

Sitting

The classic way to formally practice mindfulness meditation is in a seated posture. When beginning a session of seated meditation, “take your seat” slowly and deliberately, bringing full awareness to the process of sitting down. This helps set the stage for your session. Whether you are seated on a chair or on a meditation cushion, you should aim for an upright posture with your spine straight, while also allowing the shoulders and the rest of the body to be soft and relaxed. You should neither lean forward nor backward. Tuck your chin down just a bit. You can fold your hands in your lap or place them on your knees. Close your eyes or keep them mostly closed with a soft and unfocused gaze.


In a chair: If you are sitting in a chair, place your feet flat on the floor. A simple wooden or dining type chair works best, as it may be difficult to sit upright in a comfortable stuffed chair and your tendency will likely be to slouch or to drift off. If you can, sit without your back leaning against the back of the chair. If you require some support, try using a small cushion behind the small of your back.

On a cushion: If you are sitting on a meditation cushion, find a spot on the front third of the cushion that allows your spine to be upright. The easiest position for beginners (and even more experienced meditators) is to cross the legs one in front of the other, with the knees on the floor. Your body may not immediately fit readily into this position, so it can be helpful to have a small cushion to place under one or both knees. You can also kneel, with your buttocks resting on a cushion or meditation bench. Stretching helps!

Checking your posture during meditation: There is a relationship between your posture and the state of your mindfulness. It is therefore helpful to check in on your posture periodically while meditating. If you are slouching forward or leaning back, tilting to one side, or if your head is nodding, there is a good chance that your mind is wandering or that you are becoming dull or sleepy. If you notice this, adjust your posture and come back to a straight and upright position. Make adjustments in a slow and mindful manner. If you notice that you seem overly stiff or that there is tension in the shoulders or chest, or if you brow is furrowed, you may be straining and engaging in too much effort. Take an intentional deep breath and invite your body to relax a bit.

Other Postures

You can also practice mindfulness while lying down, standing, or walking. Lying down is particularly suited to the practice of the body scan or if you have an injury that makes it difficult to sit. Standing can be helpful if you are feeling particularly sleepy during a seated meditation. It is also excellent for informal practice – for instance, you can tune into the body and the breath while standing in a line or in an elevator. You walk every day, whether for exercise or just to get from here to there. This presents a great opportunity for mindfulness practice if you can remember to bring your awareness to the simple activity of walking itself. In the case of each of these postures, the key is to allow your awareness to rest in the body and the sensations associated with any movement or contact with the ground.

 Practicing law can be challenging and stressful. **Mindfulness is not about an escape from that reality.** Instead, mindfulness enables you to meet the challenge of law practice directly, with resilience, creativity and wisdom.

Dealing with Discomfort or Pain

When practicing seated meditation (and of course at times in daily life), you will invariably encounter some physical discomfort or even pain. This bodily sensation then becomes an object of awareness that you can bring mindfulness to. See if you can just let the sensation be as it is. Become curious as to the qualities of the sensation and how those qualities are changing.

You can also notice your reaction – likely a sense of unpleasantness and a desire to have the sensation go away. Do your best to remain still rather than immediately giving in to the urge to move. You may find that as you maintain your mindfulness, the feeling of unpleasantness diminishes or disappears. Or, you may notice that it is not constant, but that instead it comes and goes.

Pain is a complex phenomenon that has a mental component as well as a physical component. Bring awareness to any stories that you are telling yourself about the pain, as well as any emotional reactions. See if you can let those go and return your awareness to the bare physical sensation. This practice will help you build mental resilience and equanimity. Of course, you should not do anything to injure yourself – if the discomfort is intense or feels unbearable, you can mindfully change your posture or otherwise take care of yourself.

Dealing With Difficult Emotions (“RAIN”)

You can work with difficult emotions mindfully through a practice captured by the acronym “RAIN” – recognize, accept, investigate and non-identification.

Recognize: Simply recognize and label the emotion that you are experiencing, such as “fear,” “anger,” or “sadness.” Don’t overthink this or worry about absolute precision in terms of your labeling. Labeling the emotion is a means of regulating it. This begins a process of cognitive appraisal, which can assist in promoting calm. The moment that you recognize and label the emotion, you are no longer unconsciously in its grip – you have a bit of distance. This shift can start to reduce the power of the emotion.

