



# living mindfully

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Heralding from ancient Buddhist traditions, 'mindfulness' and its spiritual practice, meditation, has been used for centuries to cultivate a sense of peace and equanimity within body and mind. Embraced by wellness communities the world over, its practice is encouraging people from all walks of life to stop and smell the flowers.

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**“Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.”**

– Carl Jung

#### WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

In essence, mindfulness is known as the act of bringing complete, non-judgemental attention to the present moment by employing conscious awareness, curiosity, openness and acceptance of the mind and body (including thoughts, feelings and sensations), on a moment-to-moment basis. Although this may sound complex, the practice of mindfulness is actually very simple. “If we are not aware of our thoughts and feelings, we are not aware of who we are,” says Hong Kong-based Life Coach Glynnis Ferguson, founder of Freedom Coaching. “Mindfulness practices support us in accepting our reality, creating a sense of calm and allowing us to move through life with grace and ease.”

Like any practice, mindfulness techniques can be learned, however, instead of straining the mind and the body to ‘get somewhere’, to ‘improve’, to make ‘visible progress’, to ‘achieve something’, mindfulness practices encourages one to simply observe – without judgement – what the body is feeling, what the mind is doing, and where our emotions are taking us. In other words, mindfulness is not about fixing anything, but rather just about seeing things just as they are, even if it is difficult or painful. “Ultimately, this awareness balances our thoughts and becomes an everyday practice and makes life more peaceful and enjoyable,” says Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Centre for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society.

#### SPIRITUAL ORIGINS

Mindfulness and the practice most commonly used to cultivate it, meditation, has been practiced for centuries, and is a core aspect of Buddhism, which was founded by the Indian prince, Siddhartha Gautama, over 2500 years ago. According to legend, Siddhartha, now known as the Buddha (‘he who is awake’), left his palace after becoming disillusioned by his life of luxury to become a monk. It is said that Siddhartha found the essence of his true self and obtained enlightenment while practicing meditation by simply sitting and observing his own mind. His awakening gave him insight into the cause of human suffering, and the steps necessary to eliminate it.

Known as ‘The Four Noble Truths’ these insights are the foundation of Buddhism and comprise the following: 1) Life is composed of suffering, 2) Suffering is caused by desire (craving or wanting, in other words wanting to think, feel or be somewhere else than where one is at that very moment), 3) Suffering can be eliminated by letting go of craving (which comes through learning how to sit with one’s thoughts and sensations) and, 4) Liberation or Nirvana can be reached by eliminating suffering.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, founder of the Shambhala tradition



of Buddhism and who brought Tibetan Buddhist teachings to the west, sees the practice of mindfulness as integral to the teachings of Buddhism, and thus a spiritual practice. “According to the teachings of Buddhism, spirituality means relating with the working basis of one’s existence, which is one’s state of mind. The method for beginning to relate directly with the mind is the practice of mindfulness.” He continues, “We are continually trying to grasp onto some solid image of ourselves. And then we have to defend that particular fixed conception, resulting in confusion and aggression. From the Buddhist point of view, the development of true spirituality is cutting through our basic fixation, the clinging.” In Buddhism then, it is through mediation and working with one’s mind, that suffering can be resolved on a spiritual path.

#### THE SCIENCE OF THE MIND

Along with its spiritual foundations in the Buddhist meditation tradition, the term ‘mindfulness’ has been increasingly used in the three decades since Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., brought the practice to the forefront when he founded the Centre for Mindfulness in Medicine,

Health Care and Society in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Having trained in molecular biology, Kabat-Zinn was intrigued by the relationship between the interactions of the mind and body, specifically the effects of mindfulness meditation training on the immune system and the healing rate for chronic disease conditions. In one of his many clinical studies, Kabat-Zinn showed that patients with chronic psoriasis healed at four times the rate when listening to guided meditation exercises than those who didn’t. Additionally, enhanced psychological hardiness was noted in patients engaging in mindfulness techniques such as meditation and yoga.

