

The Essential
Guide to
**Buddhist
Teachings on
Mindfulness**



LION'S ROAR



LION'S ROAR

Copyright © 2022 Lion's Roar Foundation, except where noted. All rights reserved. Lion's Roar is an independent non-profit whose mission is to communicate Buddhist wisdom and practices in order to benefit people's lives, and to support the development of Buddhism in the modern world. Projects of Lion's Roar include Lion's Roar magazine, *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly*, lionsroar.com, and Lion's Roar Special Editions and Online Learning.



“MINDFULNESS” IS SUCH A BUZZWORD NOW that we might not even quite know what we mean when we say it. Ask yourself: Is it, A) a mind-state; B) a practice, C) a way of life, or — and the difference here is perhaps important — D) a lifestyle? Or might it be E), all of the above?

Such questions abound, in part, thanks to all the ways mindfulness has been packaged and presented as it's gone mainstream in recent years — arguably, some of those ways may not be so good. Some, though, are inarguably good. What's key, I reckon, is that the motivation behind one's adoption of mindfulness goes way beyond what it might do for us individually. Ideally, mindfulness helps us to be more at one with everyone, to retain what makes each of us unique while helping us to see through false separation. It helps us mitigate suffering, but not just for ourselves.

Without mindfulness, the Buddha's famed eightfold path to liberation and happiness would be only sevenfold—and therefore incomplete and, presumably, non-functioning. Mindfulness may be a quality that's innate in us all, but teaching it so that it applies to the whole of life has always been a Buddhist specialty.

—Rod Meade Sperry | Editorial Director, Special Projects
& Lion'sRoar.com



CONTENTS

Mindfulness on a Lazy Summer's Day

Christopher Willard

The Most Direct Path

James Baraz

More Truth, Less Suffering

Anushka Fernandopulle

The Practice of Mindfulness

Thich Nhat Hanh

How RAIN Can Nourish You

Jack Kornfield

What Mindfulness Is (Not)

Andrew Olendzki

The Power of Awareness

Diana Winston

CONTENTS (CONTINUED)

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Bhante Henepola Gunaratna

10 Steps for a Mindful Home

Karen Maezen Miller

Here, Now, Aware: The Power of Mindfulness

Joseph Goldstein

Mindfulness and the Buddha's Eightfold Path

Gaylon Ferguson

Mindfulness Is the Best Medicine

Sister Dang Nghiem



Mindfulness on a Lazy Summer's Day

Christopher Willard's father's magic trick taught him his first lesson on mindful awareness and the power of concentration, giving him insight into impermanence at the age of seven.

THE FIRST MEDITATION I ever learned was a gift from my father, when I was probably about six or seven years old. We were floating on a rubber raft in a pond, gazing up at the blue summer sky. Far above us we watched as massive white cumulus clouds slowly morphed into new forms and then gradually un-formed. My dad looked over at me and said, "Hey, want to see a magic trick?" Of course I did. What kid doesn't want to see his father perform magic?

"I'm going to make a cloud disappear with my mind." "No way!" I responded. "Sure, I'll do it. In fact, we can do it together. First, we need to pick a cloud, and since this is your first, let's start with a small one to practice." I picked a smallish looking puffy white cloud just visible above the jagged green line of trees ringing the

pond. “Now, all you have to do is focus on that cloud and just breathe in.” I slowly inhaled the summer air, taking in the smells of pond water and suntan lotion as my belly filled up.

“And now, with each breath out, notice the cloud getting a little bit smaller.” Sure enough, with each breath out, the cloud seemed to fade ever so slightly. We lay there for a few minutes, drifting in the sun and looking hard at that cloud, breathing together. I squirmed, and the rubber raft creaked underneath me.

“Keep focusing on that cloud,” my father instructed. “Bring your mind back if it wanders; keep your mind focused on it or it won’t disappear.” We continued breathing, focusing, and sending our will toward that cloud as it faded itself away over the course of the next few minutes. It was the best magic trick I’d ever seen.

Of course, I look back now and understand that clouds will form and un-form in the sky regardless of my intention, will-power or desire. But still, at that moment, my breath and my mind seemed like the most powerful force in the world. Second only, maybe, to my Dad.

Years later, I still look up at clouds on a summer’s day, and remember that afternoon and the power of my breath. When the clouds of my own mood darken around me, I can breathe through the storms of grief, anger, illness, or self-doubt. When storms of fear gather around the world, or the news headlines seem to cast a long shadow on the future, I know that as I keep breathing, they too will pass. And I know that the air I breathe connects all living beings, and how I breathe will affect me and all of those around me, a lesson that I look forward to passing on to my own children someday soon. 🌸



The Most Direct Path

Insight teacher **James Baraz** teaches how to train mindfulness with sitting meditation from the Vipassana tradition.

THE BUDDHA SPOKE of mindfulness as the most direct way to overcome sorrow and lamentation, end pain and anxiety, and realize the highest happiness. That's quite a claim!

What is so special about mindfulness? Of all the fifty-two mental factors listed in Buddhist psychology, mindfulness possesses a unique power. It weakens the negative or unwholesome mind states that cause us suffering, such as attachment, aversion, and confusion, and strengthens the wholesome mind states that lead to happiness, such as kindness, generosity, and wisdom. It can even help us develop the penetrating awareness that opens the mind to full awakening.

When I first learned about the transformative power of mindfulness, and experienced it for myself, I wanted to run down the streets telling anyone who would listen, “You just have to be mindful!” I’ve since learned that there are other important strategies that can help when life throws us a curve—compassion and loving-kindness practices, reaching out to friends, teachers, and

guides for wise counsel, trauma modalities where necessary. But after all these years, mindfulness still seems to me the primary tool for working with life's difficulties. Mindfulness trains us to be more conscious and awake to what's going on in our world. Mindfulness helps us respond with greater clarity and a kind heart to whatever situation we find ourselves in. It helps us to be more present for our lives.

