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What is mindfulness and why does it matter?

Question: Where's the best place to hide something of great value?
Answer: The present moment. No one will ever find it!

YOGA JOKE

How easy is it being you?

I often begin meditation seminars by asking this question, and it invariably prompts some rueful smiles, expressions revealing that, for many of us, life is a variation on similar themes. Never before have we felt that we have to work such long hours so relentlessly under so much pressure. The competing demands of all-consuming workplaces, growing children, burdensome financial commitments, aging parents, and lengthening commutes are more wearying than we can remember.

And increasingly there's no respite. The online world, once confined to our desktops, is now in our pockets. Bosses,

clients, and numberless others can and do message us at all hours expecting replies. Personal time and vacations are no longer sacrosanct. Formerly enjoyable "downtime" occasions such as dining out or weekend barbecues somehow lose their luster when our fellow diners constantly glance at their phones in case they're missing out on greater excitement elsewhere.

Waking to the shrill call of the alarm at 6 a.m., we intuitively know we shouldn't be checking for messages and updates before we're even fully awake. We don't need scientific evidence to prove what we already subjectively experience—that cognitive overload is degrading our attention span as well as our peace of mind. But still we do it, driven by the imperatives of our job, our friends, or a compulsion we can't even explain.

The reason it's not easy being you may have little to do with frenetic overwork. You may suffer from loneliness, a sense of irrelevance, or despair that whatever you've most sought from life seems to have passed you by. You may be the victim of an injustice that has robbed you of cherished relationships or financial security.

Or maybe there's nothing fundamentally wrong in your world, it's just hard to shrug off the recognition that life hasn't turned out the way you'd hoped. If being truly appreciated for who you really are is a remote prospect, the possibility of deep personal fulfilment may seem unlikelier still.

Stress and dissatisfaction are feelings we generally try to avoid. But here's a paradoxical idea: how about we welcome

them? Not so much the negative feelings themselves as an acknowledgement that they exist.

M. Scott Peck began one of the world's most famous self-help classics, *The Road Less Traveled*, with the memorable words "Life is difficult." In so doing, he was echoing the Buddha's very first teaching after attaining enlightenment two and a half millennia earlier, a teaching given only reluctantly, and at the insistence of those around him, because he didn't want to come across as unduly negative when he stated the First Noble Truth: "Dissatisfaction exists."

The point about acknowledgement is that it's the vital first step. There can be no moving on without it. A visit to the doctor begins with a review of symptoms followed by a diagnosis, prognosis, and proposed treatment. These four steps precisely reflect Buddha's Four Noble Truths. Only having acknowledged that there's a problem can we begin our own personal journey of transcendence.[1] This begins when we take our first simple but revolutionary step: we pay attention to the present moment.

The definition of mindfulness

Probably the most widely accepted definition of mindfulness is *paying attention to the present moment deliberately and non-judgementally*. This definition comprises three

parts, of which *paying attention to the present moment* is the first.

..... *Paying attention to the present moment . . .* .....

You may respond: what else would I be paying attention to? If I wasn't paying attention to the present moment I'd be incapable of driving the car down the road, sending off emails, preparing gourmet meals, or any of the other activities expected of me on a daily basis.

True enough, but only up to a point. While most of us have a pretty good handle on the here and now, it's often, to borrow from the language of photography, low resolution. When it comes to high resolution we're not so good. We sit on our hotel balcony overlooking a spectacular panorama, but our thoughts are back at the office and a bruising encounter with a colleague. We go for a walk in the park, and far from being absorbed by the wonders of nature, we find ourselves planning next weekend. As the smartphone survey referred to in the previous chapter showed, about half the time we're thinking about something other than what we're actually doing.

Some neuroscientists label this the "narrative" state as opposed to the "direct" state, which is when we're attending *directly* to our senses. The narrative state includes everything

in our inner monologue, which begins from the moment we wake up and continues in its desultory fashion throughout the day until we go to sleep. Thoughts, memories, plans, fantasies, all forms of conjecture and speculation, whether creative or humdrum, delightful or debilitating, altruistic or evil—all this mental activity falls into the category of the narrative state.

While no one disputes the importance of thought in planning and so on, our constant absorption in the narrative state is also the cause of much of our unhappiness. "Too much thinking," my teacher Geshe Loden used to say, wagging his finger, "is the main problem."

When we consider the darkest moments of our lives, they're almost always times when we've been trapped in the narrative state: boiling over with anger at the way we have been wronged, filled with despairing thoughts about the end of a relationship, racked with grief at the loss of a loved one, weary with self-loathing. At such times we may wish we could stop thinking about the apparent cause of our unhappiness, but we just seem incapable of it. Trying to focus on something else, after a few moments, and despite our own wishes, we find ourselves once again dwelling on the subject of our unwanted obsession.