Accept: Bring an attitude of gentle and kind acceptance to the emotion. Remind yourself that what you are feeling is a natural part of the human experience. You might ask yourself, “Can I allow this emotion to be present, just for now?” If you find yourself being judgmental or reactive, you can bring awareness to that response and do your best to accept that. It may help to periodically bring your attention to the breath or to some area of the body where there is a pleasant feeling.

Acceptance of an emotion does not mean that you are indulging it. It simply means that this emotion is present for the time being, as a result of past causes. You do not need to push the emotion away or act on it. Remind yourself that the emotion is temporary. This part of the process involves invoking a sense of compassion for yourself.

Investigate: Bring awareness to how the emotion feels in your body. This will help direct you away from ruminating about the emotion, which will in turn reduce the emotion’s afflictive quality. You might check out your stomach – is there tightness, churning, heaviness? How about your chest – is there tightness, movement, vibration? You can also check in to your face – is there tightness in the jaw, is your brow furrowed? Bring awareness to the breath for a moment or two, to notice its quality and any relationship with the emotion. As part of your investigation, you can notice how the feeling of the emotion may be changing.

Don’t worry if you can’t feel anything right away. Not everyone has a natural facility for sensing emotions in the body. You might try to take a few intentional breaths in order to prompt greater awareness and to see if this helps you to get a better general sense of the emotion.

Non-Identification: Do your best not to take the emotion personally. The fact that you are experiencing an emotion does not have to be translated into a personal identity (e.g., “I wish I wasn’t such an angry person” or “This always happens to me”). You can frame the feeling as “the emotion” or “an emotion” rather than as “my emotion.” It may be helpful to use the passive voice silently: “Anger is present” or “Fear is arising.” This may open up some more space around the emotion.

The Mindful Pause (“STOP”)

When you encounter a difficult or challenging situation, like a clash with opposing counsel, consider creating a brief “mindful pause.” This allows you to bring greater awareness to the situation and to possibly interrupt habitual reactions that are not constructive. You can do this with a quick four-part process called “STOP”:

1. Stop

Remember to pause the activity that you are engaged in, even for a moment.

2. Take a breath

Bring your awareness fully to a single breath (or two or three, if you have the time) and let this sponsor a broader awareness of and connection to your body.

3. Observe

Notice what is happening at this moment, in the body (e.g., sensations, tension, the breath) and/or thoughts or emotions. You can also notice what is happening externally, if there are other people involved.

4. Proceed

Continue with your activity, perhaps with a change in course informed by what you observed (e.g., you might decide to hold off on a comment, to alter the way in which you are going to speak, or to delay taking a certain action).

Resources

Listed below are some additional resources for mindfulness practice.

BOOKS:

Diana Winston and Susan Smalley

Fully Present: The Science, Art and Practice of Mindfulness

Jon Kabat-Zinn

Full Catastrophe Living and Wherever You Go, There You Are

Rick Hanson

Buddha’s Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love & Wisdom

Mark Williams

The Mindful Way through Depression: Freeing Yourself From Chronic Unhappiness

Susan Orsillo and Lizabeth Roemer

The Mindful Way through Anxiety

Christopher Germer

The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing Yourself From Destructive Thoughts and Emotions

WEBSITES:


UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center
marc.ucla.edu

UC San Diego School of Medicine Center for Mindfulness
medschool.ucsd.edu/som/fmphp/research/mindfulness

Mindful
mindful.org

Mindfulness in Law Society
mindfulnessinlawsociety.com

American Mindfulness Research Organization
goamra.org

 A busy schedule does not have to be an obstacle. You can carve out a minute or two to tune into your breath and your body before a meeting, a call, or a court appearance. **Let your mindfulness practice grow from there.**

“ You can’t be that kid standing at the top of the waterslide, overthinking it. You have to go down the chute. ”

Tina Fey

Getting Started

Make a commitment: You could start by committing to explore one of the formal mindfulness practices outlined in this guide for ten minutes each day (or most days – don’t worry if you miss a day), for a month. **Even if you are time-pressured, like most attorneys, you should be able to find ten minutes on most days.** At the end of a month, renew your commitment, add new practices, and consider increasing the amount of time for your formal practice sessions, perhaps gradually building to twenty to forty minutes. The more you practice, the more that mindfulness will begin to have positive effects and to arise naturally in your daily life.