As a result of Kabat-Zinn’s research, he created a unique programme that incorporates mindfulness meditation and other mind-body awareness techniques for reducing stress across a variety of people, whether they are workplace leaders, prison inmates, parents, stressed out workers, or hospital patients. His now classic eight-week course, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), has trained thousands of people to take a more centred approach to recognising and dealing with stress. The key aspect in the eight-week MBSR training is cultivating the ability to distinguish the internal narrative chatter of one’s mind from the ongoing sensory input of the ‘here and now’ experience. By training people to relate differently to their minds and observe negative thinking patterns with gentle kindness, and just allowing themselves to be in the ‘here and now’, people can begin to accept all situations – both good and bad – and as a result, experience less stress. “By bringing science together with meditation, we’re beginning to find new ways of showing the benefits of training oneself to become intimate with the workings of one’s own mind in a way that generates greater insight and clarity,” attests Kabat-Zinn.

#### MINDFUL MEDITATION

According to mindfulness philosophy, deeper awareness of all aspects of the self – both mind and body – leads to greater compassion for ourselves, and also to those around us. The practice of mindful meditation cultivates a gentle and open sense of awareness and gives insight into who and how we are as human beings, which allows us to be more tender with ourselves and others. “Meditation is a state of mindful awareness, the simple act of attention,” says Rajesh Ramani, Meditation Instructor at Kamalaya Wellness Sanctuary in Thailand. “Our day-to-day sensory and

emotional experiences are often incomplete, leading to a sense of disconnect with ourselves and others. The practice of meditation helps us to bridge this disconnect and move to a place of compassion which helps break disruptive emotional patterns and habits.”

But how does one cultivate compassion for oneself simply by meditating, or observing one’s breath? Buddhist meditation master and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, recognises the immense importance of the ability to ‘be present’ by cultivating the ability to concentrate and focus and to enjoy the nourishment that comes from being truly silent by stopping the mind’s endless chatter (which is often self-deprecating). As he states, “Mindfulness is the energy that helps us recognise the conditions of happiness that are already present in our lives. You don’t have to wait 10 years to experience this happiness. It is present in every moment of your daily life.”

#### MINDFUL BREATH

The breath is a key aspect of mindful meditation, as it guides one’s attention to becoming aware of one’s own being and also takes the minds’ tendency away from following the inevitable flurry of thoughts that preside in most people’s heads. By simply following the breath in, pausing, noting the pause, and following the breath out, one is practicing the act of simple concentration to stay in the present moment, since breath is life and all we really have, moment to moment.

“The object of mindfulness is breath, and you just focus your attention on it,” advises Thich Nhat Hanh.

“Breathing in, ‘this is my in-breath’. Breathing out, ‘this is my out-breath’. When you do that, the mental discourse will stop. You don’t think anymore. You don’t have to make an effort to stop your thinking; you bring your attention to your in-breath and the mental discourse just stops. That is the miracle of the practice. You don’t think of the past anymore. You don’t think of the future. You don’t think of your projects, because you are focusing your attention, your mindfulness, on your breath.” By taking time out on a daily basis, this simple meditation practice can ultimately train the brain to be less distracted and maintain a sustained duration of concentration, thus increasing clarity and fostering a sense of connection with oneself, which will help when connecting to others.

#### MINDFUL EATING

The key to mindfulness is the day-to-day activities that serve as



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practices themselves to cultivating greater awareness. Mindful eating is perhaps one of the simplest practices, outside of meditation. How many of us grab breakfast as we are running out the door and slam down a cup of coffee before lurching into the office? And no doubt many of us can relate to shovelling down lunch at our desks while staring at our computer screens, with dinner taken in front of the TV in the evening. Do we even remember, much less enjoyed, what we ate that day?

Eating mindfully gives us the opportunity to take time out of the day, to savour the food-taste, smell, texture, sight and sound of it. By doing so, we will probably end up eating less, as our minds will have a chance to catch up with our stomachs and we will feel more satisfied and more rejuvenated as a result. Eating mindfully is also an opportunity to sit with friends or family and connect over the joy of sharing good food together.

