

Mindfulness for Life

Motivation and Commitment

Learning mindfulness is a journey – often a life-long journey. And because this journey is a long one, really reflecting upon and establishing our own motivation helps sustain our practice over time. Meditation is an art, and as with any art, our skill is honed through consistent attention. Mindfulness requires a considerable investment in time - as well as courage, determination, and self-honesty. Though the practice brings much ease and joy, there will also be times when it can feel difficult or trying. We may wonder, “why bother?” At times, almost anything can seem like a more satisfying alternative to sitting on the meditation cushion. The busyness of life can also sweep us away from our practice. Amidst so much activity, it can be hard to find the time for the nourishing practice of ‘non-doing’.

For this reason a strong motivation can guide us back to our own inner priorities. Connecting with a deep and personal motivation for practicing not only sustains us over time, it adds an energy to our practice in the moment. If we have a clear motivation, our intention to be mindful will be stronger from moment to moment and our whole practice will benefit as a result.

Please take some time to reflect on your heartfelt for cultivating mindfulness in your life. Please take some time to sit down with a pen and paper and these questions.

- Why do you want to practice mindfulness?
- What is your aspiration in practicing mindfulness?
- What benefits do you hope to realize for yourself and others through practicing?
- You might like to imagine that it’s a year from now and you have practiced consistently throughout this time. What has changed? What habits have you cultivated? What habits have you let go of?

It can be helpful to refer back to this set of reflections for nourishment and encouragement, checking in with what has strengthened or changed over time and throughout your practice life.

A wise approach to meditation.

All of us begin practicing mindfulness for one reason or another. We may feel dissatisfied with life or stressed out. We may want to develop a kinder and more compassionate way of relating to others and to ourselves. Or we may simply want to enjoy life more – connect more deeply with each moment.

It's really helpful to have a clear motivation for practicing. But it's also important that our reasons for practicing don't become goals to strive towards. If we strive for a particular outcome then we lose our mindfulness – we're living for some idea of the future, attached to an expectation.

To be mindful means to drop all goals and expectations and encounter this moment just as it is, embracing the unfolding of experience in all its wonder. Paradoxically, it is this full embrace and acceptance of the present moment that opens new possibilities for change and personal growth. In opening to and embracing the present moment we're able to let go of old habits of mind and discover new ways of relating to life with more kindness, lightness and creativity. When we fully accept ourselves and the present moment as it is, change happens. If we get fixed in some idea of how we want ourselves to be, we get stuck.

In the path of practice, it's helpful to take the approach of a skillful gardener – gentle, patient and persistent. The wise gardener prepares the soil, plants the seeds, and waters them regularly. However, she also knows that she is only one of the causes and conditions that give rise to healthy plants and flowers. The others include the sunshine, the changing seasons and the work of the earth. So the gardener trusts that the sun will do its work, that the earth will do its work and that Spring will come at the right time. She doesn't try to force her garden to come into bloom before the time is right. She knows gardening is an organic process and that the plants will produce flowers when the time is right. Her job is to water the seeds with love and patience.

Meditation is just the same. We can think of ourselves as gardeners of the mind. We are engaged in the art of cultivating new habits of mind: habits of awareness, of embodiment, of concentration, of joy, and of compassion. We are also learning the art of letting go: letting go of habits of mind that cause ourselves and others to suffer. But we can't force any of this process. We can only attend to each moment as best we can and be gentle and patient as we practice. Sometimes, we can become impatient for results – we want to see the flowers of the practice bloom. When this impatience arises it's very important to remember that our practice is just to cultivate the soil and water the seeds. The fruits will come in their own time.

It's also helpful to remember cultivating mindfulness is a practice of rewiring the brain. In recent years, neuroscientists have discovered that the brain is an "organ of experience". That is, it changes its structure and activity in response to experience: what we repeatedly think, feel and do. This property of the brain is called neuroplasticity. If the brain operated like a computer, we could just load a new programme and decide to be happier, less stressed, and kinder. But it doesn't operate like a computer! The brain is an organ and, as such, meditation is an organic process. So, we must be like the good gardener – gentle, patient and persistent.

What is mindfulness?

There are numerous ways to describe mindfulness. But for now, here are three descriptions from three highly respected teachers in the Western mindfulness tradition, that collectively convey the range and depth of how mindfulness expresses a quality of mind, heart and body:

Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness simply and succinctly in terms of cognitive and affective training,

"paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally".

Thich Nhat Hanh describes mindfulness as an energy that transforms our way of living.

"I define mindfulness as the practice of being fully present and alive, body and mind united. Mindfulness is the energy that helps us to know what is going on in the present moment. I drink water and I know that I am drinking the water. Drinking the water is what is happening.

Mindfulness brings concentration. When we drink water mindfully, we concentrate on drinking. If we are concentrated, life is deep, and we have more joy and stability. We can drive mindfully, we can cut carrots mindfully, we can shower mindfully. When we do things this way, concentration grows. When concentration grows, we gain insight into our lives."

Finally, Larry Rosenberg describes mindfulness as a practice of intimacy with life and discusses the non-discriminative, non-evaluative nature of awareness:

"Mindfulness is often likened to a mirror; it simply reflects what is there. It is not a process of thinking; it is preconceptual, before thought..."

