

## What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness practice has become popular in the last few years; it can bring great benefits, so I understand why people are so interested in using it. I also wonder if its popularity points to how many people are dissatisfied with their lives. These practices can lead to a deep sense of peace, to being more engaged in the world, and to feeling more fulfilled.

The word 'mindfulness' means something like 'attention' or 'awareness'. It is the practice of making a conscious decision about what we give our attention to.

Usually our minds are full of thoughts. We remember an argument at work and we replay it in our minds until it comes out the way we'd like, or we start planning our shopping trip, or worrying about how we're going to clear out the loft. You might have heard the term monkey-mind to describe this ordinary state of mind. Our thoughts jump from one branch to another, like a monkey searching for a perfect banana.

In this state of mind our attention is on these fantasies about the past and the future. Our focus is on these stories in such a way that we respond as if they were real, even though they are the creations of our minds.

When we put our attention on something else (our breathing, for example) we step outside these monkey-mind thoughts. No longer pulled about by these thoughts, our minds become calmer.

One of the primary sources of mindfulness practice is the Buddhist text the *Satipatthana Sutta*, still a useful guide to practice today.

Satipatthana means something like 'foundation of mindfulness' and in it the Buddha describes different kinds of practices, beginning with mindfulness of breathing.

The Buddha gives very clear meditation instructions for this practice, "When you take a long breath" he says, "be aware that you are taking a long breath. When you take a short breath, be aware that you are taking a short breath."

Mindfulness of breathing is one of the most popularly taught and practiced meditations today. It can bring some of that calm I mentioned earlier - in fact the Buddha goes on to suggest that you might also want to think, "Calming the activity of the body I breathe in" and, "calming the activity of body I breathe out." This is good advice, particularly if we are having trouble sitting still in our meditation.

As well as the calmness that comes from escaping our monkey-mind, we can also learn something about our own nature from following our breathing.

One of the most powerful lessons following the breath can teach us is how dependent we are upon the world. In a society which celebrates self-reliance it is easy to believe that we are completely responsible for the shape of our own lives. We make our own choices and we live or die by them.

Our choices do have a powerful effect on our lives, but we are far from completely in control. As we follow the breath we become aware that we have not created the air we are breathing. We might also become aware that the air we are breathing has been recycled many, many times. This might lead us to reflect on our own lives in this way – how our existence is the result of a string of direct

and indirect causes and conditions. For example, our ancestors needed to meet each other at just the right time to have their children and so on down the generations until we get to our own parents, or think of numerous other events that happen by chance, or through other people's power, that have led us to this place in our life.

As well as these two benefits, a sense of peace and some insight about our existence, mindfulness of breathing can also create a space in which other more hidden thoughts and feelings can float to the surface of our minds. Part of what drives our monkey-mind is an aversion to what is painful; the frenetic thoughts cover up deeper wounds. When our monkey-minds become more peaceful we might start to notice some of these hidden thoughts and feelings.

This isn't always what people beginning meditation want to hear, but this process is often a good thing. These thoughts and feelings are wounds that haven't healed properly in the past (if they had completely healed we wouldn't notice them) and giving them some air gives them the chance to heal properly.

This is one place therapy can help – if the wounds are particularly deep or painful, having another person to accompany you on your healing process is invaluable.

According to the Satipatthana Sutta, at this stage of the mindfulness practice we are not supposed to do anything with these deeper feelings that are exposed, just return our attention to the breath.

This is pretty good advice: notice that these wounds are there, but don't do anything with them just yet.

After mindfulness of breathing the Buddha goes on to describe other kinds of mindfulness of body practices. We are encouraged to practise being aware of how we hold our bodies, to reflect on the make-up of our bodies and to go and sit in a graveyard and think about impermanence. These practices are designed to bring specific insights about the human condition. In a similar way to noticing our dependence on air, we see how our body is composed of elements that have existed since the beginning of time and that we have not created, and we also begin to come to terms with the fragility of life.

In this section the Buddha also gives some teaching on taking mindfulness away from our meditation cushion and into everyday life. He describes the attitude one should have when dressing in the morning, or when washing a bowl. In either case the attitude is the same – give your attention wholly to what you are engaged in. Step out of the monkey-mind and completely give yourself to the activity.

The benefits of this practice are two-fold. We are stepping outside our stories about the world and putting our attention onto something real (the clothes we are wearing, the bowl we are washing). Not inhabiting our usual fantasies can bring a similar calm to that which we find in breathing meditation. The second benefit is that we are much more likely to do whatever it is we are doing well. We choose colours that go together instead of picking up something from the crumpled heap of clothes in the corner of the bedroom. We make sure the bowl is really clean before moving onto the next dish.

