform the people sponsoring my workshop that I'll need to block out 45 minutes in the early morning before my teaching day begins and 45 minutes in the late afternoon in order to meditate.

If you're anticipating a stressful situation in which it will be challenging to remain nonreactive, or you'll need to be able to access your creativity more than usual because you're dealing with a perplexing problem, try to schedule a mindfulness meditation immediately beforehand. I've had clients meditate before attending a late afternoon meeting in order to refresh themselves creatively, and before a phone conversation with their ex-spouse, and they've reported that just five minutes spent in mindfulness practice makes a dramatic difference in their ability to remain calm, focused, and nonreactive.

How to Perform Mindfulness Meditation

Here are the four steps of mindfulness meditation:

Step 1. Get into a comfortable posture. Sit crossed legged on a meditation cushion or with your legs extended straight out with your back against a wall for support, or sit in a chair with a firm back, keeping your feet on the floor and your spine straight, and tucking in your chin slightly to keep your vertebrae aligned properly. If you have any back, pelvic, or neck pain, back support is essential. In fact, you may want to lie on the floor, or on a couch or bed, with your head propped up at a 45-degree angle. Alternately, sit in an ergonomic office chair with lumbar support.

If you're sitting up, close your eyes, but if you're lying down, keep your eyes half open to prevent yourself from falling asleep.

Step 2. Focus your eyes: With your eyes closed, focus them on one spot. You may wish to focus them toward the tip of your nose or on your third eye, the chakra point in the

middle of the forehead, allowing your eyeballs to roll upward. Alternately, look straight ahead at the insides of your eyelids. Whichever eye position you choose, make certain it feels comfortable and that your eye muscles are relaxed. You can also focus on the muscles at the back of your eye, relaxing them.

If you have heightened anxiety or fears, or are dealing with a trauma, you may want to open your eyes halfway or even fully, looking straight ahead at a spot on the wall or out the window at a stationary object, in order to ease those feelings. For example, try sitting about three feet from the wall, and with your back straight, slightly tilt your head downward and find the spot where the wall and floor meet. With your eyes slightly open and relaxed, gaze steadily at this point. You may also wish to close your eyes and imagine being in a place where you always felt relaxed, safe, and secure, such as when you were a child sitting on your grandmother's lap or on the swing in your backyard. You might even imagine such a spot if you can't remember one. This will immediately assist you in decreasing your anxiety and any inner fear about entering into a meditative state.

Step 3. Pay attention to your breathing. With eyes closed, fixating them on one spot, breathe in with awareness of your lungs and your diaphragm. As you inhale, say to yourself, "In." Exhale from your lungs and then your abdomen, saying to yourself, "Out." Do this each time you breathe. You can also use the words "rising" and "falling away," or "comfort" and "letting go," or "surrender" and "release."

Step 4. Place your hands in a relaxing and energizing "mudra" (hand position). In Buddhism, the mudra, or position of the hands, in meditation is important because it

affects the flow of energy throughout the body. There are three traditional mudras: The first is to touch the thumb and first finger to each other, then hold your palms up, with your other fingers relaxed and straight, and rest the backs of your hands on your thighs. The second, which is more common in Zen Buddhism, is similar: You bring your gently cupped hands together at your abdomen, thumbs facing away from you and palms up, with the fingernails of your first three fingers touching. The third, also a Zen mudra, is to hold your right hand in your lap or at your navel with the palm turned upward, your thumb facing away from you and your other fingers straight, with the left hand on top of it, also palm up with the thumb facing away from you so that your two thumbs form a triangle with your left index finger.

Step 5: Be aware. As you breathe in and out, mentally note the thoughts, feelings, sounds, tastes, smells, and physical sensations (such as itching, temperature, pain or discomfort, or feelings of heaviness and lightness) that you experience. Don't try to analyze any of what you're noting. Simply be present, open, alert, and watchful as you allow the witnessing mind to emerge. Observe the quality of the sensation if it has one, and categorize it—"heaviness in shoulders," "bitter taste," "lawnmower outside," "painful thought about son," "thought about that call I should make," and so on.

Don't explore this thought or feeling unless it occurs more than twice, in which case, ask yourself, "Is this something I can come back to later, after I've meditated?" If the answer is *yes*, let go of the thought as you exhale, but do come back to it later and write about it in a Mindfulness Journal (which I'll talk about later), contemplate it, or talk to a friend or counselor about it. If you determine that what keeps coming up for you

should be addressed right away, allow yourself to be present with that sensation, feeling, or repetitive thought. At the same time, allow the witness aspect of your consciousness observe yourself without judgment as the feeling, thought, or sensation fades away or lessens in intensity.