Practice regularly: Although it is beneficial to do as much formal practice as you can, the amount of time that you practice each day is less significant than the regularity of your practice. It is better to practice ten minutes each day than to practice once a week for 70 minutes.

A suitable place: Find a place where you will not be disturbed. It is helpful to meditate in the same spot regularly. Think about arranging the space so that it has positive connotations for you – perhaps by having some art, flowers, or objects that carry meaning for you nearby.

A suitable time: Early morning – before the activity and distractions of the day begin and before others in your home require attention – can be a very good time for mindfulness practice. Or, you may find that it works to set aside time at the end of the day or in the evening. For some attorneys, a session at lunchtime may work well. If you can, establish a routine that involves meditating at the same time of the day.

Use a timer: Don’t look at the clock to see if your session is finished. Instead, use a timer of some kind. There are some good meditation timer apps, including Insight Timer.

Explore guided meditations: There are many guided mindfulness meditations that are available online for free. Some can be found at the websites listed in the Resources section of this Summary Guide, as well as on the Insight Timer app. There is no substitute for self-reliance, however, so use guided meditations judiciously and primarily as a “launching pad” to gain familiarity with mindfulness practice.

Watch your judgments: It is inevitable that you will start to judge whether you are a “good” meditator, or whether you like or dislike the practice in general or specific sessions. Bring mindfulness to these judgments. Avoid leaping to the erroneous conclusion after a few sessions (or ever) that “I’m just not good at this.” Know that there may be positive effects from your mindfulness practice that may not be immediately apparent to you. Of course at some point you will decide whether this practice is beneficial for you, but let that decision unfold in a relaxed and unhurried manner.

“Fallow” periods: Invariably, despite your best intentions, there will be times when you stop practicing regularly. Life circumstances intervene. Your will and intention may flag for some other reason. When this occurs, do not give up. Think of this as if you have left a field to go fallow so that it can regenerate. You may have been integrating the prior work that you have done or you may have simply needed a break. Revisit your intention and recommit without any regrets. Nothing has been lost.

Summary Guide™ to Mindfulness Practice for Lawyers

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It does not constitute legal advice.

Mindfulness – An Overview

Mindfulness can be defined as: (1) remembering to be aware; (2) of your present moment experience, as apprehended through the five senses and the sixth “sense” of the mind; (3) with acceptance.

Mindfulness is an innate capability that can present itself naturally, but is often obscured. To fully realize the power of mindfulness, you must intentionally cultivate, or “establish” it. You train your mind so that mindfulness increasingly becomes a default mode. Mindfulness can be practiced formally through meditation in various postures, as well as informally, as awareness in daily activity. It does not involve a system of beliefs.

Mindfulness, or awareness, is not the same as thinking. Awareness is the sense of knowing that is present in the mind in the split second before you start to think. However, mindfulness does not exclude thinking – you can be aware of your thoughts and the process of thinking.

You need to have an intention to be aware and to make some effort to remember to be aware, because you are often distracted or acting automatically and therefore blind to your present experience. When mindfulness is not present,

you are on “autopilot” and you miss much of the richness and nuance of your life. You are also more likely to act based on habitual and reactive patterns, rather than deliberately choosing an intentional and wise course.

Mindfulness practice does not involve controlling your experience or achieving some desired outcome. So, contrary to what you might think, mindfulness should not involve seeking a calm state of mind, relaxation, or a state of contentment or ease – although these states may arise during a formal mindfulness session. Further, mindfulness does not involve trying to get rid of difficult mind or body experiences. This is the “acceptance” component of mindfulness. For lawyers oriented to achieve results in a linear and analytic fashion, this may come as a paradigm shift. **You can think of it as a welcome break from the never-ending drive for achievements and results that come with lawyering.**

Keep an eye on whether you are attempting to control your experience. You may have a pleasant experience and try to maintain it. This can be particularly challenging in the early or developing stages of your practice, because you may encounter calm and spacious states of mind that are new to you. You may want to replicate

these states each time you formally practice mindfulness meditation. This is impossible and will inevitably lead to frustration and disappointment. Alternatively, you will encounter unpleasant mental or physical experiences and try to avoid them, again leading to frustration and disappointment. This desire to control is a natural human tendency. Do not criticize yourself if you notice that you are doing this – just bring mindfulness to this habit! Having noticed your attempt to control your experience, do your best to let go and to allow things to unfold naturally.

