

# Mindfulness and Your Highest Human Potential

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## "External" Benefits

Since 1967, over 1500 studies have been conducted by over 250 independent research institutes showing meditation practice to be clinically effective for the management of stress, anxiety and panic, chronic pain, depression, and a wide array of medical and mental health related conditions. In addition to significant reductions in stress, the benefits of regular daily practice include elevated immune system function, less frequency and duration of illnesses, decreased heart rate and blood pressure, improved sleep and digestion, improved mental function, intelligence, and memory.

In fact, medical outcomes from 15,000 patients' participation in the UMass Medical School's *Center for Mindfulness Stress Reduction Program* since 1979 have shown "a 35% reduction in the number of medical symptoms and a 40% reduction in psychological symptoms." Not surprisingly, mindfulness meditation programs are being conducted in hundreds of hospitals, healthcare facilities, schools, corporate wellness programs, and prison settings all across the United States, and around the world.

Thanks to the ongoing dialogue between prominent scientists and key figures from the contemplative traditions, Western science has slowly come to realize that this practice, taught by Buddha over 2500 years ago, has a profound impact on our physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

## "Internal" Benefits

The benefits of mindfulness meditation practice, however, extend well beyond therapeutic applications or the development of new competencies in business or educational settings. For thousands of years people have been practicing mindfulness meditation, not for the benefits stated above, but for three primary purposes; To know the mind, to train the mind, and ultimately to free the mind.

## You Are Not Your Thoughts

Formal mindfulness meditation practice is a precise and reliable tool for navigation on the inner journey. We sit in silence, pay attention to the sensation of breathing, and return without judgment to that sensation when we realize we've been distracted by mental activity. This provides a framework for paying attention to the present moment and observing our thoughts without being swept along by them. This also creates the internal environment needed to see clearly that we are not our thoughts, but the "Awareness" or "Consciousness" within which they arise. In this environment there is the "You" choosing repeatedly to return to the breath, and there is the aspect of yourself which continually calls your attention to something else.

This constant flow of thinking, or more appropriately "thoughting," should be regarded as an experience. Just as we have experiences we call sound, we have experiences we should call "thoughting." It's very common to identify with this "thoughting" in a moment of crisis, stress, or high emotion, but the consistent practice of mindfulness meditation helps us to develop the ability to observe what is happening in and around us with non-reactive presence.

As author and teacher Guy Finley says, "If I can't choose what I do, if I don't know the forces that are making me act towards you or anybody else in my life, do I have my own life? Or, is my life an expression, an extension of a series of unconscious forces, all of which apparently have their own life and guidelines that I must serve and be a slave to as long as I remain unconscious of their presence in me? Self-knowledge is the gradual awakening to these elementary, elemental forces that are connected with thoughts and feelings that elicit behaviors in us that, without our knowledge of them, produce an experience of life for us that we then either resist or embrace, but without any choice to do so."

## Don't Believe Everything You Think

According to the National Science Foundation, "the average person thinks about twelve thousand thoughts per day. A deeper thinker (...) puts forth fifty thousand thoughts daily," and of these fifty thousand thoughts, "about 95% are exactly the same as the thoughts experienced the day before."

Then, consider how much of our thinking life occurs below the threshold of our awareness. As we go about our daily routines, running primarily on auto-pilot, we entertain thoughts and messages without question. The mind jabbers on and on informing our opinions, thoughts, behaviors, feelings, perceptions, etc. What if only 1% of those fifty thousand

thoughts you had per day were hindering your growth as a human being? If even 1% of those thoughts were negative, you would experience five thousand negative messages and thoughts every day!

Have you ever heard about "The Big Lie?" The saying goes, "if you repeat a lie frequently enough people will believe it sooner or later." What does this say about our relationship with ourselves and our thought life? What if you really are receiving five thousand negative thoughts about yourself, the world, or other people every day? That's certainly going to make it harder to see the good in you, in life, or in anyone else don't you think? Have you ever caught yourself saying things to yourself (thoughting) like "This is stressing me out!" or "I can't handle this!" or using words like "hate," "stupid," or "dumb?"

Someone once said, "The problem is that we're not paying attention enough to notice that we're not paying attention." The same mental activity we carry around in our heads every day is exactly the same mental activity we encounter in our formal sitting practice of mindfulness meditation. Only now, using the breath as an anchor to the present moment and as a solid reference point, we learn to watch without getting involved and we learn to pay attention.

"All men should strive to learn before they die what they are running from, and to, and why." ~ James Thurber

### **So if I'm Not My Thoughts, Then What?**

THAT'S the million dollar question, isn't it? This is where the inner journey really begins, and it's an amazing adventure, but we need to experience that journey for ourselves more than we need a direct answer to the question. In his book, "Mindfulness in Plain English," one of my favorite mindfulness teachers put it this way...

