

Meditation is a way of realizing the fundamental truth, the basic truth, that we can discover ourselves, we can work on ourselves. The goal is the path and the path is the goal. There is no other way of attaining basic sanity than the practice of meditation. Absolutely none.

—Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

Mindfulness isn't difficult, we just need to remember to do it.

—Sharon Salzberg

Mindfulness is our innate ability to be fully present and engaged with what's happening in the present moment. It's being "on the dot," not sidetracked by our wandering minds that tend to default to anything other than what's actually going on. When we're more present and less caught up in our own thoughts, we become more available to others, more accurate and productive, and more content. We naturally begin to experience less anxiety because we don't feel so completely at the mercy of our emotional reactions....

This natural but untrained ability to be fully present is cultivated through mindfulness meditation practice. An untrained, "mindless" mind is like a wild horse: it is beautiful and full of energy, but not only are we unable to ride it; we are constantly dragged around by its seemingly independent power. Your mind can seem to have a mind of its own.

Having an out-of-control mind creates a lot of unnecessary stress, because you are constantly trying to navigate through an endless clamor of ricocheting thoughts, which spark emotional responses in endless chain reactions. This makes it very difficult to relate fully with what is in front of you, as your attention goes in and out of focus. We all miss so much of our lives in this way, and we waste a lot of time and energy.

If you think of your mind as being like a jar filled with water and colorful sand, you are usually so speedy and distracted that the jar is constantly shaking, sometimes even turning upside down with confusion, forgetfulness, and rug-out-from-under-you emotions. You can expend all of your energy trying to keep the many threads of your life going, losing track and trying to recover, taking sidetracks before you even know it, forgetting where you were in the first place, and being unclear about your priorities. Many of us routinely begin our workday by instantly turning on the computer and letting our first email dictate where we go from there, which can easily snowball into a disorganized, inefficient use of our time. The sand in our water jar is so agitated that the water is murky and unclear. In this stirred-up state, we can't see anything, and we bounce reactively from one thing to the next, feeling anxious and out of control.

Mindfulness meditation allows the sand to settle so that the water becomes calm and clear. This practice trains the mind to be more fully in the present. It is a gentle and skillful technique for reconditioning ourselves to come back and be here. Using the example of the wild horse, you can imagine the skilled trainer who very slowly, gently, but persistently works to make a relationship with the horse. The training is conducted with an attitude of respect for the horse's power, with no intention of subjugating or reducing that power in any way. On the contrary, the whole point is to develop a mutual familiarity and trust so that the energy is fully available—so that the horse

can be ridden with enjoyment. Eventually, the horse and trainer develop a mutual understanding and respect, and in that way, they realize their full potential together. This takes patience, discipline, skill, and love.

One of the Tibetan words for mindfulness meditation is *shiné* (Sanskrit: *shamatha*). In English, this means “resting the mind,” or “peaceful abiding.” By taking time to stop and let your mind rest, without reacting to its jumpy profusion of habitual thoughts and feelings, you gradually settle and become more familiar with being simply present. By letting your thoughts come and go and returning to your breath again and again, you strengthen your innate ability to connect fully with what is going on around you.

A traditional image for steadying the mind in meditation is that of a candle flame burning uninterrupted by wind. When a flame is sputtering and flickering in the wind, the light it gives off is reduced, and it is harder to see where you are. But when the flame is steady, it illuminates everything around it. So likewise, when our minds are relaxed and still, resting in the present moment, we are able to see what is around us without the sputtering and flickering of our running commentary about it, including all of our habitual thoughts, judgments, hopes, and fears.

Another Tibetan word for meditation is *gom*. (Tibetans have many words for meditation, like the Northerners do for snow!) *Gom* means “familiarizing,” or “getting used to.” When you first sit down to meditate, your mind can seem unfamiliar and wild, like the untamed horse. This is such a universal experience that the Tibetans compare it to a waterfall—a cascade of thoughts all tumbling over each other. People often remark with alarm that meditation is making their minds more busy and crazy, but what is really happening is that they are observing that busyness fully, for the first time. As you make a relationship with your mind through regular meditation practice, you quickly become more familiar with your own recurring patterns of busyness and with the way you alternate between being caught in thoughts and fantasies and then returning, again and again, to the simple, present situation where you are just sitting and breathing.

This pattern of clumsiness, practice, and eventual familiarity/mastery is how we go about learning any new skills. Just remember what it was like to learn how to drive a car. For me, it was completely foreign to get into the driver’s seat and figure out what in the world to do: where to put the key, where to put my feet, how to relate with the mirrors, how to judge distances on each side of the car, how to look at the speedometer and drive at the same time, etc. I remember my father being terrorized in the passenger seat and more than once slamming his foot down instinctively on imaginary brakes. But with practice and study, we internalize the rules of the road and join them with the physical act of driving, until it all eventually becomes familiar and coordinated—second nature. This same thing happens when we’re learning how to meditate.

Meditation also has the effect of strengthening your mind. Each time you deliberately, gently let your thoughts go and return to your breath, you are shifting your habit of letting your mind randomly drift to being able to hold it more easily and naturally on what’s occurring in the present. Not only does it shift your habits, but it literally reshapes your brain in beneficial ways.

