

Mindfulness

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So, after all this talk of mindfulness, what is it really anyway?

According to the Buddhist scholar and monk Nyanaponika Thera, mindfulness is “the unfailing master key for *knowing* the mind and is thus the starting point; the perfect tool for *shaping* the mind, and is thus the focal point; and the lofty manifestation of the achieved *freedom* of the mind, and is thus the culminating point.” Not bad for something that basically boils down to paying attention.

Mindfulness can be thought of as moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment, and as non-reactively, as non-judgmentally, and as openheartedly as possible. When it is cultivated intentionally, it is sometimes referred to as *deliberate mindfulness*. When it spontaneously arises, as it tends to do more and more the more it is cultivated intentionally, it is sometimes referred to as *effortless*

mindfulness. Ultimately, however arrived at, mindfulness is mindfulness.¹

Of all the meditative wisdom practices that have developed in traditional cultures throughout the world and throughout history, mindfulness is perhaps the most basic, the most powerful, the most universal, among the easiest to grasp and engage in, and arguably, the most sorely needed now. For mindfulness is none other than the capacity we all already have to know what is actually happening as it is happening. Vipassana teacher Joseph Goldstein describes it as that “quality of mind that notices what is present without judgment, without interference. It is like a mirror that clearly reflects what comes before it.” Larry Rosenberg, another vipassana teacher, calls it “the observing power of the mind, a power that varies with the maturity of the practitioner.” But, we might add, if mindfulness is a mirror, it is a mirror that knows *non-conceptually* what comes within its scope. And, not being two-dimensional, we might say that it is more like an electromagnetic field than a mirror, a field of knowing, a field of awareness, a field of

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¹ I sometimes use the example of a dial-up connection to the Internet compared to a cable modem to describe the felt difference between deliberate mindfulness and effortless mindfulness. In deliberate mindfulness, you could think of it as dial-up networking, where you have to make an effort to get connected, where often the connection keeps getting disconnected and you have to reestablish it. In effortless mindfulness, the connection is always present. No dial-up is necessary. It just is. We are already connected. Things are already exactly as they are and we are already who we are. The realizing of it is always less than a breath or a heartbeat away. In fact, not even that far. No distance at all.

emptiness, in the same way that a mirror is intrinsically empty, and can therefore “contain” anything, and everything that comes before it.

If mindfulness is an innate quality of mind, it is also one that can be refined through systematic practice. And for most of us, it *has* to be refined through practice. We have already noted how out of shape we tend to be when it comes to exercising our innate capacity to pay attention. And that is what meditation is all about . . . the systematic and intentional cultivation of mindful presence, and through it, of wisdom, compassion, and other qualities of mind and heart conducive to breaking free from the fetters of our own persistent blindness and delusions.

The attentional stance we are calling mindfulness has been described by Nyanaponika Thera as “the heart of Buddhist meditation.” It is central to all the Buddha’s teachings and to all the Buddhist traditions, from the many currents and streams of Zen in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, to the various schools of vipassana or “insight meditation” in the Theravada tradition native to Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, to those of Tibetan (Vajrayana) Buddhism in India, Tibet, Nepal, Ladakh, Bhutan, Mongolia, and Russia. And now, virtually all of these schools and their attendant traditions have established firm roots in the cultures of the West, where they are presently flourishing.

Their relatively recent arrival in the West is a remarkable historical extension of a flowering that emerged out of India in the centuries following the death of the Buddha and ultimately spread across Asia in these many forms and also returned relatively recently to India, where it had fallen into decline for hundreds of years.

Strictly speaking, the application of mindfulness gives rise to awareness. The greater and the more stable the mindfulness, the greater the awareness and penetrative insight that may stem from it. But in common parlance, mindfulness and awareness are often used synonymously and, for simplicity, we will adhere to that convention as well. And since there is nothing particularly Buddhist about paying attention or about awareness, nor anything particularly Eastern or Western, or Northern or Southern for that matter, the essence of mindfulness is truly universal. It has more to do with the nature of the human mind than it does with ideology, beliefs, or culture. It has more to do with our capacity for knowing (as we have already observed, what is called *sentience*) than with a particular religion, philosophy, or view.