There are many possible aspects of your present moment experience that you can be mindful of, including the body, the breath, “feelings” (the tone of moments of experience as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral), and the mind (thoughts, emotions). You can be mindful of your internal experience as well as the world around you, including other people’s external behavior and manifestations of their internal mind states. You can be mindful of relationships, including causal relationships that lead to your own suffering. You can be mindful of the fact that all phenomena are constantly changing – and develop resilience and equanimity in the face of change.

Developing an Intention

It is important to have an overall intention for your mindfulness practice. Reflect on what is drawing you to work on developing your awareness. What is your aspiration for yourself? Hold this intention somewhat lightly, as it is not helpful to have a fixed expectation of a specific result that you want to achieve on a timetable of your choosing. Mindfulness brings many benefits, but it does not work in this way. Revisit your intention on occasion to see how it might be changing as your understanding of mindfulness and of yourself deepens and as your life circumstances change. Your overall intention is the “fuel” for your practice – it provides you with energy to keep going and to explore more deeply.

It is also important to have a specific intention when you begin a meditation session. Be clear about the specific practice that you are going to explore. This Summary Guide sets forth a number of possibilities. There are many other approaches that you may become familiar with. Are you going to be following the breath, and if so in what particular way? Are you going to be doing a body scan, and what will be your approach? Are you going to be practicing a form of open awareness? **Setting a clear and specific intention will help you to avoid quickly and blindly wandering off wherever the mind takes you.** It will also help you to build familiarity with specific mindfulness practices. When you get lost during a session, you can remind yourself of your specific intention and return to your practice.

Applying Wise Effort

In order to cultivate mindfulness, you have to apply some effort. This does not, however, involve forcing your attention. You do not need to hyper-focus, to strain, or to bear down. Instead, **the effort that is suitable for the establishment of mindfulness is relaxed and gently persistent.** Think of mindfulness as the expression of an open, receptive and softly alert connection to your present moment experience.

In the classical literature on mindfulness, the simile of playing a lute is used to illustrate the appropriate quality of effort necessary to establish mindfulness. If the strings of the lute are too tight, the sound is not proper. If the strings of the lute are too loose, the sound is also not right. In the same way, your effort in mindfulness can either be too tight or too slack. What is required to effectively cultivate mindfulness is a wise and balanced effort – just enough so that you are not drifting off and getting dull or sleepy, but not so much that you are straining, becoming tense or agitated, or exhausting yourself. Finding this balance requires monitoring and adjustment as circumstances change.

Approaching Your Practice With A Spirit of Curiosity

A key attitude for cultivating mindfulness is curiosity. Approach your experience – in formal meditation and in daily life – with the view that what is happening is fresh and new, even if it seems at first glance to be familiar. One of the early Zen masters to teach in America, Shunryu Suzuki, called this “beginner’s mind”: “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.” This quality of mind is sometimes expressed as “not knowing.” As a lawyer, you have been trained to be an expert and to “know.” This attitude may therefore require a bit of a shift. The shift will, however, enhance rather than undercut your law practice. **If you are curious and practice “not knowing,” you will be more creative in your arguments and more open to clues from witnesses and other sources.**

Using Anchors for Mindfulness

The practice of mindfulness sounds deceptively simple – intentionally bring your awareness to your present moment experience, with acceptance. While the practice is simple, it is not always easy. The nature of the mind is to forget to be aware – to be pulled into the past or the future, to go on automatic pilot mode, to become distracted by obsessive or afflicting thoughts, or to numb out or become dull. This is why you need to train your mind to remember to be aware.

One way of establishing mindfulness is to use an “anchor.” This is an “object” of mind toward which you choose to direct your awareness and that you return to repeatedly during a meditation session. **This process of aiming toward, and sustaining your awareness on, a specific object tends to promote stability of awareness.** The common mindfulness anchors of body sensations and the breath are explored in the following pages.

You do not have to hang on to your anchor with grim determination. Other objects will come and go in your awareness in addition to the anchor. This is not a problem – you can allow your awareness to land momentarily on these other objects. If you “lose” the anchor for a period of time, you simply practice returning your awareness to it with a gentle attitude of mind. There will be times when your concentration is stronger and your awareness will remain within the chosen anchor more readily and times when this will not be the case.