Ultimately, conscious awareness and appreciation for food nourishes us, both physically and emotionally. “If we don’t feel satisfied, we’ll look around for something more or something different to eat,” says Jan Chozen-Bays, author of *Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food*. “The only thing that will cure this fundamental kind of hunger is to sit down and be, even for a few minutes, wholly present. This is the gift of mindful eating, to restore our sense of satisfaction, no matter what we are or are not eating.”

#### MINDFUL MOVEMENT

In addition to eating and meditation, a yoga practice is one of the best mind-body practices that, when done with a conscious and gentle approach, can catapult us in to the present. To truly approach a yoga practice from a mindful stance, however, it is about much more than the poses themselves. Too often it is tempting to turn yoga class into

another daunting to-do list as one forces oneself into poses that one is really not ready for yet. Done mindfully, though, yoga is a chance to fully inhabit the body and experience sensations of limitedness and expansiveness as equals. Since the body is a direct reflection of the mind, it is a good place for finding and sitting with nervous tension or anxiety or conversely, jubilation and elatedness. By learning how to inhabit one’s body without struggle, a sense of freedom ensues.

Respected yoga teacher Sarah Powers, who takes an interdisciplinary approach to her yoga classes and retreats, notes, “While being mindful of the body, we do not try to prevent or ignore pain, or pleasure, as the case may be. Instead, simply observe the direct, unmitigated experience of the sensory world unfolding within us. It turns out that relaxing our struggle with pain greatly diminishes our experience of suffering and initiates the natural healing faculties of the mind, which in turn also triggers the body’s capacity for self adjustment and balance.”

#### MEDICAL MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness has also found its way into the medical sphere and studies show that the ways that internal focus can be shifted during mindful practices, such as meditation, can activate specific parts of the brain. Research done by Dr Dan Siegel, researcher and author of *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*, indicates that the activity in the left frontal area of the brain increases with mindfulness practices such as meditation. This increased electrical charge reflects the cultivation of an “approach state”, where one is inclined to move toward a challenging situation, rather than away, thus creating a neural basis for psychological resilience. Thus, with repetition of mindfulness practices over time, this intentional state can even have long term effects in both brain function and structure, an effect known as ‘neuroplasticity’ – which is how the

brain changes in response to experiences.

The effects of this are profound and The National Institute for Clinical Excellence recently began recommending mindfulness practices for those with chronic depression after studies showed it reduces the rate of relapse by 50 percent over 12 months. “The willingness to stop and be present leads to seeing and relating to circumstances and events with more clarity and directness. Out of this directness seems to emerge deeper understanding or insight into the life unfolding within and before us,” notes Saki Santorelli, Director of the Stress Reduction Programme at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. “Such insight allows us the possibility of choosing the responses most called for by the situation, rather than those reactively driven by fear and habit.” The practice of mindfulness is key to treating depression as it acts as a way to separate thoughts from facts and habitual thinking, so that negative thinking patterns can be observed with kindness and neutrality rather than increased negativity and anxiety. “The ability to differentiate our unique streams of awareness may be a crucial step for disentangling our minds from ruminative thoughts, repetitive destructive emotions and impulsive and addictive behaviours,” notes Dr Siegel.

#### CORPORATE MINDFULNESS

The ability to control and be aware of one’s thoughts through practice has significant potential in the corporate sphere. Being able to listen effectively, remain focused in complex high-stress situations, having greater self-awareness of one’s stress levels and being able to decrease anxiety are all traits that can serve corporate leaders and executives in the midst of challenging and high-pressure situations. “Contrary to popular belief, the more people multi-task, the less efficient and creative they are at completing a task or solving complex problems,” says Janice Marturano, co-creator of the Mindfulness Leadership Programme (an initiative supported by the Institute for Mindful Leadership). “Mindfulness cultivates our ability to sustain attention for longer periods of time – to actively be in the moment in order to make clear decisions, to notice our propensity to simply react, rather than ask ‘What is called for now?’”