Step 6. Slowly come back into ordinary consciousness. Take three long, slow, deep breaths, breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Rub the palms of your hands together to generate heat and place the palms over your eyes and face. Open your eyes and slowly lift your hands away from your face as you return to awareness. Inhale deeply and stretch your arms up over your head, with your hands interlocked. Bend slowly to the right and then to the left. Do this several times, then bend forward toward your feet. Reflect on whether there is anything of importance that revealed itself to you that you wish to write about in your Mindfulness Journal, think about, or attend to.

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The Mindfulness Journal

I suggest you create and work with a Mindfulness Journal, a blank book that you can use to record your sensations, observations, thoughts, feelings, emotions, images, creative ideas, and messages of wisdom from your mind-body as you become mindful of them. As you perform the exercises in this book, these may come to you along with insights and images that you would like to explore later. When you are writing, be mindful of simply noting what you've experienced and why you might have experienced it.

You may also want to arrange your schedule to commit to sitting quietly and writing in your Mindfulness Journal. It's best to do this in a peaceful, restful place, perhaps a room in which you are surrounded by books and pictures that inspire you and evoke qualities such as wisdom and joy. You may also want to sit on a meditation chair or cushion with meditative music playing, wrap yourself in a meditation shawl or blanket, and light a candle or incense. Be certain to set aside a time when you won't be disturbed.

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Categorizing What the Mind Churns Up

Our minds create a mix of emotions, thoughts, and sensations, all of which influence each other. The thought, "My boss is so insensitive—I can't believe he was so abrupt with me today..." might not surface in your mind until you sit and begin meditating, appearing not as a fully formed thought but as a headache or an overall sense of vulnerability and defensiveness. In meditation, it's important not to go wherever those sensations and feelings take you but to simply sit with them, allowing them to reveal themselves. Afterward, as you journal about your experience, work with a therapist, or ponder where that feeling or sensation came from, you might discover it has deeper roots. Recognizing that your experience bears a powerful emotional resemblance to a past experience can be a helpful and freeing insight, but in the end, the story of its origin is just a story that can distract you from healing. If you come to realize that your defensiveness around your gruff boss reminds you of the way you reacted to your highly critical father, the value in that is acknowledging how deeply your mind has been programmed to respond to criticism or abruptness with fear and defensiveness. It's easier

to be patient with yourself when you recognize that your mind has actually created an elaborate neural network to support this reaction, because clearly, it will take time, patience, and repetition to change that instantaneous response.

The danger in giving too much weight to such a revelation is that you can begin reinforcing that reality. You reinforce your habitual thinking/feeling patterns when you subscribe to a narrative of suffering such as, “I can’t help being the way I am. My defensiveness goes way back to my childhood.” I call this the Big Story. It has the potential to shut you off from the art of creative transformation. Once you’ve identified the Big Story, categorize it as “old stuff” and set it aside whenever it comes up. For most people, the major healing work they need to do is to transform and move beyond the story of their relationship with their parents. The other common Big Stories I often encounter are “I need more money in order to be happy and secure” and “No one gives me credit for all I do.” There’s no benefit in bringing back all of the details of your Big Story, retelling it to yourself over and over again. It was what it was, and now that you’re aware of it, you can let go of it and replace it with a new, more positive and creative story that will make you feel freed from your past.

It’s also important to let go of the “new stuff”: each Small Story, or rationalization for why your present life is the way it is. The Small Stories are worth examining to discover what lessons they hold, but if you hang on to them, repeating them to yourself, they will become “old stuff” and part of the Big Story as well. Your friend may have communication problems that make it difficult for you to be nonreactive and remain the observer when he starts speaking to you flippantly. It’s helpful to explore what you can do to affect his communication problems, but you may soon realize that he

isn't willing to be mindful of his behavior and consider changing it. In that case, your own ability to remain mindful, a witness to the drama unfolding before you, will give you the clarity and courage to either accept the situation as it is (without being drawn into an emotional response) or to change the situation by ending the friendship.

