Being Mindful vs. Acting Mindful: Don’t try too hard

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In our Mindfulness Meditation classes we not only spend time doing the formal sitting practice itself, but we also discuss ways to be more mindful in daily life. For example, we’ve learned how to cultivate a continuity of mindful awareness by using "transition moments" throughout the day to pause and be present, or by checking in with how it feels to breathe at this moment. We’ve also learned to be present while we’re going through our daily routines, or while we’re eating, or walking, or listening to someone, etc.

We’ve also learned that as our ability to be mindfully present grows, we become more relaxed, patient, compassionate, forgiving, and happier human beings. Life goes more smoothly, we’re less stressed out, our relationships with ourselves and others improve, we enjoy life’s little blessings more, and we don’t sweat the small stuff so much.

At some point in our journey, however, we may find that we start to cling to the characteristics and principles of mindful living and forget how to simply BE mindful. We TRY to be more patient, we TRY to relax, we TRY to be happier, and with all of this trying, we can end up less patient, less relaxed, less happy, and ultimately less mindful. In other words, it’s very common to put the cart before the horse, forgetting that it was the simple act of being mindful that brought about these qualities. It has happened in my own journey, and in my work as a Mindfulness Coach, I’ve seen it happen in others too.

Remember: Our attempts to be mindful are most often undone by our attempts to be mindful.

I’m not suggesting that it’s wrong to want to embody these characteristics more often. What I’m suggesting is that if we find ourselves straining and struggling to act more mindfully, it might be beneficial to relax a little and return to simple present moment awareness or mindfulness.

Keep in mind that pure mindful awareness doesn’t compare or contrast one thing against another. So, if we find ourselves judging ourselves, or criticizing ourselves, we can take this as a clear sign that we are no longer simply mindful. Below the self-judgment and criticism is a rapid and almost invisible calculation occurring which compares and contrasts the “you” in this moment to others and the “you” from the past and the ideal “you” in the future. If you find yourself caught up in this maelstrom of mental aggression, step back, take a deep breath, and watch again. Keep coming back to the present moment without judgment.

Remember: There is no such thing as degrees of mindfulness. We are either mindful, or we are not.

The ongoing practice of mindfulness helps us to not identify so much with the ceaseless mental commentary, judgment, and chatter that we used to call thinking. We are increasingly able to simply observe the agitated activity of the mind without getting involved. It’s like being on the observation side of a two-way mirror while a board room conflict is boiling on the other.

Said another way, the ongoing practice of mindfulness puts us in touch with a profound inner stillness and inner harmony. No longer are we caught up in the inner conflict of one inner voice against another, or one impulse vying for dominance over another. The practice first helps us to find the “eye of the storm,” so to speak, and then with time, the practice helps us to understand that we ARE the eye of the storm.

Pure mindful awareness is fully present, non-reactive, objective, and non-judgmental. Sometimes referred to as the "Observer," mindfulness is not invested in any particular emotional outcome because it is only in the here and now. In fact, mindfulness itself isn’t a particular mood or emotion at all, neither is it trying to get anywhere, become anything, or even do anything. It simply is.
In a manner of speaking, the ongoing practice of mindfulness sensitizes us to beneficial human qualities like happiness, peace, and love, and softens our reactivity to “negative” emotions such as hostility, anxiety, and envy. These beneficial human qualities are already within us, and I believe they are our true and inherent nature. They can, however, become buried beneath the avalanche of mental noise. Instead of fighting against what we don’t want to be, and struggling to be something different, through formal practice we find a third option – mindfulness.

The beauty of the formal practice is that it changes us from the inside out in a healthy and holistic way. It’s an ongoing process that unfolds organically and spontaneously, and it’s very liberating to know that if we just make the time for formal practice, our simple effort will bear fruit in our daily lives.

Remember: We don’t have to DO mindfulness, mindfulness does us.

There is always a right time and place for making an effort to change. The key is to strike a balance between “being with” what is and “working with” what is. This article, I hope, will help someone wake up from the struggle against themselves, return to a mindful awareness of the moment, and find that balance again.