Based on the principle that the mind can be developed to cultivate awareness in the present moment, an innate and inherent capacity, the Mindfulness Leadership Programme aims to reduce stress, increase the mind’s ability to stay present in high stress, complex situations, enhance clarity and creative thinking by cultivating awareness of contextually relevant solutions, improve communication skills by enhancing the ability to listen instead of just hear and decrease habitual, auto-pilot reactions and thinking patterns. The ultimate goal is to cultivate the awareness to see ourselves, others and our situations more clearly. “The mental discipline of mindfulness training develops the mind’s ability to be focused and fully present and to notice the auto-pilot, fragmented way we live and work,” Marturano says.

#### EVERYDAY MINDFULNESS

Whether you are on a devoted spiritual path or simply seeking peace of mind in the midst or at the end of a busy day, mindfulness practices such as sitting and observing one’s own beehive mind and

tender heart are worth a try. So many of us spend our lives waiting for grandiose breakthroughs such as finding the “perfect” partner, job or home to make us happy, instead of paying attention to the little moments of joy in daily life. The practice of being present, however, encourages us to acknowledge each moment as a blessing – a habit that soon becomes second nature and eventually leads to happiness, as all the little moments of joy add up. “True mindfulness is about letting the practice spill over into every waking moment of your life – cultivating a kind of love affair with the present moment without making it a big chore,” says Kabat-Zinn. “It doesn’t take any energy to remember you’re breathing, seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching. Sensing your body and your connection with nature, with your colleagues at work, with your family members, with your own heart – that is what builds the foundation for mindfulness that supports your formal practice. You’re no longer practicing a technique. It becomes a way of being.” 🌱

### mindfulness resources

<p><b>BUDDHIST RETREAT CENTRES</b>  <a href="http://www.plumvillage.org">www.plumvillage.org</a>  <a href="http://www.shambhala.org">www.shambhala.org</a>  <a href="http://www.meditate-thailand.com">www.meditate-thailand.com</a></p>	<p><b>RECOMMENDED READING:</b>            Mindfulness for Beginners by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D.  <a href="http://www.soundstrue.com">www.soundstrue.com</a></p>
<p><b>MINDFUL TRAVEL</b>  <a href="http://www.integraltravel.com">www.integraltravel.com</a>  <a href="http://www.vedicodyssey.com">www.vedicodyssey.com</a></p>	<p>Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook by Bob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein  <a href="http://www.mbsrworkbook.com">www.mbsrworkbook.com</a></p>
<p><b>YOGA AND MINDFULNESS</b>  <a href="http://www.sarahpowers.com">www.sarahpowers.com</a>  <a href="http://www.insightiyogainstitute.com">www.insightiyogainstitute.com</a>  <a href="http://www.meditate-thailand.com">www.meditate-thailand.com</a></p>	<p>The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh  <a href="http://www.beacon.org">www.beacon.org</a></p>
<p><b>LIFE COACHING</b>  <a href="http://www.freedomfromfearcoaching.com">www.freedomfromfearcoaching.com</a></p>	<p>Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living By Pema Chodron  <a href="http://www.shambhala.com">www.shambhala.com</a></p>
<p><b>MBCT COURSES</b>  <a href="http://www.mindful-well-being.com">www.mindful-well-being.com</a>  <a href="http://www.mindfulnesscentre.com">www.mindfulnesscentre.com</a>  <a href="http://www.umassmed.edu">www.umassmed.edu</a></p>	<p>The Path Is the Goal: A Basic Handbook of Buddhist Meditation By Chogyam Trungpa  <a href="http://www.shambhala.com">www.shambhala.com</a></p>
<p><b>SPA RETREATS</b>  <a href="http://www.kamalaya.com">www.kamalaya.com</a></p>	<p>Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation by Daniel J. Siegel  <a href="http://www.drdsiegel.com">www.drdsiegel.com</a></p>