Many studies are now showing that even short amounts of practice, like thirty minutes per day, cause measurable changes in the brain that can be tracked on a brain scanner. For example, controlled studies show that the amygdala, which is the primitive part of the brain responsible for our fear response (commonly known as the fight, flight, or freeze reaction) and anxiety-related emotions, actually shrinks in size—its brain cell volume decreases—after mindfulness practice.

Similarly, the gray matter in the parts of the prefrontal lobe related to functions like planning, problem solving, and emotional regulation has been found to increase with mindfulness meditation.

Thanks to many scientists and researchers today, like Jon Kabat-Zinn and Richie Davidson, among others, the experiences that meditators have observed directly for millennia are now being measured and explained in modern scientific language. This is bringing a new acceptance of the ancient practice of meditation into our culture.

Mind training has been missing for too long in the West. It is an essential and basic tool for a full and healthy life, and it benefits people of all ages, no matter how young or old. What could be more basic, and more important, than being in touch with yourself in a clear and accepting way? What could be more natural than learning to ride the horse of your own mind?

Meditation Instruction

Short sessions of meditation done regularly are more valuable than longer sessions done only occasionally. Find a regular time in your day when you can stop for ten to twenty minutes and meditate. When you have more time, it's helpful to sit for longer periods. Finding a group to do this with is invaluable, as well as a trained meditation instructor for support.

Preparation

- Find a place in your home where you can close the door and have this time to yourself. Choose a seat that helps you to be comfortable and upright (if possible)—a cushion on the floor, or a sofa or chair. Sitting on your bed can be a good option too. If you're at work, you may be able to use a conference room or staff room if you don't have a private office. (Meditation is becoming more acceptable in many workplaces, so you might even start something!) The easier you can make it for yourself, the more likely you will be to do it regularly.
- Decide when you will schedule this time—first thing in the morning, midday break, before bed—whatever works best for you. But actually put it into your schedule, so that your commitment to yourself is clear. Then, if you find the time just isn't working, try another time. Every session is a fresh start.
- Decide how long your session will be, and stick to it. Some people like to burn a stick of incense that's the approximate length of the session they want to do, and just sit until it has finished burning. Ringing a chime or gong, actually or virtually, can also help make a clear boundary for the beginning and end of your session.
- Turn off your phone, completely. The environment doesn't have to be totally quiet, but the fewer distractions you have, the easier it will be to relax and be present.

Posture

The basic guideline is “upright and relaxed”—neither too tight nor too loose. If you have an injury, take whatever posture you need to be gentle with yourself. You can still have a wakeful attitude, even if you have to lie down. Learning to meditate is like learning a new exercise, so be

sure to go easy on yourself as you get used to sitting still in this way, and stretch when you need to.

- Feel your seat resting firmly on your cushion or chair, so that you are stable and not perched. Comfortably cross your legs, or if you are in a chair, place your feet flat on the floor.
- Hold your spine in a straight and upright position, with shoulders slightly back.
- Relax your arms, and place your hands on your thighs, palms down.
- Feel the crown of your head pointing up at the sky, and tuck your chin in slightly.
- Relax your mouth and jaw. Close your mouth and breathe through your nose, if possible.
- Relax your eyes. Let them remain open, gently looking down with a soft gaze. If this feels strained (you will quickly get used to it), alternate between open and closed eyes during your meditation practice, noticing how each feels for you.
- Finally, feel your presence in the room, and bring your awareness in closer to your whole body, noticing and relaxing each part and then letting go. Just be present—relaxed and alert.

Breath

Mindfulness meditation means giving your mind something to focus on, which is called the object of meditation. It is NOT (this is the only time I will use all caps) about trying to get rid of your thoughts or clear your mind. The purpose of this kind of meditation is not to find some so-called ideal, higher state of mind, but to foster a more systemic, permanent transformation—to make a friendly relationship with your own mind. Likewise, you don't need to be in any particular state of mind to meditate.

An object of meditation can be a physical object, like a candle, stone, or statue. It can be a sound, a word (like a mantra), an image (visualization), or a particular thought.

Using the breath is the most simple, natural mindfulness technique, because the breath is always happening in the here and now. It is coming from inside and outside of us, and we can feel it in our body as it happens. So it provides a somewhat more physical, present support than just a visual or mental object.

Having settled your body, turn your attention to your natural breathing. Don't try to breathe in a certain way, but be curious as each breath comes in and goes out. Rest your attention gently and precisely on your breathing. With each out breath, let go into the space and relax. That's all you have to do.

Thoughts

Thoughts are a natural part of your mind and your meditation.

When you realize you are caught up in thoughts or feelings and have forgotten the technique, simply acknowledge that without judgment or analysis, then let it go and come back to your breath. This will happen again and again during the session, and it is this noticing—this

alternation and intentional return to the object of meditation—that strengthens our ability to focus and be present. Noticing that you’ve been caught in a thought doesn’t make you a bad meditator; it makes you a good noticer!