

Week 2 - Mindfulness

In meditation we focus on achieving a state of mindfulness. Last week we introduced a simple mindfulness practice, that helps us be aware of what is happening around us and in us, and how to not get caught up in phenomena. This week we will introduce the concept of Mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a very ancient concept.

- In Verdic (Hindu and Buddhist) traditions the concept of Sati (सति) or Smṛti (स्मृति) is central. In Buddhism it is the first of the Seven factors of Awakening, and the seventh practice of the Eight-fold path. It is this concept, that has been translated into the modern western concept we call *mindfulness* today.
- In Judaism we have in Psalm 46, “be still and know that I am God”. The key idea is the need for stillness or surrender (har·pū הַרְפּוּ), in order to know (ū·dā·ū וְדָעוּ).
- For Christians, in the Gospel of Matthew 6:6, “When you pray go to your private room and when you have shut your door pray to your Father who is in that secret place and your Father who sees all that is in secret will reward you.”
- In Islam, the Sufi traditions have a rich tradition based on a staged meditation path called Murāqabah (مراقبة), where the practitioner develops an ability to be aware of ever more subtle phenomena, from the physical, through the emotional to the meta-physical.
- In Japan there is a practice of forest bathing (*shinrin-yoku*) where practitioners seek to experience nature, free from thoughts and distractions. While a new movement, it has connections to ancient Shinto beliefs.

Mindfulness can be understood as consisting of two key properties:

1. The experience of being present in the moment and non-attached to mental phenomena
2. Learning how our mind works and interacts with mental phenomena, and to approach this with openness, curiosity and acceptance (Lau et al, 2004).

Being Present

Think back to the last time you were Watching the Breath. You will recall that thoughts and emotions arose and you experienced physical sensations. You developed a practice to let these pass you by – to not focus on them. Imagine we have now developed this practice to the point where we can just be, you can control this monkey mind of yours and you can see reality as it really is, free from the obscurations of our mind. In this state there is no past (because that is memory (thinking)) and there is no future (that is planning (thinking) and hoping (emotion)). There is no pain (that is a construct of our mind) and there is no desire. What do we see then? According to the Buddhist theory of mind, we would experience our Luminous Mind (*prabhāsvara-citta*).

The difficulty is that it is almost impossible to be in this state. Why? Because our past thoughts and actions have set up habits in our thinking. Think of a pond on a still day – you can see your reflection perfectly – and then someone throws a handful of pebbles into the water. The ripples flow out, interacting with each other, until the reflection on the surface is destroyed. We need to understand what causes these ripples in our mind, and then we can try to do something about them.

Learning how our mind works using Mindfulness

Clearly, we have an important challenge. We need to develop our meditation techniques so we can calm our mind. But we need to understand how thoughts, sensations and emotions affect our mind, and prevent us from reaching this calm state. So an equally important aspect of our meditation practice, is to learn how our mind works.

To do this we need to bring three important attitudes:

- Openness.
 - We need to be OK about experiencing different phenomena during our practice. We can't go into a meditation sessions saying "today I will meditate on this" or "I will experience this". We need to be open to experiencing the world as you experience it, without your perceptual filters.
 - We need to open to whatever we may experience, understanding that we are actually completely safe from harm. That anything negative we may experience, is only a mental phenomenon.
- Curiosity.
 - We need to keep asking "why".
 - To what am I attending? Thoughts (or beliefs)? Emotions? The senses or sensations?
 - Where is my attention? Is it immersed in thinking and/or emotions? Is it in the body?
 - When did my attention land wherever it is? Did the experience change after I focused on it or does it persisting?
 - How am I attending? Am I gripped by a looping thought or situation that I don't like? Am I curious? Am I attending with intention or am I drifting, lost in a daydream or fantasy?
- Acceptance.
 - Acceptance means accepting your experience and acknowledging it.
 - It means refraining from judging the experience as either good or bad.
 - Non-judgement is the heart of developing our compassion, for ourselves and for others.
 - When we have a negative feeling or thought come up, our instinct is to criticise ourselves – "what a bad meditator I am!"
 - When you find yourself judging, gently remind yourself that these are just experiences. Accept them like you would accept a wind in the trees.

Practice

We are going to do a 10 minute practice on Mindfulness.

- Start watching the breath for a minute and settle into a state of mindfulness
- Bring your attention to sensations in your body: your feet, back, shoulders, neck, head, face. Not areas that feel warm, cold, painful.
- Feel the breath as you breath in and out
- Be open to all these experiences – be they pleasurable or painful
- Remind yourself that we must be curious.
- Watch as thoughts arise? How did they arise? Where do they go? Are the fleeting or looping?
- Accept everything. Understand that you can learn from all experiences, even painful ones.
- If you find yourself evaluating these experiences as good or bad, examine how they are good or bad? Is goodness and badness fundamental to their nature? Remind yourself that your judgements make them so.
- If you wander, gently bring your attention back to your breath. Remind yourself that every meditator has to train their mind and congratulate yourself for being in the class, as a positive step in improving yourself.

Discussion

What was my experience during this exercise:

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To think about at home

Cookie Thief

A woman was waiting at the airport one night,
With several long hours before her flight.
She hunted for a book in the airport shop,
Bought a bag of cookies and found a place to drop.

She was engrossed in her book, but happened to see,
That the man beside her, as bold as could be,
Grabbed a cookie or two from the bag between,
Which she tried to ignore to avoid a scene

She read, munched cookies, and watched the clock,
As the ghastly "cookie thief" diminished her stock
She was getting more irritated as the minutes ticked by,
Thinking, "If I wasn't so nice, I'd blacken his eye!"

With each cookie she took, he took one too.
When only one was left, she wondered what he'd do.
with a smile on his face and a nervous laugh,
He took the last cookie and broke it in half.

He offered her half, and he ate the other.
She snatched it from him and thought, "Oh brother,
This guy has some nerve, and he's also so rude,
Why, he didn't even show any gratitude!"

She had never known when she had been so galled,
And sighed with relief when her flight was called.
She gathered her belongings and headed for the gate,
Refusing to look at the "thieving ingrate".

She boarded the plane and sank in her seat,
Then sought her book, which was almost complete.
As she reached in her baggage, she gasped with surprise.
There were her bag of cookies in front of her eyes!

"If mine are here," she moaned with despair.
"Then the others were his and he tried to share!"
Too late to apologize, she realized with grief,
That she was the rude one, the ingrate, the thief!!!!

By: Valerie Cox

Ask yourself:

- What does the poem tell us about Mindfulness?
- How did her perception differ from reality, and how this shape her emotions?
- Can you think of a situation where your perception of a situation turned out to be completely wrong? How did that shape your reactions and behaviours?