Once we have done some mindfulness of breathing, and some mindfulness of the body, and some mindfulness in our daily life, the Buddha then suggests we turn our attention inwards.

There are two traps that we can fall into when we turn our attention to our thoughts. The first is that we become seduced by them and quickly fall back into the monkey-mind. The second is that as soon as we see what we are thinking we begin to judge ourselves, “What terrible crazy thoughts I have!” or even, “What profound thoughts I have!” We should apply the same method of just noticing without judging that we learnt in mindfulness of breathing here too. We are aiming to be aware of what thoughts are appearing, without being caught by them.

When we can maintain this sort of awareness we notice the monkey-mind without acting from it, and without being trapped in it. Because we are not adding energy to our thoughts as we usually do, when we simply watch them appearing, they will often disappear in their own time. We are then able to act from a place that is clearer, that is less frenetic or confused.

Another benefit is that as we watch our thoughts we can consider where they are coming from; we can ask, “What lies beneath this thought?” In this way we can gain some understanding of how our mind works: as our body is composed of elements that have existed since the beginning of time, so our thoughts appear from other causes and conditions.

Let’s look an example of that process: I notice I am thinking about that umbrella I lost years ago. Where did that thought come? I realise that I’ve just heard a weather forecast on the radio, which triggered the thoughts about umbrellas. But why did I start thinking about the weather forecast and my lost umbrella, when I didn’t even notice the news bulletin earlier? Perhaps it’s because I have been worried about getting all my gardening jobs done. There is some connection to the weather (do I really want to garden in the rain?) and also to how organised I am, or unorganised, like that time I lost the umbrella. In this way I can see that my thoughts were triggered by both external conditions (hearing the weather forecast) and internal conditions (my past experience of losing the umbrella). Perhaps the result of noticing these thoughts is that I can make a plan to complete my gardening jobs, rather than worrying about them, or decide that as long as I’m wearing the right clothes it doesn’t matter what the weather is doing. Either way I have moved forward.

As we become mindful of our thoughts we gain some understanding of how all minds work; that all of our thoughts appear from a complex set of conditions. We also gain some understanding of how our own mind specifically works; just what is it that drives us?

Now we have some experience in these different areas of practices (mindfulness of breathing, of our bodies, in daily tasks, and of thoughts) we might also give some space to thinking about any deeper wounds we have uncovered – what lies beneath them? This is where having a therapist or spiritual friend can be a great help. Not only are we easily caught by our old thought patterns and slip back into the monkey-mind, but giving attention to our thoughts can often provoke intense emotions that we feel unable to cope with on our own. If we have a therapist or spiritual friend alongside us we can borrow some of their steadiness in the face of all this.

It is also true that we are resistant to change and that we close our eyes to our worst thoughts and feelings. A therapist can stand beside us and just notice without judging, even when you are unable

to do this yourself, and a therapist can make connections and observations about your thought patterns that are harder to spot from the inside.

Noticing these thought patterns, and dealing with anything we need to as a result, can bring a deep sense of peace. In the example above I am able to let the worry go because I am doing something about it (or perhaps I realise that the gardening can wait, which also relieves the worry). Even just exposing these thoughts can bring some relief, as we expend less energy in trying to hide from them.

Finally, in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha asks you to give your attention to his teachings on living a meaningful life. These teachings can move you towards a deep sense of being at ease in the world, and towards being actively compassionate in the world. In the text he outlines some of these teachings, finishing with the Four Noble Truths. These teachings could form the syllabus for a lifetime's study, and I don't want to enter into the detail of them here. If you would like to read a good exposition of the Four Noble Truths I recommend David Brazier's 'The Feeling Buddha'.

The important point to note here is that the pinnacle of mindfulness practice is a teaching about how to be compassionate in the world. The Four Noble Truths ask us to face the whole world, including the vast suffering we find there, and respond with wisdom and compassion. This is the ultimate path for a peaceful life.

This means being able to face the suffering in the world with equanimity, and to face the suffering inside each of us with equanimity.

What disturbs this equanimity is the monkey-mind, the mind that races frenetically (or that refuses to respond at all), which covers up the deeper wounds we have suffered and held on to. The path of mindfulness leads us away from this selfish mind and into a more open and honest way of being in the world.

As we take each step on the path, from practicing mindfulness of breathing, to washing our bowls with mindfulness, we can find new depths of peace. Mindfulness of breathing can be the first step on the road towards living a much fuller and more satisfying life.

For instructions on mindfulness of breathing see: [Mindfulness of Breathing](#)

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May 2013