However, as any student of Buddhism will tell you, mindfulness takes practice. It's one thing to have the intention to be present. It's quite another to actually do it. That's why formal mindfulness meditation is so crucial to being more mindful in all our daily activities. As with any skill, practicing mindfulness in a formal way will help it to arise naturally and spontaneously.

“

It's one thing to have the intention to be present. It's quite another to actually do it. That's why formal mindfulness meditation is so crucial to being more mindful in all our daily activities.

In the Theravada tradition, mindfulness meditation is called Vipassana, which means “to see things clearly.” When you are mindful you know what is actually happening in your present moment's experience, without judging how it is or wishing it were different. If you have an itch, for example, mindfulness feels the

sensation of itching with no agenda to get rid of it. It is the bare knowing of experience. When you're mindful, the mind is fully present for what's actually happening. You are not lost in thought.

How exactly do you practice mindfulness meditation? As one of my teachers used to say, if you want to understand the mind, sit down and observe it. To begin, find a comfortable posture, sitting in a chair or on a meditation cushion or bench. Your posture should be a balanced expression of alertness and ease. I like Thich Nhat Hanh's suggestion of thinking of yourself like a mountain—strong, worthy of respect, here for any changes in the weather system. At the same time, allow any places of tension or holding to release, letting go of anything that you don't need. Feel your connection to the Earth and let it support you. It's here for you.

Mindfulness training usually begins with awareness of breathing. You collect and focus your attention on the breath wherever you feel it most clearly—the in- and out-breath at the nostrils, the rising and falling of the abdomen, or the whole body expanding and contracting. This is easier said than done, because the mind will soon wander into thought. Anyone who has ever tried to meditate knows this. You may be lost for five seconds or five minutes, but when the mind is gone, it's gone, and there's little you can do about it. This is not bad. It's just the way it is. The eye sees. The ear hears. The mind thinks. The mind is not the enemy. And it can be trained.

The key moment in the meditative process is the moment you realize you've been wandering. How you respond to that fact determines how you will relate to meditation practice. If you react with frustration and judgment, you will strengthen those qualities. If you get hooked by the thought and say, "Oh, let me go with this interesting thought," you'll be lost once again and, in a little while, feel more frustration. The secret to skillful meditation is bringing your attention back with great patience and kindness. Instead of feeling frustrated because you've been lost, you can appreciate that you've woken up from your daydream. In doing so, you will develop a healthy relationship with your mind, as you cultivate patience and kindness along with mindful awareness.

After establishing the breath as your connection or anchor to the present, you can then include any part of your experience as the subject of your mindfulness meditation. There is nothing outside the meditation field. Whether it's the breath, sensations, sounds, images, emotions, or the thinking process itself, you simply are aware of what is happening now, allowing your experience to be just as it is. When a loud sound calls your attention, mindfulness knows that hearing is happening. If you're restless, mindfulness knows that restlessness is here. If you are calm, mindfulness means simply knowing you are calm. Mindfulness does not try to fix anything.

Along with kindness and patience, it's important to let the mind be as relaxed and spacious as possible, so that it's not contracted or tight. This allows you to more easily open to anything

that arises. At the same time, if you bring a natural curiosity to what is happening in your experience, you will be more engaged and less likely to get bored or sleepy. Of course, when boredom or sleepiness come, they too are part of the moment's experience, so rather than trying to get rid of them, just include them.

Practicing mindfulness in formal meditation with this relaxed, interested, non-judging awareness will help you develop these qualities in the rest of your life. You will see for yourself why the Buddha called mindfulness the most direct way to overcome suffering and realize great happiness. Good luck! ❁



More Truth, Less Suffering

Anushka Fernandopulle on how mindfulness reduces the suffering caused by our collective sense of separation.

AMONG ALL BUDDHIST SCHOOLS, mindfulness is most clearly emphasized and articulated in Theravada Buddhism—old school Buddhism developed in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. In the West, many people practice Insight Meditation, a practice coming from this school that includes training in mindfulness and other factors of mind that can help us develop insight into the way things are.

In Insight Meditation, we tune into the changing nature of all experience. We see the lack of solidity of everything, and thus the unreliability of things and experiences as places to seek and find lasting well-being. These insights can bring a fundamental shift in the way we relate to life. We no longer seek refuge in experiences that will vanish, and we can live life in greater harmony and peace.

Mindfulness is situated within a larger context of ethical trainings. These cover our actions, work, and speech; cultivating wholesome states of mind and heart; and clarifying our view of what is true. All of these are necessary to attain the goal of the path: freedom from suffering, stress, strain, grief, and despair.

Mindfulness is essential in developing this kind of wisdom, but it is not the only ingredient. Collectedness of mind (concentration or focus), balance of mind (equanimity), and investigation of experience are also important. A sense of ardency or passion is considered an essential factor on the path, and we need to develop wise attention, understanding how and to what we should be applying mindfulness.

“Mindfulness is situated within a larger context of ethical trainings. These cover our actions, work, and speech; cultivating wholesome states of mind and heart; and clarifying our view of what is true.

One of the frequent companions of mindfulness in the Buddhist teachings is *sampajanna*, translated as clear comprehension, clear knowing, or full awareness. The pairing of “mindfulness and clear comprehension” is as well-known to students of Theravada Buddhism as salt and pepper and bread and butter.

Sampajanna refers to understanding the broader context in which an action or experience is happening, including intention and impact. This contributes to the development of wisdom, which is the real goal of the practice.

We need to include this broader awareness so the practice is not one that supports self-absorbed disconnection. We can't be satisfied with just feeling the bare sensation of our foot on the

ground but must also know if we are stepping on somebody's foot. We can be aware of what our sandwich tastes like but also tune into whether we have taken someone else's sandwich, if everyone has a sandwich, or if it is even sandwich-eating time.