Returning to the simile of the mirror, it is the cardinal virtue of any mirror, small or large, that it can contain any landscape, depending on how it is turned and whether it is clear or covered with dust or dulled by age. There is no necessity to anchor the mirror of mindfulness and restrict it to one particular view to the exclusion of other equally valid landscapes. There are many ways of knowing. Mindfulness subsumes and includes them all, just as we might

say there is one truth, not many, but there are many ways in which it is understood and can be expressed in the vastness of time and space and the plenitude of cultural conditions and locales.

Yet the mirror is a limited simile or metaphor for mindfulness in other ways, even though it is exceedingly useful at times. For a reflected image is always reversed. When you look at your face in the mirror, it is not your face as it is seen by the world, but the mirror image of it, where left is right and right is left. Being a surface, it does not reflect things quite as they actually are but renders merely an illusion of such.

Mindfulness is valued, perhaps not by that name, but by its qualities, in virtually all contemporary and ancient cultures. Indeed, one might say that our lives and our very presence here have depended on the clarity of the mind as mirror and its refined capacity to reflect, contain, encounter, and know with great fidelity things as they actually are. For example, our early ancestors needed to make instant and correct assessments of situations virtually moment by moment. In any moment, their ability to do that well could spell the difference between survival of an individual or even a whole community, and extinction. Thus every person now on Earth is the progeny exclusively of generations of survivors. There was clearly an evolutionary advantage to a mind that could mind what was happening in real time and know instantly that what it knew could be relied upon and acted on. Those whose mirrors were perhaps somewhat flawed may not have made decisions that effectively insured their survival long enough to pass on their genes. In this way, there was definite selective advantage to clear mirrors that could instantly recognize and reflect accurately in any matter impinging on survival all the messages coming through the sense doors.

We are the inheritors of that perpetually self-refining selection process. In that sense, we are all, like the young inhabitants of Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon, above average. Far above average. Miraculous beings really, when you stop and think about it.

Over the centuries, the universal inborn capacity we all have for exquisitely fine-tuned awareness and insight has been explored, mapped, preserved, developed, and refined—not so much anymore by prehistory’s hunting-and-gathering societies, which sadly, along with everything they know of the world, are on the verge of extinction brought on by the “successes” of the flow of human history, such as agriculture and the division and specialization of labor and the rise of advanced technologies—but rather in monasteries. These intentionally sequestered environments sprang up early in antiquity and have weathered millennia of vicissitudes, all the while renouncing worldly concerns to better devote their energies solely to cultivating, refining, and deepening mindfulness and putting it to use to investigate the nature of the mind with the intention to come to a full and embodied realization of what it

means to be fully human and become free from the prison of habitual mental affliction and suffering. At their best, these monasteries were veritable laboratories for investigating the mind, and the monastics who populated them and continue to do so to this day used themselves as both the scientists and the object of study in these ongoing investigations.

These monks and nuns and occasional householders took for their North Star the example of the Buddha and his teachings. The Buddha, as we have seen, was a person who, for various karmic reasons, took it upon himself to sit down and direct his attention to the central question of suffering, to the investigation of the nature of the mind itself, and to the potential for liberation from sickness, old age, and death, and from what might be called the fundamental dis-ease of humanity, not by denying any of these or attempting to circumvent them, but by looking directly into the nature of human experience itself, using as his instrument the capacity we all share but hardly ever refine to such an extent, for looking into anything in the first place, namely, unwavering attention and the awareness and potential for deep and clarifying insight that stem from it. He described himself, when asked, not as a god, as

some would have had it, awed by his wisdom, apparent luminosity, and mere presence, but simply as “awake.” That wakefulness followed directly from his experience of seeing deeply into the human condition and human suffering and his discovery that it was possible to break out of seemingly endless cycles of self-delusion, misperception, and mental affliction to an innate freedom, equanimity, and wisdom.

Over and over again, we will be coming back to mindfulness, to what it is and to the different ways, both formal and informal, it can be cultivated, while at the same time hopefully not getting caught in our stories about it, even as we unavoidably generate them. We will examine mindfulness from many different angles, feeling our way into its various energies and properties, and how they may be relevant to the specifics of our everyday lives on every level, and to our short- and long-term well-being and happiness.

We will start by taking a closer look at why paying attention is so critically important to our well-being in the first place, and how it fits into the larger scheme of healing and transforming both our lives and the world.