

An Introduction
to
Mindfulness Meditation

Week 5
Mindfulness of Mind



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Mindfulness of Mind

by Gil Fronsdal

Now that we have practiced with mindfulness of the breath, body, emotions and thoughts in previous weeks, the new instruction is to turn the attention around and notice the mind itself. Not just the content of the mind in terms of particular feelings or thoughts, but the quality of the mind; the mood of the mind; the state of the mind.

Sometimes it is not easy to notice the overall state of the mind because we are focusing so much on the details of what is happening during mindfulness practice. This often can be the case in daily life as well, especially when we are preoccupied with what we want or don't want. It is like focusing on the details of driving while noticing neither how dirty the windshield is nor the strain of looking through the dirt. Part of mindfulness practice is to step back from the details of what we are experiencing in order to notice the subjective feeling of being aware. So, for example, does our awareness or our mind feel contracted or spacious, tense or relaxed, scattered or focused?

States of the mind are closely connected with our mood or attitude. Whether subtle or strong they have a pervasive quality that is more lasting than particular thoughts or impulses of the mind. For example, angry thoughts sometimes may appear briefly without affecting our mood. In contrast, an angry state of mind can shape our entire demeanor. While in an angry mood, not all our thoughts may be angry. However, the mood can linger as a background for whatever we are experiencing, sometimes significantly coloring our perception of things.

For some people, this background attitude is at the heart of what motivates their life. All too often it is closely connected to people's suffering. When they are not aware of the influence their attitude has, people can feel trapped in their suffering. An attitude or mood can create a bias in how we see our experience. Moods of desire or aversion can influence us one way, moods of generosity or friendliness another way. When we are clearly aware of our mood we are less likely to be unduly influenced by it.

If we do not notice the underlying attitude it can fester and build up stress and tension in our lives. The attitude may only cause relatively mild tension or stress in any given moment, but if it is chronically reinforced, then the tension can become great and lead to greater suffering.

In becoming mindful of attitude it is useful to distinguish between what is happening at any given moment and what our relationship is to what is happening. Mindfulness practice helps to tease these apart so that we can be more discerning about how our opinions, judgments, attitudes and feelings may or may not accurately represent what is happening. The space between what is happening and our relationship to what is happening is a door to peace.

The suffering and stress that mindfulness practice is meant to help address is less about how things are and more about our relationship to how things are. Fortunately freedom is not as much about what is happening in the world or within us, but more about how much freedom we have in relating to what is happening.

Knowing the Mind

It is easy to spend an hour, a day, or even a lifetime so caught up with thoughts, concerns, and activities as to preclude understanding deeply what makes us operate the way we do. People can easily be clueless as to what motivates them, the nature of their reactions and feelings, and even, at times, what they are thinking about. The first step in mindfulness practice is to notice and take stock of who we are. What is going on in the body, in the mind, in our emotional life? What underlying dispositions are operating?

This part of mindfulness practice is a simple process of discovery; it is not judging something as good or bad. Meditative discovery is supported by stillness. Whatever our degree of stillness, it acts as a backdrop to highlight what is going on. It doesn't take much stillness to notice a racing, agitated mind. Discovery means becoming familiar with what a racing mind is like instead of being critical of it. What is the mind itself like, and what is its effect on the body? What emotions are present? What thoughts and beliefs?

The knowing aspect of mindfulness is deliberate and conscious. When you know something this way, not only do you know it, but also a presence of mind grows in which you clearly know that you know. It is like being one of two calm people in an unruly crowd. Neither of you gets caught up in the crowd's agitation, and a spark of recognition, maybe even a smile, passes between you as you share knowing that both of you are not caught.

When the focus is on knowing, we make no attempt to try to change anything. For people who are always trying to make something happen, just observing the mind can be a radical change and a relief.

Training the Mind

The mind is not static. It is a process or, more accurately, a series of interacting processes. As such, the mind is malleable and pliable: it can be trained and shaped in new ways. An important part of [mindfulness] practice is taking responsibility for the dispositions and activities of our own mind so that it can operate in ways that are beneficial. When we don't take responsibility for our own mind, external forces will do the shaping: media, advertisements, companions, and other parts of society.

A good starting point is to train the mind in kindness and compassion. Even a little mindfulness will sometimes prove the cliché, "Self-knowledge is seldom good news." Mindfulness may reveal mental conflict with ourselves, others, or the inconstant nature of life. Such conflict can take the form of aversion, confusion, anger, despair, ambition, or discouragement. Meeting conflict with further conflict will only add to our suffering. Instead, we can begin exploring how to be kinder, more forgiving and spacious with ourselves.

Sometimes how one makes effort in meditation can be counterproductive. Striving too hard, trying to escape something, clinging to views and ideals, meditating as penance or obligation, and measuring every little bit of progress are some of the things that interfere with meditation. An antidote to this struggle is training the mind to be more at ease with how things are. Rather than trying to organize the conditions of the world, we can cultivate an ability to be relaxed with whatever is happening.

Once the mind experiences some ease in meditation, it is easier to train it in other ways. We can develop concentration or mental stability. We can foster the growth of generosity, ethical virtue, courage, discernment, and the capacity to release clinging. Often a [mindfulness] practitioner will choose one particular quality to cultivate for a period of time.

Freeing the Mind

Central to [mindfulness] practice is training the capacity to let go of clinging. Sooner or later, the first aspect of [mindfulness] meditation, knowing the mind, will reveal how and where clinging is present. Some of the more painful forms of grasping are clinging to such things as pleasure, desire, self-image and judgments, opinions and ideals, people, and possessions. All clinging limits the mind's freedom and peace.