If we do not include a broader awareness in our practice of mindfulness, there can be a sense of separation from the world. Becoming more aware of those around us and our impact on others is essential on the path. The path of mindfulness, when it includes all these factors, is one that can lead to greater alignment with truth and less suffering for oneself and others. ❁



Thich Nhat Hanh on The Practice of Mindfulness

Meditation master **Thich Nhat Hanh** teaches five mindfulness exercises to help you live with happiness and joy.

OUR TRUE HOME is not in the past. Our true home is not in the future. Our true home is in the here and the now. Life is available only in the here and the now, and it is our true home.

Mindfulness is the energy that helps us recognize the conditions of happiness that are already present in our lives. You don't have to wait ten years to experience this happiness. It is present in every moment of your daily life. There are those of us who are alive but don't know it. But when you breathe in, and you are aware of your in-breath, you touch the miracle of being alive. That is why mindfulness is a source of happiness and joy.

Most people are forgetful; they are not really there a lot of the time. Their mind is caught in their worries, their fears, their anger, and their regrets, and they are not mindful of being there. That state of being is called forgetfulness—you are there but you are not there. You are caught in the past or in the future. You are not there in the present moment, living your life deeply. That is forgetfulness.

The opposite of forgetfulness is mindfulness. Mindfulness is when you are truly there, mind and body together. You breathe in and out mindfully, you bring your mind back to your body, and you are there. When your mind is there with your body, you are established in the present moment. Then you can recognize the many conditions of happiness that are in you and around you, and happiness just comes naturally.



You don't have to wait ten years to experience this happiness. It is present in every moment of your daily life.

Mindfulness practice should be enjoyable, not work or effort. Do you have to make an effort to breathe in? You don't need to make an effort. To breathe in, you just breathe in. Suppose you are with a group of people contemplating a beautiful sunset. Do you have to make an effort to enjoy the beautiful sunset? No, you don't have to make any effort. You just enjoy it.

The same thing is true with your breath. Allow your breath to take place. Become aware of it and enjoy it. Effortlessness. Enjoyment. The same thing is true with walking mindfully. Every step you take is enjoyable. Every step helps you to touch the wonders of life, in yourself and around you. Every step is peace. Every step is joy. That is possible.

During the time you are practicing mindfulness, you stop talking—not only the talking outside, but the talking inside. The talking inside is the thinking, the mental discourse that goes on

and on and on inside. Real silence is the cessation of talking—of both the mouth and of the mind. This is not the kind of silence that oppresses us. It is a very elegant kind of silence, a very powerful kind of silence. It is the silence that heals and nourishes us.

“

When your mindfulness becomes powerful, your concentration becomes powerful, and when you are fully concentrated, you have a chance to make a breakthrough, to achieve insight.

Mindfulness gives birth to joy and happiness. Another source of happiness is concentration. The energy of mindfulness carries within it the energy of concentration. When you are aware of something, such as a flower, and can maintain that awareness, we say that you are concentrated on the flower. When your mindfulness becomes powerful, your concentration becomes powerful, and when you are fully concentrated, you have a chance to make a breakthrough, to achieve insight. If you meditate on a cloud, you can get insight into the nature of the cloud. Or you can meditate on a pebble, and if you have enough mindfulness and concentration, you can see into the nature of the pebble. You can meditate on a person, and if you have enough mindfulness and concentration, you can make a breakthrough and understand the nature of that person. You can meditate on yourself, or your anger, or your fear, or your joy, or your peace.

Anything can be the object of your meditation, and with the powerful energy of concentration, you can make a breakthrough and develop insight. It's like a magnifying glass concentrating the light of the sun. If you put the point of concentrated light on a piece of paper, it will burn. Similarly, when your mindfulness and concentration are powerful, your insight will liberate you from fear, anger, and despair, and bring you true joy, true peace, and true happiness.

When you contemplate the big, full sunrise, the more mindful and concentrated you are, the more the beauty of the sunrise is revealed to you. Suppose you are offered a cup of tea, very fragrant, very good tea. If your mind is distracted, you cannot really enjoy the tea. You have to be mindful of the tea, you have to be concentrated on it, so the tea can reveal its fragrance and wonder to you. That is why mindfulness and concentration are such sources of happiness. That's why a good practitioner knows how to create a moment of joy, a feeling of happiness, at any time of the day.

First Mindfulness Exercise: Mindful Breathing

The first exercise is very simple, but the power, the result, can be very great. The exercise is simply to identify the in-breath as in-breath and the out-breath as the out-breath. When you breathe in, you know that this is your in-breath. When you breathe out, you are mindful that this is your out-breath.

Just recognize: this is an in-breath, this is an out-breath. Very simple, very easy. In order to recognize your in-breath as in-breath, you have to bring your mind home to yourself. What is recognizing your in-breath is your mind, and the object of your mind—the object of your mindfulness—is the in-breath. Mindfulness is always mindful of something. When you drink your tea mindfully, it's called mindfulness of drinking. When you walk mindfully, it's called mindfulness of walking. And when you breathe mindfully, that is mindfulness of breathing.

“

The in-breath can be a celebration of the fact that you are alive, so it can be very joyful.

So the object of your mindfulness is your breath, and you just focus your attention on it. Breathing in, this is my in-breath. Breathing out, this is my out-breath. When you do that, the mental discourse will stop. You don't think anymore. You don't have to make an effort to stop your thinking; you bring your attention to your in-breath and the mental discourse just stops. That is the miracle of the practice. You don't think of the past anymore. You don't think of the future. You don't think of your projects, because you are focusing your attention, your mindfulness, on your breath.

It gets even better. You can enjoy your in-breath. The practice can be pleasant, joyful. Someone who is dead cannot take any more in-breaths. But you are alive. You are breathing in, and while breathing in, you know that you are alive. The in-breath can be a

celebration of the fact that you are alive, so it can be very joyful. When you are joyful and happy, you don't feel that you have to make any effort at all. I am alive; I am breathing in. To be still alive is a miracle. The greatest of all miracles is to be alive, and when you breathe in, you touch that miracle. Therefore, your breathing can be a celebration of life.