Significantly, at such moments the world around us that we can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch may well be neutral or even very pleasant. It's highly likely that we enjoy the kind of

material circumstances that most people in the world can only aspire to. If only we could free ourselves from the mad monkey of the mind and "pay attention to the present moment," we could perhaps be free to enjoy these privileged circumstances.

. . . *deliberately* . . .

Which brings us to the second part of the mindfulness definition. Mindfulness is *deliberate*. It's a state we cultivate intentionally. As we've already seen, although sex triggers high levels of "paying attention to the present moment," most other activities—even the delectation of chocolate—will usually attract our attention for only so long before we're tripping away again in our world of thought.

Some activities seem especially well suited to mindfulness practice. These often have a repetitive quality that people find calming or relaxing. Swimming and cycling lend themselves to keeping the mind in the here and now. Gardening, too, which also offers a multiplicity of direct sensory contact with nature. Walking can be used as a meditative practice. The highest performance levels in sports and the performing arts all demand very high levels of mindfulness. As Justin Langer, one of Australian cricket's greatest all-time opening batsmen and an advocate of meditation, has observed, you can't allow

what is written about you in the daily newspapers to impinge on your thoughts for even an instant when you're standing at the wicket preparing for the next ball.

For most beginners, mindfulness is a practice that needs to be assigned to certain activities during the day. Some things we do may lend themselves quite readily to its practice. In time, once we've developed our mindfulness muscles, much more of our lives will be lived more mindfully. But to begin with, we need to cultivate its practice deliberately.

. . . *and non-judgementally*

The third part of the mindfulness definition is about being non-judgemental. Having intentionally switched to "direct" mode, our challenge is to experience whatever is presented through the doors of our senses without any of the analysis, comparisons, and ruminations that usually accompany sensory experiences and that draw us back into narrative mode so subtly we don't even notice.

Most of us depend on our well-developed critical faculty to manage our busy lives. Moment by moment we're judging, reviewing options, and making choices, whether we're searching the net, talking to friends, hard at work, or walking through the streets. As a result, it's actually quite hard for us simply to

experience something without making a judgement about it. The judgement referred to here is not a moralistic one, by the way. It could be as simple as "this coffee is a bit cold" or as cerebral as "use of the word 'rumination' in the last paragraph made me think of cows."

Learning to disengage this constant mental commentary is our greatest challenge when practicing mindfulness. It's just so habitual. We can't help ourselves rushing to judgement, even when enjoying such simple pleasures as eating chocolate. After taking a group through "the Lindt technique" (see Chapter 1) during a seminar, I asked the meditators how it had been for them. One lady explained how frustrated she'd been. Usually she ate her chocolate in two bites, but felt that for the purposes of this exercise it should be a singular experience, so had popped the whole ball in her mouth. She then found it too unwieldy to enjoy as she usually did. As she tried to get comfortable rolling the chocolate around her mouth, she thought how it would have been better if she'd adopted her standard two-bite process. She chastised herself for not doing so.

On a different occasion, a meditator in a corporate group reported how a simple breath-focused meditation we'd just completed, which usually leaves people feeling calmer and more relaxed, had stirred up concerns. About halfway through the session he realized his breathing was fairly shallow and he

remembered reading somewhere that taking deep breaths is good for relaxing. He spent the rest of the session worrying if he should be breathing more deeply.

In both cases I hadn't given instructions on how chocolates were to be eaten or breaths breathed because it really didn't matter. All that mattered was being mindful of the experience itself. What tripped those two practitioners of mindfulness up, as it trips us all up, is the difficulty of experiencing anything without judging it.

Meditation and mindfulness—how are they related?

If mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment deliberately and non-judgementally, how do we define meditation? The answer to this question depends on the purpose to which meditation is being put, but perhaps the most practical definition of meditation is *the practice of mindfulness in relation to a specific object over a sustained period of time.*

If you were to ask a room of thirty people to practice mindfulness for a minute, and then asked them what they'd been mindful of, chances are you'd get a variety of answers, ranging from mindfulness of ambient noise, such as birdsong or traffic, to mindfulness of the decor in a room, the sensation of the breeze blowing through the window, or the inhaling and

exhaling of breath—or all of the above at various times during the sixty-second period. Any of these answers would constitute a valid mindfulness experience.