The good news of [mindfulness] is that we can release clinging. We can free the mind. Or, if you prefer, you can call it "freeing the heart." The ultimate aim of [mindfulness] practice is to liberate the heart so there are no barriers, shackles, or constrictions to our heart's freedom. Usually freeing the heart begins in small steps, each bringing a corresponding peace. Freed completely, the heart is completely at peace. Complete freedom is not easily attained. It requires knowledge and training.

Knowing, training, and freeing the mind develop together. The more we know ourselves, the easier it is both to train ourselves and to know what needs to be released. The more our minds are trained, the easier it is to know ourselves and the more strength and wisdom we have to let go. And the more we let go, the fewer the obstructions to understanding ourselves and the easier it will be to train the mind.

Few people care for their own minds as they do their own bodies, their clothes, or their possessions. Care of the body is a daily task. The mind too needs regular care, exercise, and training. With freedom from suffering as the goal, knowing, training, and freeing are the three [mindful] ways of caring for the mind.

During Formal Meditation Practice

During meditation periodically ask yourself what is your relationship to what is happening. For example, you may feel some discomfort. Be mindful of your relationship to the discomfort. Are you clinging or resisting? Are you relaxed, generous, or kind towards the discomfort? Once you notice the relationship, hold it in the warmth of your attention. Once you have done this, you can investigate some of the present-moment elements of how you are relating. How does it affect your breathing? Are there any physical sensations or emotions associated with it? What are your beliefs behind it? Also, as you notice the relationship, ask yourself if that relationship or attitude represents a way you want to be or whether it contributes to a sense of dissatisfaction or dis-ease.

Also, remember that there is no need for judging, criticizing or being upset with what we see when we look at our relationship to the present moment, even if what we see is unfortunate or difficult. Similarly, there is no need to praise or get involved with fortunate or preferred attitudes. In either case, the practice is to be mindful of the relationship or attitude without being for it or against it. This practice then allows the relationship or attitude to settle or relax.

Periodically notice the general state of your mind. Does it feel tired or alert, contracted or expanded, calm or agitated, fuzzy or clear, resistant or eager, pushing forward or pulling back? Putting aside whatever commentary or judgments you might have about the state of your mind, use your mindfulness to become more aware of the state. What emotions come with it? What is its felt sense? What relationship is there between your mind state and how your body feels? What does it feel like to step back and observe the state of mind rather than be in it? What happens to your state of mind as you are mindful of it?



Support Quotes

Week 5 – Mindfulness of Mind

"In any given moment, there are two things happening. There is what's happening and our relationship to what's happening." ~ Gil Fronsdal

"Mindfulness is the aware, balanced acceptance of the present experience. It isn't more complicated than that. It is opening to or receiving the present moment, pleasant or unpleasant, just as it is, without either clinging to it or rejecting it." ~ Sylvia Boorstein

"If your every day practice is to open to all your emotions, to all the people you meet, to all the situations you encounter, without closing down, trusting that you can do that - then that will take you as far as you can go. And then you'll understand all the teachings that anyone has ever taught." ~ Pema Chodron

"In mindfulness of mind we notice whether it is a mind filled with sense-desire, a mind filled with anger or fear, a confused mind, a clear mind, a concentrated mind, etc... By meeting the mind-states with attention that is free of judgment or commentary, we are in effect stepping outside of these mind-states. This creates some space which allows us to choose how to respond to them, possibly responding by simply noticing them and allowing them to come and go in awareness. It's like looking out the window and simply noticing what the weather is outside. Can we notice what the weather is inside?" ~ Adapted from Rose Colored Glasses, an article by Phil Jones

"The only reason we don't open our hearts and minds to other people is that they trigger confusion in us that we don't feel brave enough or sane enough to deal with. To the degree that we look clearly and compassionately at ourselves, we feel confident and fearless about looking into someone else's eyes." ~ Pema Chodron

Do not try to become anything.
Do not make yourself into anything.
Do not be a meditator.
Do not become enlightened.
When you sit, let it be.
When you walk, let it be.
Grasp at nothing.
Resist nothing.
~ Ajhan Chah



Common Mind-States, Moods, and Attitudes

Agitated	Enlarged	Patient
Amused	Equanimous	Peaceful
Angry	Excited	Persevering
Anxious	Expanded	Relaxed
Averse	Fearful	Released
Appreciative	Foggy	Spacious
Calm	Friendly	Resigned
Cheerful	Generous	Resistant
Clear	Grateful	Restless
Clinging	Happy	Restricted
Confused	Insecure	Sad
Contracted	Irritable	Scattered
Compassionate	Light-hearted	Self-critical
Concentrated	Kindly	Shrunken
Confident	Lethargic	Sinking
Depressed	Lonely	Tense
Distracted	Low-energy	Tight
Determined	Loving	Wanting
Eager	Mindful	
Energetic	Passionate	



Assignments for Week 5

Mindfulness of Mind

□ Reading Assignments

1. **Support Quotes**
2. **“Mindfulness of Mind”**
3. **Review “Common Mind-States, Moods, and Attitudes”**

□ Mindfulness of Mind in Daily Life

1. Choose an activity you do on a daily basis. This can be driving to work, preparing breakfast, reading email, etc. For one week each time you do this chosen activity become aware of your state of mind. How does your state of mind influence how you relate to the activity? Keep a mental (or literal) log of your changing states over the week and compare the role your mind state has on how you do the activity.
2. Consider what ordinary activity you do that helps you have a good state of mind. During this week, do this activity more often and become more mindful of what this state of mind is like physically, emotionally and cognitively. Explore how you might realistically maintain this state of mind after you have finished the activity that tends to bring it on.
3. Have a conversation with a good friend (or complete stranger if that is easier) about what might be the most common attitudes that you operate under. How do these attitudes influence what you do, how you see life, and how you relate to yourself? How do you tend to relate to people who have similar attitudes to your most common ones?