An in-breath may take three, four, five seconds, it depends. That's time to be alive, time to enjoy your breath. You don't have to interfere with your breathing. If your in-breath is short, allow it to be short. If your out-breath is long, let it to be long. Don't try to force it. The practice is simple recognition of the in-breath and the out-breath. That is good enough. It will have a powerful effect.

Second Mindfulness Exercise: Concentration

The second exercise is that while you breathe in, you follow your in-breath from the beginning to the end. If your in-breath lasts three or four seconds, then your mindfulness also lasts three or four seconds. Breathing in, I follow my in-breath all the way through. Breathing out, I follow my out-breath all the way through. From the beginning of my out-breath to the end of my out-breath, my mind is always with it. Therefore, mindfulness becomes uninterrupted, and the quality of your concentration is improved.

So the second exercise is to follow your in-breath and your out-breath all the way through. Whether they are short or long, it doesn't matter. What is important is that you follow your

in-breath from the beginning to the end. Your awareness is sustained. There is no interruption. Suppose you are breathing in, and then you think, “Oh, I forgot to turn off the light in my room.” There is an interruption. Just stick to your in-breath all the way through. Then you cultivate your mindfulness and your concentration. You become your in-breath. You become your out-breath. If you continue like that, your breathing will naturally become deeper and slower, more harmonious and peaceful. You don’t have to make any effort—it happens naturally.

Third Mindfulness Exercise: Awareness of Your Body

The third exercise is to become aware of your body as you are breathing. “Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body.” This takes it one step further.

In the first exercise, you became aware of your in-breath and your out-breath. Because you have now generated the energy of mindfulness through mindful breathing, you can use that energy to recognize your body.

“Breathing in, I am aware of my body. Breathing out, I am aware of my body.” I know my body is there. This brings the mind wholly back to the body. Mind and body become one reality. When your mind is with your body, you are well-established in the here and the now. You are fully alive. You can be in touch with the wonders of life that are available in yourself and around you.

This exercise is simple, but the effect of the oneness of body and mind is very great. In our daily lives, we are seldom in that situation. Our body is there but our mind is elsewhere. Our mind may be caught in the past or in the future, in regrets, sorrow, fear, or uncertainty, and so our mind is not there. Someone may be present in the house, but he's not really there, his mind is not there. His mind is with the future, with his projects, and he's not there for his children or his spouse. Maybe you could say to him, "Anybody home?" and help him bring his mind back to his body.

So the third exercise is to become aware of your body. "Breathing in, I'm aware of my body." When you practice mindful breathing, the quality of your in-breath and out-breath will be improved. There is more peace and harmony in your breathing, and if you continue to practice like that, the peace and the harmony will penetrate into the body, and the body will profit.

Fourth Mindfulness Exercise: Releasing Tension

The next exercise is to release the tension in the body. When you are truly aware of your body, you notice there is some tension and pain in your body, some stress. The tension and pain have been accumulating for a long time and our bodies suffer, but our mind is not there to help release it. Therefore, it is very important to learn how to release the tension in the body.

In a sitting, lying, or standing position, it's always possible to release the tension. You can practice total relaxation, deep relaxation, in a sitting or lying position. While you are driving your car, you might notice the tension in your body. You are eager to arrive and you don't enjoy the time you spend driving. When you come to a red light, you are eager for the red light to become a green light so that you can continue. But the red light can be a signal. It can be a reminder that there is tension in you, the stress of wanting to arrive as quickly as possible. If you recognize that, you can make use of the red light. You can sit back and relax—take the ten seconds the light is red to practice mindful breathing and release the tension in the body.



It is always possible to practice releasing the tension in yourself.

So next time you're stopped at a red light, you might like to sit back and practice the fourth exercise: "Breathing in, I'm aware of my body. Breathing out, I release the tension in my body." Peace is possible at that moment, and it can be practiced many times a day—in the workplace, while you are driving, while you are cooking, while you are doing the dishes, while you are watering the vegetable garden. It is always possible to practice releasing the tension in yourself.

Walking Meditation

When you practice mindful breathing you simply allow your in breath to take place. You become aware of it and enjoy it. Effortlessness. The same thing is true with mindful walking. Every step is enjoyable. Every step helps you touch the wonders of life. Every step is joy. That is possible.

You don't have to make any effort during walking meditation, because it is enjoyable. You are there, body and mind together. You are fully alive, fully present in the here and the now. With every step, you touch the wonders of life that are in you and around you. When you walk like that, every step brings healing. Every step brings peace and joy, because every step is a miracle.

The real miracle is not to fly or walk on fire. The real miracle is to walk on the Earth, and you can perform that miracle at any time. Just bring your mind home to your body, become alive, and perform the miracle of walking on Earth. 🌿



How RAIN Can Nourish You

Jack Kornfield teaches us the transformative mindfulness practice known as “RAIN.”

MINDFULNESS does not reject experience. It lets experience be the teacher. With mindfulness, we can enter the difficulties in our life and find healing and freedom.

There are four principles for mindful transformation of difficulties that are taught in Western mindfulness retreats with the acronym (coined by Michele McDonald) called RAIN. RAIN stands for Recognition, Acceptance, Investigation, and Non-Identification. This acronym echoes the Zen poets who tell us “the rain falls equally on all things.” Like the nourishment of outer rain, the inner principles of RAIN can transform our difficulties.

Recognition

Recognition is the first step of mindfulness. When we are stuck in our life, we must begin with a willingness to see what is so. It is as if someone asks us gently, what is happening now? Do we reply brusquely, “Nothing”? Or do we pause and acknowledge the reality of our experience, here and now?