As long as you remain in these stories, you create suffering for yourself. To change your life, you have to see the story for what it is: A way of framing events that isn't contributing to your happiness and is holding you back from positive change. If you hold on to your story, big or small, giving it life in the retelling and embellishing it endlessly, it will cause you pain. The point isn't whether or not you're justified in telling that particular story, or its veracity, but whether you're suffering because of it.

When you set aside your thoughts and feelings, you're not engaging in avoidance behavior. Mindfulness training is not about denial; it's about the acceptance of what is emerging from inside you moment-by-moment and dealing with it appropriately. It takes practice to develop the acceptance that the content of most of the thoughts your mind creates isn't very important. The more you meditate, the more it will feel as if you're simply sorting the laundry as you observe what your mind generates. You may be surprised by just how many "socks" you own. Old thoughts and feelings about unworthiness may come up in many different forms, but none of them matters if you choose not to assign them significance. Over time, your distracting feelings, thoughts, and sensations will dissipate and you'll find you're doing less sorting as you sit in mindfulness.

Debunking Four Myths About Mindfulness Meditation That Cause Resistance to Practice

The majority of my clients resist mindfulness meditation at first, although the time commitment is small and the payoff is enormous. One of my clients insisted that it wasn't necessary and that she didn't have enough time in his day to devote to a regular practice. She said that taking twenty minutes twice a day was a "virtual impossibility," but when she went through loss of a parent, she had such trouble coping that she couldn't even drag herself out of bed. After she'd called in sick to work ten days straight she called me to ask what she could do because she knew she had to get back to the office. I told her to mindfully meditate while in bed. Terrified and bewildered, my client took this advice and in a few days, found she could face going to work again. After that, she called me up several times to say she was in a overwhelming state of grief, or so distracted that she couldn't focus during crucial meetings, and my advice was always the same, "Shut the door and tell your assistant to hold all calls and visitors. Schedule these meditation sessions as if they were a meeting with your most important client." Slowly, her grief lessened.

Typically, those who resist meditation are buying into one of four common myths, that must be discarded as they create resistance to regular mindfulness meditation practice.

Myth #1: *"Practicing mindfulness meditation will conflict with my religious beliefs."*

The practice of mindfulness meditation for cultivating awareness is a part of good mental hygiene. Just as you turn the lights out before retiring for the night so that you're prepared to shift into another state of consciousness, you can use mindfulness meditation to take you from one state into another. This form of meditation turns down the volume

of the chatter in your mind and allows you to tune in to a deeper wisdom and insight.

As a method for developing awareness, mindfulness practice is free of religious and spiritual dogma. In fact, if you believe in turning to God for guidance, you can use mindfulness meditation to set aside distractions and listen to the divine wisdom that can be found only when you set aside the endless chain of thoughts your own mind creates. Becoming receptive, you'll find you're "cultivating the wisdom of the desert," as Christian author and monk Thomas Merton put it.

Mindfulness meditation is a core practice that in Buddhist meditation systems and Zen Buddhist practice is referred to as Shamatha training. "Zen" actually means discovering and finding one's own truth ("Theraveda" means "the ancient teachings"), and mindfulness meditation is focused on gaining experiential knowledge. Buddhist author Stephen Bachelor has pointed out, Zen is Buddhism without beliefs. Some would say that when we're practicing mindfulness meditation, we first enter deeply into the moment and then become open to going beyond our personal truth and tapping into a much larger wisdom and source of creativity, or the truth of the divine, while others would say we're tapping into the collective unconscious of all humanity. Either interpretation is valid. Mindfulness practice is a pathway for discover that anyone can use, regardless of their religious or spiritual beliefs.

Myth #2: "I'm too restless and busy to learn to be quiet and practice any form of meditation."

Just 20 minutes on a meditation cushion twice each day will cause you to need less sleep, be more productive and less distracted, and make the most of the time you have

during the day. Note that if you're very busy, your unmindful activity may be inefficient. Many of us sit down to work at a computer and soon find that instead of simply looking up one fact on the Internet as we intended, we've just spent 20 minutes watching YouTube videos or reading a blog. If it's not a task that takes us off course, it's a distracting interaction with others. A lengthy conversation about what might happen, or what should have happened in the past, may be less productive than we'd like to think it is. We turn the same thoughts over in our mind again and again and even work ourselves into a state of agitation—and then we find someone else to “vent” to, wasting more time.

