

Emerging into Mindfulness

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A lot of the time, maybe most of it, we live in a mental tunnel, only seeing where we're aiming to go, plus any obstacles or advantages to getting there. Living this way is like a video game: very engaging, exciting, with a brief high if we reach our goal, and a spell of frustration if we fail.

We can get caught up in our reactions, suffering quite a lot, depending on how attached we were to the outcome. We think this is just how life is. And it is, if we live with that tunnel vision.

But at any moment we can shift into mindfulness, broadening the scope of our awareness far beyond the limits of that tunnel vision, so that we can keep our goals in perspective. Is arriving on time after a late start really so important? Can't we live long and prosper if this committee ends up not agreeing with us?

When we have a meditation practice, we can remember every so often to broaden our focus and observe our internal experience. Is whatever we're attached to really worth the dukkha – the disappointment or the anger or whatever comes up – when we don't get what we want?

Just as we return to the breath over and over during meditation, we can develop the habit of checking in with the body every so often during the day. Unlike our minds, our bodies are always in the moment, breathing air and pumping blood right here and now.

The movement of an arm, the exertion of a leg, or relaxing into a chair can bring us back to mindfulness and give us a chance to reassess our intentions. Certainly, for meditators, clearly feeling the body inhale and exhale will do this too. This moment of broadened awareness opens the door for wisdom to guide our actions from that point on... at least until that tunnel vision takes over again.

In the string of moments while we are mindful, we get to experience, and not just react to, our feelings. Teachers often say, "notice" or "investigate" these states of mind. We don't need to do any extensive research to do that.

It's just a matter of being *with* our responses. What is the state of our consciousness as a result of what's happened? It's a matter of feeling our feelings and discerning what thoughts accompany them. We can do this with big events or quite ordinary ones.

Events that have a powerful effect on us may teach us a lot, if we're not overpowered by them. So, it's beneficial to emerge from our tunnel vision during little as well as big things. What's most important to remember is that we can become mindful at any moment.

The longer we remain in this state of mindfulness, the less attached we are to results, and the less power our reactions have over us. It gives us a chance to let each moment's experience be just what it is, without being warped into an ongoing crisis that keeps us flustered.

This doesn't mean we're happy that bad things have happened, or letting bad things go on causing harm. It's about being calm enough to assess the situation and choose the wisest course of action, with wise speech and non-harming conduct.

Several years ago I wrote this poem, entitled Serenity:

I was a twister of emotion
cutting through my life
a swath of destruction.
It seemed to be life itself, this
intensity, as if the trouble to speak
could only be justified
by a tremendous noise.

Everything I encountered
yielded to my fervor
until the day
I came
to the edge of life
and saw
the emptiness embracing
all experience.
It quieted me
like a divine voice
that stills the waters.
In the face of just this moment,
all vehemence seemed
a child's pretense,
and every
thing, in its simplicity
stood silent, sacred
in the miracle of being
exactly what it is.

The edge of life can be reached by remembering our limitations, our mortality, and that can have a powerful effect on our perspective about what's going on. This is a moment of mindfulness where the awareness stretches out to embrace our entire lives and judges *this* event in the context of all we know and care about. Let me read the poem again.

We can also access and embrace that silent and sacred simplicity at any moment, just by coming back into our bodies and recognizing where we are just now. This is the eternal now, where we actually spend our lives. Everything else is empty.

This perspective allows us to grasp the miracle of the ordinary, like Mary Oliver in her poem "The Summer Day," gazing at a grasshopper and asking us what we intend to do, "with our one wild and precious life."

In such a moment of mindfulness we can appreciate the freedom and comfort of emptiness, which holds big and little events in the same openness, without clinging. That is the function of equanimity, recognizing all that happens for just what it is and allowing us to find the best thing to do next.

This applies to either finding a butterfly on our arm or being in a car accident. Possible reactions hang in the air so we can see the difference between grasping the butterfly or just holding still to appreciate its beauty, or screaming at the other driver versus asking if anyone is hurt. It's all there, all possible reactions, and we can make a considered choice, like selecting something from a menu.

Mindfulness enables us to meet our wounds with tenderness, our anger with acceptance, our craving with compassion, our joy with gratitude, our love – and all love – with deep respect. It provides us the equanimity to hold all this in a few fleeting moments before we return to swinging from one activity to another.

This might make nice poetry, but can it **be** our lives? Emphatically: yes, it can. In his final words to his sangha, the Buddha told them to "seek enlightenment now." That "now" is always at our fingertips and we only need to reach out to it.

When I look back to before I began to practice, I see the mess made by the person in that poem, that twister of emotion. I remember how painful and confusing it was to live with all that reactivity, and I can't imagine accepting that life now.

For five years I led a meditation group, of people who were sentenced by San Francisco's Drug Court to attend a rehab program. Let's just say they did not come in as enthusiastic meditators. The last place they wanted to hang out was inside themselves.

I made these promises to them: if they meditated daily for several months, they would be calmer, and they would have better relationships, and their judgment would improve. I think it was the hope of better judgment that persuaded them. A surprising number came by after a few years to thank me for introducing them to a new and better life.

What sold *me* on meditation was pain. I had suddenly acquired a neurological disorder that made my muscles tense, and cramp painfully. When I first tried to meditate, I noticed immediately that it reduced stress and my muscles relaxed. Just what I needed.

So I sat every day, whether I wanted to or not. Like every student I've ever talked with, and there have been hundreds, there were times when I didn't want to sit. I thought I was too busy, or so absorbed in some ongoing drama that it was hard to break away. But I sat.

Gradually, to paraphrase Sharda Rogell, I stopped worrying about fitting practice into my life and started fitting my life into practice. It's been much smoother to see practice this way, because it happens naturally. Everything – every event or material object – can be observed, evaluated and dealt with through the eyes of mindfulness.

My first teacher was a Zen abbot who loved to say two phrases: Nothing special, and No preference. Mindfulness sees grasshoppers and new cars through the same eyes. The ordinary is as precious as the rare. All that is present is worth the same attention.

Many teachers have told me that this practice has a wisdom and momentum of its own. It begins to practice *us*. For me, this became clearly evident about a decade ago. Practicing wasn't something I did anymore. It has become life itself.

Charlotte Joko Beck, one of the first women Zen teachers in the West, says:

We learn in our guts, not just in our brain, that a life of joy is not in seeking happiness, but in experiencing and simply being the circumstances of our life as they are; not in fulfilling personal wants, but in fulfilling the needs of life.

Another Zen teacher, whose name has been lost to history, was asked to say in three words what was the purpose of practice. Many of these little anecdotes involve three-word answers. His was, "An appropriate response."

There is no point in judging ourselves about any unskillful responses in the past, or failures to reach out for mindfulness. We can only do it Now, and for as long as we're conscious we can return to mindfulness in any moment.

Life is to be responded to, not manipulated or carved into what we want. What if we kept asking, "How can I meet this moment in a way that honors it and serves what's needed?" That question is part of what happens when we burst out of tunnel vision and see the beauty and vastness of the moment we're inhabiting.

Thank you.