With recognition we step out of denial. Denial undermines our freedom. The diabetic who denies his body is not free. Neither is the driven, stressed-out executive who denies the cost of her lifestyle, or the self-critical would-be painter who denies his love of making art. The society that denies its poverty and injustice has lost a part of its freedom as well. If we deny our dissatisfaction, our anger, our pain, our ambition, we will suffer. If we deny our values, our beliefs, our longings, or our goodness, we will suffer.

“

If we deny our values, our beliefs, our longings, or our goodness, we will suffer.

“The emergence and blossoming of understanding, love, and intelligence has nothing to do with any outer tradition,” observes Zen teacher Toni Packer. “It happens completely on its own when a human being questions, wonders, listens, and looks without getting stuck in fear. When self-concern is quiet, in abeyance, heaven and earth are open.”

With recognition our awareness becomes like the dignified host. We name and inwardly bow to our experience: “Ah, sorrow; and now excitement; hmm, yes, conflict; and yes, tension. Oh, now pain, yes, and now, ah, the judging mind.” Recognition moves us from delusion and ignorance toward freedom. “We can light a lamp in the darkness,” says the Buddha. We can see what is so.

Acceptance

The next step of RAIN is acceptance. Acceptance allows us to relax and open to the facts before us. It is necessary because with recognition, there can come a subtle aversion, a resistance, a wish it weren't so. Acceptance does not mean that we cannot work to improve things. But just now, this is what is so. In Zen they say, "If you understand, things are just as they are. And if you don't understand, things are still just as they are."

Acceptance is not passivity. It is a courageous step in the process of transformation. "Trouble? Life is trouble. Only death is nice," Zorba the Greek declares. "To live is to roll up your sleeves and embrace trouble." Acceptance is a willing movement of the heart, to include whatever is before it. In individual transformation we have to start with the reality of our own suffering. For social transformation we have to start with the reality of collective suffering, of injustice, racism, greed, and hate. We can only transform the world as we learn to transform ourselves. As Carl Jung comments, "Perhaps I myself am the enemy who must be loved."



With acceptance and respect, surprising transformations can occur.

With acceptance and respect, problems that seem intractable often become workable. A man began to give large doses of cod-liver oil to his Doberman because he had been told that the stuff was good for dogs. Each day he would hold the head of the

protesting dog between his knees, force its jaws open, and pour the liquid down its throat. One day the dog broke loose and the fish oil spilled on the floor. Then, to the man's great surprise, the dog returned to lick the puddle. That is when the man discovered that what the dog had been fighting was not the oil but his lack of respect in administering it. With acceptance and respect, surprising transformations can occur.

Investigation

Recognition and acceptance lead to the third step of RAIN, investigation. Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh calls this "seeing deeply." In recognition and acceptance we recognize our dilemma and accept the truth of the whole situation. Now we must investigate more fully. Buddhism teaches that whenever we are stuck, it is because we have not looked deeply enough into the nature of the experience.

Buddhism systematically directs our investigation to four areas that are critical for understanding and freedom. These are called the four foundations of mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and dharma, the underlying principles of experience.

Here is how we can apply them when working with a difficult experience. Starting with investigation in the body, we mindfully locate where our difficulties are held. Sometimes we find heat, contraction, hardness, or vibration. Sometimes we notice throbbing, numbness, a certain shape or color. We can investigate whether we are meeting this area with resistance or with

mindfulness. We notice what happens as we hold these sensations with mindfulness. Do they open? Are there other layers? Is there a center? Do they intensify, move, expand, change, repeat, dissolve, or transform?



With mindfulness, each feeling is recognized and accepted.

In the second foundation of mindfulness, we can investigate what feelings are part of this difficulty. Is the primary feeling tone pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? Are we meeting this feeling with mindfulness? And what are the secondary feelings associated with it? Often we discover a constellation of feelings. A man remembering his divorce may feel sadness, anger, jealousy, loss, fear, and loneliness. A woman who was unable to help her addicted nephew can feel longing, aversion, guilt, desire, emptiness, and unworthiness. With mindfulness, each feeling is recognized and accepted. We investigate how each emotion feels, whether it is pleasant or painful, contracted or relaxed, tense or sad. We notice where we feel the emotion in our body and what happens to it as it is held in mindfulness.

Next comes the mind. What thoughts and images are associated with this difficulty? What stories, judgments, and beliefs are we holding? When we look more closely, we often discover that

some of them are one-sided, fixed points of view, or out-moded, habitual perspectives. We see that they are only stories. They loosen their hold on us. We cling less to them.

The fourth foundation to investigate is called mindfulness of the dharma. Dharma is an important and multifaceted word that can mean the teachings and the path of Buddhism. It can mean the truth, and in this case it can also mean the elements and patterns that make up experience. In mindfulness of the dharma we look into the principles and laws that are operating. We can notice if an experience is actually as solid as it appears. Is it unchanging or is it impermanent, moving, shifting, recreating itself? We notice if the difficulty expands or contracts the space in our mind, if it is in our control or if it has its own life. We notice if it is self-constructed. We investigate whether we are clinging to it, resisting it, or simply letting it be. We see whether our relationship to it is a source of suffering or happiness. And finally, we notice how much we identify with it. This leads us to the last step of RAIN, non-identification.

Non-identification

In non-identification we stop taking the experience as me or mine. We see how our identification creates dependence, anxiety, and inauthenticity. In practicing non-identification, we inquire of every state, experience, and story, is this who we really are? We

see the tentativeness of this identity. Instead of identification with this difficulty, we let go and rest in awareness itself. This is the culmination of releasing difficulty through RAIN.

One Buddhist practitioner, David, identified himself as a failure. His life had many disappointments and after a few years of Buddhist practice, he was disappointed by his meditation too. He became calmer but that was all. He was still plagued by unremitting critical thoughts and self-judgments, leftovers from a harsh and painful past. He identified with these thoughts and his wounded history. Even the practice of compassion for himself brought little relief.