Mindfulness of Breathing

The breath is an essential mindfulness tool. It is “portable” and always present and available. The breath is ever flowing and changing and has different qualities depending on the state of your body and mind. **When using the breath as an object of your attention, allow it to move as naturally as possible, without attempting to assert control or to breathe in any special manner.** In this respect, mindfulness of breathing is different than breath work that you may have been exposed to through yoga or relaxation exercises. You may find that bringing awareness to the breath without trying to control it in any way is difficult and that you are subtly controlling your breath to some extent. If that happens, just notice this and see if you can relax and let go. Breathe in and out through your nostrils and keep your mouth closed. It helps to keep your tongue lightly pressed against the roof of your mouth.

When practicing mindfulness of breathing, you are choosing to direct your awareness to the particular object of the breath. You will quickly discover that your mind will not always cooperate with this endeavor. The mind has a natural tendency to hop from one stimulus to another, whether it is a thought, a sound, a body sensation, etc. Don’t worry. This is not a sign that you are a failure at meditation. Just notice that this is how your mind is behaving at this moment. Also, it may be that there is some object of your awareness other than the breath that is particularly demanding of your attention. This could, for example, be a strong bodily sensation or an emotion. In that case, simply bring mindfulness to that object, with curiosity as to its nature. When that object of awareness fades away or loses its intensity, gently bring your awareness back to the breath.

There are a number of ways of practicing mindfulness of breathing. You should be clear about the specific breath practice you intend to follow in a particular session, and do your best to stick to that practice. The summary presented here is a brief introduction and is far from complete. What seems like a very simple or even boring practice at first glance can actually be quite subtle and interesting. **Mindfulness of breathing can lead you to increasingly refined levels of awareness.**

Breath counting: When you first begin a meditation practice, you can experiment with breath counting. You can also choose to do this for a period of time at the beginning of a session to give yourself a solid “baseline.” This is really an exercise in building some concentration rather than a mindfulness practice. Use the beginning of the out breath as the beginning of each breath cycle, silently noting the number at that point, and count up to ten cycles. Don’t go beyond ten – just return to one again. If you lose the count before you reach ten, start back at one.

It is easy to become overly achievement-oriented when working with the breath – especially if you are counting the breath. Try to avoid becoming competitive about this. If you find that doing some breath counting from time to time is helpful in promoting stability of your awareness, great. If you are repeatedly judging yourself or getting frustrated, then this is a practice that you may want to avoid or use very judiciously.

At the beginning of a session: It can be helpful to start a meditation session with three intentional in and out breaths that are deep and long, with the exhalation longer than the inhalation. Bring your full attention to the entire cycle of the breathing process and remind yourself that your intention for the session is to stay as mindful of your breath as you can. After you have completed the three breaths, allow the breath to come and go naturally.

Finding the breath in the body and choosing a place for your attention: Mindfulness of breathing involves awareness of bodily sensations. There are three main spots in the body where you can work with being aware of breath sensations: (1) the belly, (2) the chest, and (3) the tip of the nose. Regardless of which spot you choose, see if you can continue to return your awareness to the same location throughout the meditation session. The belly is often a good place to start, because the bodily sensations there are coarser and therefore sometimes easier to notice and follow. You can experience the sensations of tension and relaxation (among any other sensations that you become aware of) as the belly rises and falls with the breath. The expansion and contraction of the chest is another place where the breath may be felt prominently. The sensations at the tip of the nose are much more subtle, so choosing this as a place to rest your awareness may be somewhat more difficult at first.

Noting in and out breaths: One way to work with the breath is to direct your awareness to the fact that now there is an in-breath happening, and now there is an out-breath happening. In the beginning of your practice, or at the beginning of a session even after you have more experience, you may choose to silently note “in” and “out” at the appropriate moment. You can also drop this noting and simply know that that you are breathing in with the in-breath and know that you are breathing out with the out-breath. As you deepen your work with directing and maintaining your awareness of breathing, you can become aware of the moments when the in-breath and the out-breath begin and end, as well as the “gaps” between the in-breath and out-breath.

Noting the “nature” of the breath: You can also bring mindfulness to the “nature” of your breath. The breath can be short or long, shallow or deep, tight or relaxed. As you are breathing, you can know the quality of each in-breath and out-breath. For instance, when breathing in a long breath, you know in those moments that the breath is long. You can also bring awareness to the relationship between the nature of your breath and the quality of your overall body and mind.