Meditation offers two important benefits that help reduce restlessness. One is heightened concentration, allowing you to be more productive. Another is physiological changes, namely, a decrease in skin temperature and increase in oxygenation to the brain, a decrease in lactic acid (which causes fatigue) and cortisol (a stress hormone), and a decreased need for sleep. With less fatigue and stress, you become less distracted and more efficient in using and managing time. Ray Kroc, founder of McDonalds, once reported that he'd spontaneously fall into states of meditative reverie during the day and thus didn't need a lot of sleep. Even if you can only devote five minutes a day to mindful meditation because you're so busy, doing it while waiting in line at the bank or sitting in traffic, or waiting on hold for computer technical support, you can receive these benefits.

Restless, obsessive thinking is often mistaken for positive creative energy. Indeed, when you're obsessing, the mind is creating *something*, but on closer inspection, it's generating the same unproductive old beliefs and ideas, just in a different form. Nothing is learned or gained. When you rest your mind and let go of the constantly buzzing thoughts that pull you into the cloud of obsession, you can begin to see more clearly. You

start to recognize how limited your perceptions have been and start making better decisions about how to move forward.

If you're restless or usually find it difficult to focus, you may want to do mindfulness meditation after physical activity, which calms the agitated mind and fosters concentration. Yoga in particular can be very helpful for taking you out of your thoughts and focusing your awareness on your body. Gardening, or walking or biking in the woods or along the beach puts you in touch with the slower rhythms of nature and helps the witness or observer to rise to the surface of your awareness. Although these activities have their benefits on their own, if you establish a regular mindfulness meditation practice in addition, you'll find it even easier to access your deepest wisdom and core creativity. In mindfulness meditation, there's very little sensory stimulation to pull your thoughts in one direction or another. In every sitting, thoughts, feelings, sounds, and sensations will arise, and there's no need to assign importance to any of them. Over time, you'll find it easier to move from this sorting through what the mind generates.

When you first begin to meditate, you're likely to experience many mental distractions. Rather than judge yourself as a bad meditator, distracting yourself further by obsessing over your distractibility or creating thoughts such as "Maybe I should stop meditating and make that phone call just in case I forget," simply observe any disruptive thoughts, feelings, or sensations and set them aside. You'll never have complete freedom from distractions while meditating, but with practice, it will be easier to turn down the volume on them quickly. Just as you build your muscles by going to the gym, and develop the ability to lift weights without feeling "I can't do this" or quickly becoming fatigued, a regular practice of mindfulness meditation builds your focusing abilities. As

your concentration abilities increase, so will your mindstrength. Quickly, you'll discover that you can simply rest and relax into the moment, enjoying the sense of spaciousness and abundance.

Myth #3: *“If I practice mindfulness, it will put out the fire of my ambition and creativity.”*

Some of my extremely talented and creative clients are bipolar and/or suffer from severe disorders of mood. They're convinced that their highly active and creative minds are generating a fast-moving river of excellent ideas. One client brought me a couple of notebooks filled with stream-of-consciousness writing she was certain would, with a little editing, yield a brilliant novel. To her, the notebooks proved that a highly active mind is a far superior creative tool to a mind quieted by mindfulness meditation. But as we looked at her writing more closely, she began to see that her daylong session had actually produced little of value. It wasn't until she began mindfully meditating that her writing became more deeply creative and focused. There was less of it, because she would only write for a few hours at a time, but it was of higher quality.

Mindfulness practice seems to ground restless people, transforming their energy from a chaotic, even manic discharge to a more focused and heightened exuberance that then can be channeled into productivity. It's important to become adept at slowing down the rush of mind flow and become more discerning about what is core creative flow and what is simply mind distraction.

Some of my clients in the film, television, and music industries have resisted mindfulness meditation for five or six years and suffered through torturous manic,

depressive, and anxious states, insisting they need their mania to be creative or to “keep their edge.” When they finally agreed to establish a practice, they discovered their creativity didn’t disappear after all, and that they didn’t need to feel competitive and aggressive in order to do their best work. Letting go of that belief, opening up to their core creativity, and trusting that there is no shortage of ideas relieved them of anxiety and a sense that they had to work nonstop lest their creative juices dry up. In each case, they also benefited from participating in mindfulness-based, mind/body therapeutic counseling, and most, from taking an SSRI as well.

