



Mindfulness Instructions

INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness is the way of coming back to the present with an open hearted curiosity. We come to the here and now by literally coming back to our senses –vision, sound, body feeling especially the breath, smell and taste. We then take the radical approach of remaining open to whatever arises trying neither to push away the unpleasant nor to grasp at the pleasant. This is radical as we are constantly having these types of judgemental reactions throughout every day of our lives. That is how we choose our food and what clothes to wear.



As we do this we become aware of the full range of experience including sensory impressions, thoughts, imagery emotions, urges and impulses. We even can become aware of the quality of mindfulness itself – weather the mind is calm and clear or agitated or dull and foggy.

Because we do not judge either the content or the processes of our mind we become freer to observe our internal processes more objectively without getting so seduced by them. It is as if we are watching the stream of consciousness rather than swimming in it and being buffeted by its eddies and currents.

Eventually this leads to deeper levels of relaxation and resilience. Moreover instead of reacting in our automatic pilot habitual ways we become more spacious allowing us to choose different more skilfull ways of responding. An example of this is that new meditators often find themselves able to choose not to get so irritated when driving in heavy traffic.

SETTING

Even though we can practice mindfulness in any place and in any posture, some conditions are more conducive. So first we find a relatively quiet place where we are unlikely to be disturbed. It is great to have a regular place in an environment that supports the practice. Some people like to be in a study surrounded by books, others prefer to be outdoors. Some like to have articles that have special significance for them close by that support their practice. Some like to use meditation bells or smart phone apps. Whatever works for you to support your practice is just fine.

PRELIMINARY PRACTICES

Exercise or yoga can clear the mind and calm the body, making the practice easier. This is necessary for some people who suffer high levels of agitation.





Others like to link their mindfulness practice to their spiritual beliefs by saying a short prayer or doing a simple ritual at the beginning of their mindfulness practice. It is certainly beneficial to reflect on how your practice may benefit others as well as yourself at the beginning.

POSTURE

There are valid moving mindfulness practices such as mindful walking, mindful yoga and mindfulness in action when doing normal daily activities. However the rest of this article will be largely focussing on still mindfulness practises. Nonetheless many of the principles discussed can be applied to these other practices.

We then adopt a relaxed but alert posture. The traditional position is sitting cross legged on a cushion on the floor. Sitting on a chair with the back straight without introducing extra tension into it and unsupported and relaxed will do just as well. In the beginning it is better not to be too uncomfortable. So the placement of any support cushions or anything else that helps you to be reasonably comfortable is good at the start. If however you do experience discomfort or irritation it can be a good opportunity to practice nonjudgemental awareness with a difficult experience. (See article on sitting with difficult feelings)

EYES OPENED OR CLOSED

When beginning practice it is better to close the eyes. Closing eyes improves inward focus for most of us. Ultimately it is very useful to be able to practise mindfulness with the eyes open as it allows us to expand its application to a much broader range of settings. Also meditating with the eyes open can help if experiencing drowsiness or agitation.

THE ANCHOR: BREATH, BODY SENSATIONS, SOUNDS

We generally use the breath as an anchor for our attention. The breath has the advantages of immediately bringing the attention into the body. Moreover, awareness of the breath immediately focuses our attention on a function that is under both conscious and unconscious control. This is a very appropriate place for psychological work to occur. So we focus our attention on the breath without trying to control it. We let the breath breathe itself.

We can focus on the breath at one point in the body such as the entrance to the nose or the belly or we can follow it into different areas. Focusing at the nose is generally quite calming. Following the breath into the belly and chest generally helps us to get more in touch with our emotions.

Focussing on sounds takes us out of the body which can be helpful if we are very stressed or traumatised.

ALL THOUGHTS ARE “JUST THOUGHTS”

All thoughts including images are regarded as equal while meditating. It does not matter how noble or base they might be; how profound or banal they might be. This is how we cultivate the non-judgemental awareness that is the cornerstone of mindfulness. So for the purpose of mindfulness they are all “just thoughts”.

DEALING WITH DISTRACTION FROM THE HERE & NOW



Soon enough we will realize we have become distracted from our breath and immersed in our old familiar thoughts. When this happens we *gently* bring attention back to the breath without criticism or struggle. We have just been for a dip in our thought stream. So we lightly return to the solid ground of our awareness of our breath. With this process we become a more objective witness of our own thoughts and feelings.

Similarly, **sensations** such as sounds, aches itches and tingles are quite acceptable. We can just allow them to be. When these sensations lead to discursive thoughts, such as: "I wish that dog next door would stop barking", then we treat that like any other thought. So we just gently return our attention to our breath.

Strong emotions or physical pain can sometimes be problematic. They can lead to the practitioner being overwhelmed by a vortex of intense thoughts and feelings. In this case it is often helpful to be mindful of the changing physical sensations in the body associated with the emotion or pain. As the practitioner watches the fluctuations and changing nature of these sensations, the sense of being overwhelmed can often be replaced with interest or even curiosity about the experience.

EXPANDING MINDFULNESS

We use the breath as an anchor as a way of developing our ability to witness the activity of the mind. As we get used to this the mind settles. It is then easier to expand our mindfulness to include:

- Subtle body sensations – We can scan our body from head to toe or feel our breath expand into different parts of the body.
- Sights, sounds, smells & any other sensory impressions
- Emotions
- Thoughts in different modalities e.g.
 - Verbal
 - Visual
 - Musical
- Thought types e.g.
 - Planning
 - Sexual
 - Grandiose fantasies
 - Worrying
- The quality of our mindfulness
 - Calm & clear or
 - Agitated or
 - Foggy or sleepy

ESTABLISHING A REGULAR DAILY PRACTICE

Many people have great difficulty establishing a regular daily practice. It is best to start with a practice that you find easy. Usually it is best if a practitioner links the mindfulness practice into their normal daily routine. Most people have a predictable morning routine into which mindfulness can be slotted. The important thing is that the practice should not be based on whether a practitioner feels up to it on a particular day or not. Instead it needs to be established as a good habit which is practised without internal disputation, much like brushing your teeth.



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Also it is very helpful to begin with a mindfulness practice you find easy whether that be sitting mindfulness, a lying body scan, walking mindfulness or something else. Some find sound tracks on a CD or a smart phone app very helpful. Obviously if you find it easy at the beginning you will get less frustrated and be more likely to persevere. As you practice regularly you will develop mindfulness fitness whereby you find yourself being able to practice in more and more difficult situations. Then you can progress to the other practices that are more difficult for you. That keeps the practice interesting and engaging.

Sometimes flexibility and imagination are required to find an appropriate time and place. People with young children often find it easier to meditate at work in their office. Single parents of preschool children often find it very difficult to find time. Sometimes they can fit it in when the children are napping. Some people meditate on the train on the way to work in the morning.

It helps to read literature or watch videos that explain mindfulness and its benefits. This can increase your motivation. Practicing with friends or a group every now and again makes all the difference for some. An experienced mindfulness practitioner as a coach can save you from giving up by helping you with difficulties.

Once you have started the practice it is good to make special plans as to how you can continue your practice when your routine is going to be interrupted by things such as going on holidays changing jobs or having a new child. A little bit of forethought can stop your practice from falling over.

Finally if you do drop your practice don't despair. Just like renewing a physical fitness regime, it won't take nearly as long to reach the same level of mindfulness fitness as it did the first time around.

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