What to do when your mind wanders: Your mind will wander away from the breath and your mindfulness will feel “lost” – count on this. Don’t beat yourself up – this is natural and it happens to experienced meditators as well as beginners. When you find that your awareness is no longer on the breath, take a moment and notice where the mind has landed. This is a moment of mindfulness, because you are now aware. It may be that your mindfulness had not diminished at all, but rather that the object of your awareness had simply changed. Or, it may be that you had been lost in thinking of some kind for a while. You might realize that your mind had become dull or sleepy and that this is why you lost awareness of the breath. When you recognize where your awareness has gone to, you can then gently escort it back to the breath. It doesn’t matter how many times you do this in a session.

There may be times when you find it particularly difficult to sustain awareness on the breath. This difficulty can in turn prompt judgments about your capability. You may begin to tighten up in an effort to “make progress” by staying with the breath for longer periods. This cycle can be quite counterproductive. If you find that this is happening, try to bring awareness to your reaction. Then, relax a bit and bring a more balanced effort to your breath awareness.

Just one breath: In a time of significant difficulty of staying with the breath (or at any time), you can also play with the practice of seeing whether you can mindfully be aware of just one breath. Do your best to follow the breath through one in and out cycle. Don’t worry about how many breaths you can bring awareness to consecutively. When you have finished with one breath cycle, bring forth the same intention and see if you can follow just one more breath. At any time that you get “blown off course,” you can return to this practice of mindfully attending to just one breath. Let this be enough.

Three-breath practice: You can use the breath to promote mindfulness when you are not engaged in a formal meditation session. One way to do this is to mindfully take three breaths. Simply rest your awareness on your breath, follow each breath from the very beginning of the first breath to the very end of the third breath. Again, there is no need to breathe in any particular manner. At the end of the three breaths you can take a moment or two to open your awareness and notice the condition of your body and mind. Then you can see whether this interval may have changed the condition of your body or mind or helped orient you in a new direction (fine if that is not the case as there does not have to be any immediate “result”), and proceed. You can try this three-breath practice before meetings or phone calls, at transitional moments (arriving at work or at home), in the elevator, when stressed, or at intervals during the day (think about setting a timer or using physical reminders like sticky notes to prompt this practice).

Mindfulness of the Body

The body is an excellent anchor for awareness. It is always available for you to return your attention to. The body can help to ground you and to literally “get you out of your head.” When your awareness is directed to the body, you are in the present moment.

One practice to explore is the body scan. This involves directing your awareness to different parts of the body in a systematic fashion, noticing whatever sensations are present. You may notice, for example, pressure, tension, tingling, heaviness, lightness, cold, warmth, aching, itching, movement, etc. The sensations may be intense or subtle. They may seem to come and go. Or, you might not notice any sensation in a particular part of the body. **Whatever you feel is fine – the point is to bring your awareness to the area of the body in question and to discover what may be present.**

For a full scan, start with the top of the head, and then move on to the face, the back of the head, the neck and throat, the left shoulder, the left arm (upper then lower), the left hand and fingers, the right shoulder, the right arm (upper then lower), the right hand and fingers, the upper back, the middle back, the lower back, the chest, the belly, the pelvis and hips, the left thigh, the left calf, the left shin, the left ankle, the left foot and toes, the right thigh, the right calf, the right shin, the right ankle, and the right foot and toes. After you have completed this scan, allow your awareness to rest in the sense of the body as a whole, noticing sensations as they come and go without trying to associate them with any particular part of the body. If you need to stabilize your awareness, you can return to the breath from time to time.

You can also do an abbreviated version of the scan, by sweeping your awareness more quickly through the body (for instance, by starting with your head, then neck, then both shoulders at once, both arms at once, both hands at once, front of torso, back of torso, both hips at once, both legs at once, and both hands at once).

Open (Choiceless) Awareness

Mindfulness of breath and mindfulness of body sensations in other specific parts of the body is directed – you are choosing an object of awareness. This strengthens not only your mindfulness but also your mental faculty of concentration.

It is also possible to practice mindfulness without choosing a specific object of awareness – this is called open or choiceless awareness. In this style, you make a higher-level decision to allow the various objects of your awareness to naturally arise in your consciousness, one after the other. This does not mean that you lack curiosity about these changing objects or that you allow them to pass by without being aware of them. You bring a strong intention to remain aware of the changing objects and to invite a spacious quality to your mind.