Then, during a ten-day mindfulness retreat, he was inspired by the teachings on non-identification. He was touched by the stories of those who faced their demons and freed themselves. He remembered the account of the Buddha, who on the night of his enlightenment faced his own demons in the form of the armies and temptations of Mara. David decided to stay up all night and directly face his own demons. For many hours, he tried to be mindful of his breath and body. In between sittings, he took periods of walking meditation. At each sitting, he was washed over by familiar waves of sleepiness, body pains, and critical thoughts. Then he began to notice that each changing experience was met by one common element, awareness itself.

In the middle of the night, he had an “ah ha” moment. He realized that awareness was not affected by any of these experiences, that it was open and untouched, like space itself. All his struggles,

the painful feelings and thoughts, came and went without the slightest disturbance to awareness itself. Awareness became his refuge.

David decided to test his realization. The meditation hall was empty so he rolled on the floor. Awareness just noticed. He stood up, shouted, laughed, made funny animal noises. Awareness just noticed. He ran around the room, he lay down quietly, he went outside to the edge of the forest, he picked up a stone and threw it, jumped up and down, laughed, came back and sat. Awareness just noticed it all. Finding this, he felt free. He watched the sun rise softly over the hills. Then he went back to sleep for a time. And when he reawakened, his day was full of joy. Even when his doubts came back, awareness just noticed. Like the rain, his awareness allowed all things equally.

“

Without identification, we can live with care, yet we are no longer bound by the fears and illusions of the small sense of self.

It would be too rosy to end this story here. Later in the retreat David again fell into periods of doubt, self-judgment, and depression. But now, even in the middle of it, he could recognize that it was just doubt, just judgment, just depression. He could not take it fully as his identity anymore. Awareness noticed this too. And was silent, free.

Buddhism calls non-identification the abode of the awakening, the end of clinging, true peace, nirvana. Without identification, we can live with care, yet we are no longer bound by the fears and illusions of the small sense of self. We see the secret beauty behind all that we meet. Mindfulness and fearless presence bring true protection. When we meet the world with recognition, acceptance, investigation and non-identification, we discover that wherever we are, freedom is possible, just as the rain falls on and nurtures all things equally. 🌿



What Mindfulness Is (Not)

You can't reduce mindfulness to just a single idea.

Andrew Olendzki unpacks its many meanings in classical Buddhism.

PERHAPS THE BEST WAY to understand what mindfulness is, from a classical Buddhist perspective, is to recognize some of the things it is not.

Mindfulness does not just mean being aware or being conscious, because one is always conscious when not comatose or dead. Consciousness is the fundamental quality of mind, understood as an event that occurs rather than a thing that exists. As such, it is always present when any kind of experience takes place. If mindfulness meant to be aware, then we would always be mindful, automatically, in all circumstances.

Mindfulness does not just mean attention, because we are always paying attention. Attention is the mental factor that gathers all the other mental factors together and directs them to a single object, bringing coherence and focus to each mind moment. Our attention may wander from one object to another, and it may be unable to stay on the same object for multiple moments in a row, but it is always directed somewhere.

Mindfulness does not mean paying attention in the present moment, because all mind moments occur in the present moment. How could it be otherwise? It is not possible to see, hear, smell, taste, or touch an object in anything but the present moment. Mental objects like thoughts can take their content from the past (a memory) or the future (an imagination), but the process of thinking about the past or future always occurs in the present moment. When people talk about being aware in the present moment, they really just mean either getting out of the mind door and attending to one of the senses or being aware of the act of thinking without getting caught up in the content of the thought.

“

Mindfulness is awareness, with attention, in the present moment, on purpose—and with an attitude or intentional stance of nonattached equanimity.

Nor can mindfulness be adequately identified as paying attention on purpose, or as we might put it, being conscious consciously. The difference between conscious awareness and unconscious awareness is the presence of the mental factors “applied thought” and “sustained thought.” The first allows the mind to be directed to an object that is chosen by volition, and the second means we are able to hold our attention on the object of our choosing. Meditation training usually involves the intentional

directing and sustaining of attention in various ways, which develops the skill of concentration, but not all meditation is mindfulness meditation.

It is important to recognize that each of the mind states mentioned so far is ethically neutral and can be used for harm or good. Many of the ways we misbehave involve attention, volition, and concentration, and these same functions are at work when we are acting benevolently.

Let's turn now from what mindfulness isn't to what it is in the context of Buddhism.

Every moment of consciousness is accompanied by an emotional response, and this is where mindfulness is properly situated on the Buddhist maps of experience. Mindfulness is a quality of emotional response, a particular intentional stance and attitude toward the object of experience that shapes and textures how it is experienced by consciousness.

Mindfulness is an inherently wholesome or healthy mental factor, so it cannot function at any moment when the mind is under the influence of greed or hatred, even in their mildest versions of favoring and opposing. Anytime you want or don't want things be a certain way, the mind is not being mindful.

Mindfulness requires a thoroughgoing equanimity. This does not mean you don't care or are indifferent to what is happening, only that the mind is evenly balanced and fully aware of things exactly as they are, without the desire to change them by favoring one thing or opposing another.

Mindfulness is a mind state that is engaged with the object of attention, but that engagement is disengaged from craving. One breathes mindfully, not wanting the breath to be long or short but just being aware of it as it is. One walks mindfully, back and forth, with no desire to get somewhere, simply noticing the nuanced textures of physical sensations arising and passing away in the body. Mindfulness is thus all of the above—awareness, with attention, in the present moment, on purpose—with the important addition: and with an attitude or intentional stance of nonattached equanimity. ❁



The Power of Awareness

Diana Winston on how to use the tools of mindfulness to work with negative patterns like shame, guilt, and self-criticism that stand in the way of caring for and liking yourself.