I have found that for many bipolar people, it’s not the medication they resist so much as the idea of meditation as a healing antidote for their condition that creates such exuberance. Their resistance ebbs after I explain that mindfulness practice will actually enhance their creativity. If you’re uncomfortable with the thought of slowing down your mental output because you think you’ll lose something valuable, keep in mind that this is not the goal of mindfulness practice. You may want to speak to your psychopharmacologist about reducing the dosage levels of the SSRI you’re on after you’ve established a mindfulness practice and begun therapy. This approach will allow you to access some of the vitality and passion you associate with mania.

Myth #4: “If I practice mindfulness, what I’ll discover will be so upsetting that I’ll become paralyzed with fear.”

The fear of what will arise from the subconscious isn’t entirely irrational, but the chances of experiencing intense discomfort while mindfully meditating are slim. An afflictive mind state, in which you’re gripped by anxiety or feelings of sadness, anger, or

unworthiness, isn't pleasant, but allowing those emotions to surface and be felt fully allows you to begin the process of working through them. Emotions that remain buried have no chance of dissipating, and will remain as an underlying toxin that affects the functioning of the mind and body. A skilled psychologist or mindfulness meditation teacher can be enormously helpful in guiding you through these emotions and modulating their intensity.

If you've been avoiding painful feelings and thoughts for a long time, you may not be able to handle more than a five-minute-long session of mindfulness meditation, and you may need someone with you to support you in your process of uncovering this pain. Most western mindfulness meditation teachers who teach at major centers in America, regardless of how many years' experience they have, are in or have been in counseling or psychotherapy to work on their personal issues.

What does commonly emerge from meditation is physical pain. I had one client who, shortly after she began her practice, would experience intense pain in her head whenever she sat down to meditate. After several weeks of attempting to sit in meditation, and remaining present with the pain instead of ending her session in order to avoid it, she found this pain was beginning to transform into a deep feeling of anger. I encouraged her to experience the anger and let it go. In therapy, we explored the Big Story as well as her small stories, so she was able to recognize that the anger that was coming up had nothing to teach her because she already knew its source. Soon, the anger subsided as well, and her meditation sessions were uninterrupted by such intense feelings and sensations.

Occasionally, however, memories of the past are so horrific that instead of tranquility and calmness, mindfulness meditation can bring up feelings that are deeply upsetting. Traditionally, since this practice was rooted in ancient Asian culture, meditation teachers were usually unfamiliar with psychodynamic disorders such as trauma and abuse, and didn't give great weight to the complexity of pain and suffering associated with interpersonal relationships. Unfortunately, students who reported that frightening or extremely painful feelings and memories were coming up for them were told, "You're not trying hard enough. You need to sit longer with this pain and it will pass." Consequently, many meditators were left with a dismal sense of failure. As Buddhist psychiatrist Mark Epstein wrote in an article called "Awakening with Prozac," which appeared more than ten years ago in the magazine *Tricycle*, meditators who have a high amount of anxiety and a greater propensity for depression than most often find their meditative experience significantly improved when they use SSRI medications. Due to trauma or genetics, some people's brains are wired in such a way that no matter how much meditation they do, or what type of meditation they engage in, they simply can't get past their hindrances and experience the creative bliss in Open Mind. Their fear, anxiety, or sadness is so highly magnified that they need biochemical help to shift out of unwholesome states of mind.

So, while meditation can bring up difficult feelings, emotions, and thoughts, it's always better to uncover them and deal with their intensity rather than deny them out of fear of the discomfort they'll cause.

Some people avoid meditation because their religious beliefs cause them to fear opening the door to the subconscious—they see it as a portal to dark energies. When we

access the right brain, negative thoughts, feelings, and beliefs which had been hidden in the unconscious can come tumbling through. Some have believed that because of their negative quality, these are the products of some external, sinister force and may even be powerful enough to take over the mind. In reality, negative beliefs and feelings are far more destructive when they hide from our awareness. Bringing them into the light and consciously choosing to dismiss their significance is the only way to prevent them from unduly influencing us.

By cultivating mindfulness, you allow yourself to hear even the subtlest messages from the unconscious. You can be awakened with a gentle nudge instead of a splash of icy water. The process of necessary and inevitable transformation can begin without your being shaken out of your complacency and denial by unwanted changes imposed upon you. Embracing your circumstances despite the pain, you can craft a fulfilling life that's infused with passion and originality, driven by a sense of purpose, and in synch with your values and priorities. Any hidden resistance can then be eliminated.

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