Mindfulness is unbiased. It is not for or against anything, just like a mirror, which does not judge what it reflects. Mindfulness has no goal

other than the seeing itself. It doesn't try to add to what's happening or subtract from it, to improve it in any way.

It isn't detached, like a person standing on a hill far away from an experience, observing it with binoculars. It is a form of participation – you are fully living our your life, but you are awake in the midst of it...”

There are many ways, then of understanding mindfulness, and all of these descriptions, including others, can aid our understanding of practice. However, rather than trying to achieve a precise conceptual understanding of mindfulness, what is much more important is to understand how to practice and cultivate the lived experience of mindfulness.

The foundation of practice

In the mindfulness tradition, the mind has often been likened to a monkey. Just as a monkey swings from branch to branch and tree to tree searching for a delicious piece of fruit, the mind has the tendency of racing from past to future and from thought to thought, often impelled by worry, craving or anger. If, for one day, we could continually observe our mind, we would likely see countless mind-states, thoughts and emotions passing through: anger, joy, sadness, loneliness, worry, fear, self-criticism, compassion, happiness... Like the weather in the sky, the mind can be a stormy place then suddenly bright and clear; ever-changing from moment to moment.

Mindfulness offers us a way to bring stability and calm to the mind. Rather than drowning in the moods or emotions that wash through us, or being dragged away from the present moment by an endless stream of thoughts, mindfulness offers a way to regain mastery of ourselves – to regain our personal sovereignty. We come back to the present moment and encounter life with awareness.

We do this by bringing the mind and body back together.

This is the foundation of our practice. So much of the time we live in the world of thoughts and thinking – “up in our heads”. Our practice from moment to moment is to come back to the here and now by grounding our attention in the body.

We can do this not just on the meditation cushion but also throughout our daily life. Anywhere that we walk can become a path for walking meditation if we can bring our attention to the soles of our feet. When we cook or chop vegetables, this can become a mindfulness practice simply by resting our attention with our breathing as we also pay attention to cooking or chopping. Indeed, all of our daily tasks can become mindfulness practices: brushing our teeth, showering, dressing, washing dishes, making a cup of

tea. The question is whether or not we remember to be mindful, or whether we are lost in thought or carried along by habit energies of striving and hurrying.

Every moment is an opportunity to cultivate present-moment awareness, to live more deeply, to live more authentically, to live more honestly, and to relate to our experience with more kindness and compassion.

When we live in this way we discover joy and happiness are available in the present moment and we water the seeds of transformation and insight.

The Mindful Attitude

As well as learning to be present to each moment of life, we are also learning to be present in a particular way. Jon Kabat-Zinn has described this as non-judgment. Others use words like kindness, gentleness, acceptance, and openness. This is the mindful attitude.

Often in life, we have the tendency to crave for things to be other than how they are. We sit in meditation and experience a pain in our back and we wish it would go away. We work on a task and feel rushed for time, wishing we hadn't left things to the last minute. We have a habit of resisting or rejecting what is present and this can harden into mind states that increase our suffering, such as anger, frustration, fear or self-criticism.

With mindfulness we learn to approach each moment of experience with non-violence. We accept and allow each moment just as it is. With a little practice this acceptance of the moment develops into accepting ourselves just as we are. The relief and freedom that can come from simply accepting each moment as it is can be immense. What's more, this practice of being with and accepting what is deepens over time. We develop a strength to embrace experiences that, at one time, we might have thought to be unbearable.

Importantly, this attitude of acceptance and non-violence is not resignation. We don't resign ourselves to situations that cause harm to ourselves or others. Nor do we resign ourselves to habits of mind such as depression or loneliness, that prevent our wellbeing. Instead, we recognize "in this moment, this is what is happening. I see it clearly. I neither ignore it, nor am I overwhelmed by it. I simply see." This seeing, in a non-violent, non-reactive way, is a profoundly different way of relating to our experience. We empower ourselves through such seeing. We realize an inner freedom through such seeing. From this place of inner power and freedom we are able to make choices that arise from a place of wisdom rather than a place of fear or reactivity.

And it's not only with difficult experiences that this attitude of acceptance and non-reactivity can be beneficial. With beautiful and enjoyable experiences a reactive mind can separate us from the moment. We listen to a beautiful piece of music and think, "I must let so-and-so hear this", or we see a beautiful sunset and instantly we reach for our camera to take a picture. There is nothing wrong with reacting to moments of beauty or enjoyment in this way, but it's helpful to be aware that when the mind is reactive, our judgment or evaluation can come between our experience and us. When we simply see without reacting, we more deeply connect to each moment.

Cultivating mindfulness: embodied presence.

Our practice then is to be present by "being in the body" and allowing each moment to be just as it is. A wonderful way to cultivate this is through the bodyscan practice. With the bodyscan practice we gently and gradually move our attention through our body paying attention to whatever sensations we notice from moment to moment. We may notice warmth, cold, tingling sensations, or the absence of sensations. Our mind will inevitably wander numerous times in the course of one session. Our practice is just to notice and bring the mind back. In this way we cultivate the ability of the mind to be focused and present. At times the practice may be pleasant and relaxing, at other times we may become bored or feel agitated. No matter what happens in our experience we just notice and allow. In this way we cultivate the mindful attitude.

Enjoy breathing ☺