"Never mind what I have been taught. Forget about theories and prejudgments and stereotypes. I want to understand the true nature of life. I want to know what this experience of being alive really is. I want to apprehend the true and deepest qualities of life, and I don't want to just accept somebody else's explanation. I want to see it for myself." ~ Bhante G.

In teaching mindfulness meditation over 2500 years ago, the Buddha's invitation was "Come and See." One of the things he said to his followers was "Place no head above your own," and by this he meant, don't accept somebody else's word. See for yourself. This inner journey through mindfulness meditation practice is intensely empirical and anti-authoritarian.

Take the journey, explore, discover, learn, and find out what/who you are for yourself. "Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering." ~ St. Augustine

### **Tips for the Journey**

"Meditation is not for the faint-hearted, nor for those who routinely avoid the whispered longings of their own hearts. It is for individuals interested in the adventure and challenges of self-exploration and transformation, for those who wish to taste and explore new ways of knowing and new ways of being - not someone else's, but one's own moment-to-moment experience." ~ Jon Kabat-Zinn and Saki Santorelli

The daily practice of mindfulness meditation sets us on a journey of mythic proportions. We discover dark places within filled with demons and monsters; aspects of ourselves we've been afraid to face for a long time. We face trials, challenges, and battles of all kinds. Above all, we discover the hero/heroin within us and magical places where true love really does conquer all.

"The greatest explorer on this earth never takes voyages as long as those of the man who descends to the depth of his heart." ~ Julien Green

### **When in Dark Places**

Inevitably, we will have to face the "unwanted" and "undesirable" aspects of ourselves that hide in the shadowy recess of our psyches. In Jungian psychology, the shadow or "shadow aspect" is a part of the unconscious mind consisting of repressed weaknesses, shortcomings, and instincts. Our shadows aspects cause us to suffer and to return unkindness for unkindness, anger for anger, hostility for hostility, and judgment for judgment. They can cause us to tremble in the face of hardships, conflicts, and difficulties in our relationships. They can leave us feeling weak and cornered.

It's important that we look these aspects squarely in the eye and not look away in disgust. We have to see our shadow aspects clearly, and we have to transcend them, not defeat them. We need to open to our suffering in order to heal ourselves. Be strong, compassionate, and mindful. Don't react to the pain out of a short-term need for relief; we're not looking for relief, we're formulating a cure.

See that the pain is only a symptom, not the cause. Move into the pain and embrace the fear. Like a child who must enter the dark closet to overcome their fear, we too must enter the darkness of our own soul to learn that it has no real power. We have to learn to be ok with not feeling ok. It's just a feeling. We have to learn from experience how to stand still and watch. The training takes place in the formal practice.

"We run away all the time to avoid coming face to face with ourselves." ~ Unknown

Our highest human potentials are hidden behind the dark walls of fear and pain. When we have taken the epic journey through our own fear and pain, and have cultivated a transcendent and healing relationship with our shadows, we will have the strength, insight, and compassion to bring healing to others who suffer from the same inner turmoil. No more avoidance; no more codependency.

### **The Probability of Innate Goodness**

"You do not become good by trying to be good, but by finding the goodness that is already within you, and allowing that goodness to emerge. But it can only emerge if something fundamental changes in your state of consciousness." ~ Eckhart Tolle

"Happiness, compassion, wisdom, and clarity are inherent qualities within all human beings. The true nature of the mind is gentle, peaceful and clear. This seems difficult to believe because most of the time our minds are in a state of anxiety, agitation, desire, passion, anger, or grief - all clouds that obscure the bright pure quality of what we truly are. We ourselves are creating obscurations and thus keeping our innate qualities inaccessible within our minds.

"Through understanding the psychology of meditation we can reverse our perspective, and recognize these obscurations, how they came about, and how to release and dissolve them. The innate brilliance of the mind then naturally manifests.

"Meditation is inherently simple. We do not need to import anything new into the mind. There are no complex, intellectual mechanisms involved. We don't have to understand profound philosophical systems. What is necessary is to learn the very basic simplicity of being - and in this way discover the diamond mind." ~ Chögyam Trungpa

What characteristics come to mind when you envision your highest self? Spend time reflecting on the possibility that these characteristics are your inherent and essential nature. The qualities that you admire in your heroes exist within you already. The wisdom and insight you admire in your favorite teachers exist within you already too. Realize that certain quotes, teachings, and books resonate with you because you contain an aspect of that wisdom within you already. When we say, "That really resonates with me" what we are really saying is "In a very deep and profound way I knew that already, but it delights me to see my inner-knowing put so clearly into words."

Spend time in formal mindfulness meditation practice and you will find the source of wisdom, insight, compassion, and every other aspect of your highest human potential. You don't have to try to find it – it has always been there. Go within, spend time with yourself – partake in the exploration of the last great frontier. You are the one we've been waiting for; you are the hero!