MY NINE-YEAR-OLD had saved up her money for roller blades. When we were at the sporting goods store, I got inspired too and purchased a pair of old-school white roller skates with pink wheels.

I was thrilled to share this new pastime with her and we spent the afternoon in blissful mommy-daughter union. We were learning together, it was outdoors, and we were away from screens.

It was all great until the next day, when I caught my toe in a crack, fell, and torqued my knee in an awful direction. Alongside the excruciating knee pain, I was filled with equally painful self-recriminations.

What was I thinking, what a stupid idea, I can't believe I screwed this up. Summer's ruined! If I got hurt, what's going to happen to her? I'm such a terrible mom. On and on it went.

Until I remembered to be mindful.

Then I saw I was caught in a painful cycle of self-blame, guilt, and judgment, all intensifying the physical pain and making me even more miserable. I paused and brought compassionate

attention to my breath and body. Noticing the thoughts and emotions that were arising, I calmed myself down and found my center. I remembered I was human, definitely fallible, and I would get through this. And I did (although my knee still hasn't fully recovered).



Don't believe everything you think.

I, like everyone else, suffer from a challenging complex of thoughts and emotions that show up from time to time: self-judgment, self-criticism, guilt, shame. These emotions seem to be at epidemic levels in society today.

Because I've been meditating now for thirty years, I have tools at my disposal that I can deploy to work with these emotions and thoughts. When they pop up, as they did in my roller-skating misadventure, mindfulness tools are there for me. To help you work with your own painful thoughts and emotions when they arise, here is the approach I use when working with students, one that has kept me sane (most of the time) and self-compassionate for decades.

How to Get Off the Train of Thoughts

The simple mindfulness practice of returning our wandering mind to the present moment is the foundation. When we get submerged in shame, self-hatred, and guilt, we can train ourselves to come back to the present moment and find relief. It's helpful to

develop a regular, daily-ish meditation practice so that we have some understanding and experience with mindfulness in advance. Then we have the tools to apply it on the spot when the going gets rough.

The critical voices inside us take on a myriad of disguises, and mindfulness excels here. We learn to see those thoughts merely *as* thoughts—not to be taken as reality. One of my favorite bumper stickers is “Don’t believe everything you think.”

Thoughts, while potentially amazing, profound, and brilliant, are also the source of enormous suffering. We all have our top ten suffering thoughts—worry, judging, comparing, and for most of us, guilt, shame, and self-criticism. We can learn to bring a mindful approach to these thoughts.

I find a couple of analogies helpful.

Thoughts are like snowballs. We start out with a tiny bit of snow and if we’re not mindful, it can grow into a giant snowball that overwhelms us. It’s important to catch the thoughts when they’re tiny to not let them escalate.

Thoughts are like trains. We get on a train (*I blew it today at work...*) and it leaves the station. The next thing we know we’re twenty miles down the track—twenty minutes into disturbing, predictive, globalizing, or catastrophic ruminations (*so I’ll probably be fired...*).

With mindfulness we have some choices. When we realize we're on the train, we can get off—it doesn't matter how long we've been ruminating. Or we can never get on the train in the first place—a thought arises, we see it as a thought, and we stay on the platform while the train passes.

How do we do this? Sometimes simply the power of noticing our thoughts in the moment is enough to help relieve them. Often we harangue ourselves without really noticing we are doing it, so this recognition is key. One more analogy: You know those thought bubbles that cartoon characters have over their heads? Imagine your critical thought is in a thought bubble. Now you can take the pin of mindfulness and pop it. Ah, sweet relief.

When meditators catch a thought with their awareness, the thought may just dissolve in that moment—they've "popped it" or "got off the train." This is wonderful when it happens, but it may be best case scenario. So I recommend that people also "note" thoughts: put soft mental labels on them like "self-criticism," "judgment," "worrying," "blaming," etc. Sometimes naming the thought can allow it to "pop." This strategy is often called "name it to tame it."

Now let's say that just labeling thought doesn't do much—we find ourselves still ruminating, acting like a dog with a bone. Then it's time to bring our attention into our body to notice if there is an emotion fueling the repetitive thought pattern.

How to Mindfully Hold Challenging Emotions

Study after study shows the benefit of using mindfulness to regulate challenging emotions. We can be mindful of thoughts and emotions together, or we can focus on a strong emotion alone.

Mindfully holding our emotions starts with recognition—labeling and recognizing what has taken you down: fear, grief, shame, guilt, and so on. We can label emotions in the same way we label thoughts. Often just recognizing, naming, and letting them be there without trying to alter them may be enough.

Or we can shift to investigating the emotion in real time, in our body. What's happening in this moment? *My stomach is clenched, my jaw is tight, my chest feels constricted.* We sit with these sensations and hold them as a compassionate witness, just as I try to do with my daughter.

One skillful approach is not to force ourselves to stay solely with the emotion, especially when it feels big and painful. It's helpful to have a pleasant or neutral part of our body that we can move our attention to, and then return to the challenging emotion/sensations in our body when we're ready. (If you don't have an easeful area in your body, you can imagine a nurturing time or place.) Moving our attention back and forth allows for a bit of rest, prevents us from getting overwhelmed, and helps to integrate the challenging emotion. It helps build up our mindfulness capacity to hold the difficult emotion.

As we attend to our emotions mindfully, we track them as they ebb and flow, move and shift, and intensify or dissipate. There are very specific sensations we can attend to: pulsing, pounding, contracting, vibrating, tightness, and so on. Sometimes, mindfully being with them allows them to pass through, like weather patterns. Sometimes they don't pass through, but we can hold them in our awareness and we are not disturbed by them. Sometimes they don't pass, and we feel overwhelmed, but a little voice inside us knows we're okay, even in the midst of strong, challenging feelings.



When we get disidentification, so much freedom arises.