When we meditate, we choose an object of meditation and try to stick with it. That object may be physical, such as a flower, a shell, or a statue. Very commonly it's a specific aspect of breathing, such as the sensation of our breath at the tip of the nostrils as we inhale or exhale. Or the object could be a particular visualisation, mantra, or even mind itself—there's a lot more on that in Chapter 11.

The regular practice of meditation supports our development of mindfulness. When we train ourselves to pay attention to just one thing during our ten minutes of meditation each day, we're developing a highly transferable skill. We're also getting better at paying attention to the person sitting across the table from us, or eating the chocolate bar more mindfully, or enjoying the sun on our backs as we walk across the park on a warm summer's morning.

Improved concentration is one significant way meditation enhances our practice of mindfulness. But it's also the case that when we meditate regularly and become more familiar with being in direct mode, we're also more likely to switch back into it deliberately at different times of the day. We may choose to enjoy our morning shower rather than spend it rerunning a futile argument we had the night before. We may forgo the car

radio for silence on the drive home from work, paying attention to the here and now, creating space in a frenetic schedule. As we become aware just how much the narrative state dominates our mind and how poorly it often serves us, we find ourselves wishing more and more to let go. Simply to be.

Meditation is a bit like the term "sport" in that it encompasses a fairly wide range of activities. A professional golfer may appear to have little in common with an Olympic swimmer or a soccer player, but all are sportspeople. And when you strip away the apparent differences, you discover more commonality than may at first be apparent. All require cardiovascular stamina, specific muscle training and coordination, and the high levels of emotional intelligence demanded by constant training.

In the same way, a procession of people walking slowly in single file may seem to have little in common with a group of people sitting cross-legged on cushions murmuring mantras or lying on their backs with their eyes open, but all could be engaged in various types of meditation. And when we go beyond surface appearances, we find the same essential requirements for mindfulness and awareness, not to mention the same high levels of emotional intelligence. Apart from being specific about the object of meditation, whatever that may be, we also attempt to focus our attention on that object for a particular period of time.

The similarities between training body and mind are worth exploring. Because we westerners are so culturally fixated on the external, prod-able world, the process of physical training provides some useful metaphors for mental development. This includes the relationship between mindfulness and meditation, which is sometimes blurred.

How meditation supports a mindful life

As a regular gym-goer—I wouldn't go so far as to say "enthusiast"—my personal experience as well as observation of others tells me that most of the soaked-shirt brigade do not have some chromosomal quirk that draws them to treadmills like moths to a lamp. They are there typically because they choose to get fit, burn off excess carbs, lose weight, or age well. In some cases they arrive on medical advice, having faced an existential crisis. Others, less dramatically, arrive at the same point on their own.

While at the gym, we focus on our chosen class or program, encouraged by our trainer to constantly improve. Little by little we may add weights, repetitions, or minutes on a machine. If we can keep up the discipline for a few months, we detect meaningful changes and are encouraged to do more. Although the mechanics of what we do at the gym are our main concern, in

reality we're mostly doing it for the twenty-three hours a day we're not at the gym. We may monitor our regime with keen attention, but the main benefit is that our improved cardiovascular fitness, capacity for weight-bearing, and flexibility mean we can cope with much greater ease with whatever life hands us.

Precisely the same applies to the practice of meditation.

We may begin on the recommendation of a doctor, or in seeking our own solution to stress, depression, or anxiety, or in response to a more general wish to enjoy greater mental well-being. If we can keep up the practice for a couple of months, encouraged by our teacher, we'll inevitably experience the benefits. And while we may monitor our regime according to the minutes we spend on it each day, the types of meditation in which we engage and/or our subjective experience while doing it, the real benefit is in the twenty-three hours and fifty minutes a day we're *not* meditating. It allows us to deal with life's inevitable ups and downs with greater mindfulness, along with providing associated benefits—equanimity, inner peace, spontaneity, and zest for life, to name just a few.

Regular meditation therefore supports a more mindful life in the same way a gym routine supports a fitter life. We can practice mindfulness without meditating regularly, just as we can try to get fit through incidental exercise. But it seems a bit pointless. For the sake of just ten minutes a day we might as well benefit from a daily meditation session.

"Ah, but I don't have time," people sometimes say. If that thought just crossed your mind, here's a question: if, by meditating regularly, you knew that at the end of a three-month period you'd receive a massive multimillion-dollar prize, would you somehow be able to find ten minutes each day? So how much is it really about time versus willingness?

With the motivation to meditate in mind, in Chapter 4 I've outlined some of the proven benefits of mindfulness and meditation established by recent clinical studies. Their systemic impacts on body and mind are so powerful, so beneficial, and so profoundly life-enhancing that if you're not already a regular meditator, I hope you soon will be!

But before we get there, how exactly do you meditate?