Here is an illustration of how this practice works. You are aware of the in-breath and out-breath for a few cycles. Between breaths, you become aware of thoughts about an upcoming motion hearing and a related knot of anxiety. These objects of awareness fade and your awareness then moves back to the breath. After a few moments, you become aware of an ache in your back. You notice that you are worried that this is an old injury flaring up and that it may knock you out for days like it has in the past. This passes. Your awareness returns to and remains with the aching sensation in your back. You notice that what initially felt like a solid and piercing ache is actually fluctuating significantly in its intensity and quality. Your awareness continues to remain on these changing bodily sensations until they cease. You are then aware that your back is at ease and that there are no unpleasant sensations to be found there. Your awareness opens up to a sense of spaciousness in your mind and your body. It then returns to the breath.

You might choose to practice in this way for an entire session. Or, especially when you are new to the practice, you might begin a session by establishing some degree of mindfulness in a directed manner with the body or the breath, and if awareness seems somewhat stable, broadening the “focal length” of your mindfulness and proceeding with open awareness.

Thoughts

Mindfulness meditation does not involve eliminating thoughts from your mind. You may certainly experience periods of a “quiet mind,” during which thinking is substantially reduced. However, thoughts invariably arise. You should not consider them to be a problem.

Remember that awareness is not the same as thinking. You can be aware of thoughts without getting involved in them. You can begin to discern the quality of thoughts – some have clarity, some are disjointed, some are obsessive, some are dreamy, some are negative or positive fantasies that the mind has conjured up, etc – there are many varieties and flavors of thinking.

The “monkey mind”: One of the first things you may notice about your mind when you begin mindfulness practice is that it tends to hop from one thought to another, quickly and without any control. Meditators often refer to this as “monkey mind.” It can be disconcerting to see this chaotic quality of your mind. When you notice it, remind yourself that this “monkey mind” is natural and not a personal deficiency.

The “thought train”: During a formal session (or at any time), mindfulness may arise and you may suddenly realize that your mind has been lost in thought for some time, without knowing it. It is as if you had hopped on a “thought train” and traveled miles down the road with little or no awareness of what was happening or where you were headed. Cultivating mindfulness can help you to avoid blindly getting on this type of thought train and to shine the light of awareness on the train

Thoughts are just thoughts: You do not have to identify personally with the thoughts that arise in your mind. Thoughts are simply thoughts – they are not “you.” If you have a sad thought, that does not make you a “sad person.” You also do not have to believe every thought that arises in your mind. Some thoughts are useful and wise and deserve to be honored and acted upon. Other thoughts are habitual, delusional, obsessive, or harmful, and can and should be let go of. You have the freedom to decide whether to believe your thoughts and whether to act upon them.

Noting: You can be aware of thoughts that arise, without becoming entangled in them, through the practice of noting or labeling. For example, you might notice that your mind is anticipating or planning some future event. In that case, you could silently note to yourself, “anticipating, anticipating” or “planning, planning.” Or you might notice that your mind is recalling some past event, in which case you could silently note, “remembering, remembering.” There are many other categories of thinking, which you can note based on their quality. Don’t worry too much about the precision of your noting. The point is to notice the thinking process itself and its nature. Practice watching thoughts arise, noting them, and watching them cease, without giving them any energy.

Similes: You may find it helpful to consider the mind as if it is a spacious and clear blue sky, with thoughts coming and going like puffy white clouds carried by the wind, appearing and then moving out of sight. Alternatively, you might let your awareness touch your thoughts as if they are paper boats floating on a stream – being carried along by the current, in view for a while and then moving downstream.

Feelings

The entirety of your experience consists of a succession of discrete, momentary sense impressions, involving the classic five senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell, and the “sixth sense” (in the mindfulness meditation tradition) of mind (you can consider the mind as a sense organ and thoughts as sense objects, like the eye perceives sights). In each instant of sense impression, there is an accompanying “feeling tone” that is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. One mindfulness practice is to simply note this quality of feeling tone in your present experience. The natural tendency is to react to this feeling tone – wanting to continue pleasant feelings, avoid unpleasant feelings, and become checked out or bored in response to neutral feelings. When you are blind to this cycle, you are acting habitually and often without wisdom. **By bringing awareness to the feeling tones of your experience – and to your reactions – you can gradually become less whipsawed by the circumstances of your life.**



Breath is a key to knowing the state of your body and mind.