The key to the mindful approach is what's typically called "disidentification." This is the moment of recognition that we are not our thoughts or emotions. We go from "This is my thought or emotion that I'm entirely caught in," to "This thought is moving through me." "My thought" becomes "the thought." "Being the thought" is now "being *with* the thought."

This way we become disentangled from our painful thoughts and feelings, but we still have them. We're not trying to use mindfulness to become mindful zombies with no affect. With disidentification we are present with and fully embodying our experience. Yet we have some space, some witnessing, and I daresay, some freedom.

When we get disidentification, so much freedom arises.

How to Enlist Your Wisdom Mind

Traditional Buddhist mindfulness approaches are pretty strict: mindfulness is not intended to explore our psychological material and we must avoid analyzing the content of our thoughts and emotions at all costs. However, my experience is that in practice it is much more nuanced than that. Using simple investigative processes that are rooted in mindfulness, we can explore the nature and history of our patterns, reactivity, and repetitive thoughts in helpful ways.

First of all, when we are mindful of a thought or emotion, psychological understanding and insight may emerge quite spontaneously. We are sitting with our grief and then a memory of our childhood arises. As we hold that memory in kindness and awareness, we realize that this may be why our present-day grief seems so enormous in comparison to the actual trigger.

We can be proactive too. When our mind is concentrated, stable, and aware, a well-placed question can help us find some ease and understanding. For example, with strong, repetitive emotions like shame or self-judgment, we might ask ourselves: “What might be the wisdom within this judgment? Can I separate out the wisdom from the reactivity?” Or, “Is there a deeper need I am trying to fulfil? Can I meet this need in other ways?”

Questioning in this way is very different from ruminating, analyzing, or trying to figure something out. It is also different from psychotherapy. Instead, it's making space for our wisdom to emerge by dropping a question into our mind. It's like dropping a pebble into a pond—we look for the reverberations.

When I'm caught in an anxiety avalanche about my daughter, I might ask myself, *Is there a purpose this worry is serving?* My wisdom mind might offer: *I just want to protect her and keep her safe.* Then I let myself feel the deep love connected to that desire. I hold that love in awareness, and sometimes tears come. As I feel the love and grief comingled with the worry, there is a loosening inside me, and the anxiety often subsides.

Other skillful uses of thinking in the midst of self-judgment include asking ourselves, *Is this really true? What part of this is true, and what part is worst case scenario? Am I globalizing here? Catastrophizing?* Also helpful are simple reminders: *This too shall pass. I will get through this.*

I call these practices “enlisting the wisdom mind.” Even in the midst of our neuroses, there is buried wisdom in us that we can learn to trust, listen to, and ultimately cultivate more fully, even when we're utterly miserable.

I remember once being caught in a cycle of shame I couldn't release. I was feeling like a terrible mommy and blaming myself for my inability to hold a boundary with my daughter. In my distorted thinking, I decided I had ruined her for life, that she was

going to walk all over me and would end up being a rotten adult. I knew I was globalizing and catastrophizing, but I couldn't shake the deep shame that kept arising.

As I sat with myself in the shame—and believe me, shame is awful to be mindful of—I held myself in awareness, felt the deep spikes and burning in my chest, and suddenly a thought emerged: *It's not your fault. Your neuroses were in perfect lockstep with her challenging behavior. If you could have done it differently you would have.*

At that moment my mind let go. I began to cry with relief and the shame evaporated. All that was left was compassion—for me, for other moms who suffer in this way, and for the ongoing co-triggering dance of mother and child since beginningless time.

When you're feeling horrible, a simple adaptation of Tibetan *tonglen* practice is to reflect on all of the people in the world who are feeling exactly the same way you are. As you take their suffering in a gentle way, you send out some compassion for all the people suffering like you are. You may feel the great relief of recognizing your common humanity, but stop if acknowledging all the suffering feels too overwhelming.

How to Use Your Mindfulness Toolbox

We can work with all of the mindfulness-based tools I have described, one by one, or in combination. Some of them will work for you at different times. Some you will feel more drawn to; some will feel less useful. You can use them in meditation, or on the

spot in daily life. Together, they form a comprehensive approach to mindfully holding challenging emotions. But remember to be gentle and kind to yourself in the process.

Will these techniques free you entirely from self-criticism, shame, and guilt? Probably not, but sustained practice will give you significantly more freedom from them, especially when supplemented with self-compassion practices and a recognition of your inner goodness. Personally, I have found that much of my core suffering has been transformed over time. I have significantly less self-hatred than I used to. I attribute that to my mindfulness practice (and other modalities like therapy). And when shame, guilt, and judgment do arise, like in the roller-skating fiasco, when you cultivate mindfulness and wisdom, you will find your (yup, I'm going here) footing, stay stable in the midst of reactivity, and experience (sorry) way smoother skating! 🌸



The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

In this excerpt from **Bhante Gunaratana**'s book *Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Plain English*, the great Theravada teacher explains why all practitioners should meditate on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, at every stage on the Buddhist path.

MINDFULNESS PRACTICE has deep roots in Buddhist tradition. More than 2,600 years ago, the Buddha exhorted his senior *bhikkhus*, monks with the responsibility of passing his teachings on to others, to train their students in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

“What four?” he was asked.

“Come, friends,” the Buddha answered. “Dwell contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, unified, with concentrated one-pointed mind, in order to know the body as it really is. Dwell contemplating feeling in feelings... in order to know feelings as they really are. Dwell contemplating mind in mind... in order to know mind as it really is. Dwell contemplating dhamma in dhammas... in order to know dhammas as they really are.”

The practice of contemplating (or as we might say, meditating on) the Four Foundations—mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind, and dhammas (or phenomena)—is recommended for

people at every stage of the spiritual path. As the Buddha goes on to explain, everyone—trainees who have recently become interested in the Buddhist path, monks and nuns, and even *arahants*, advanced meditators who have already reached the goal of liberation from suffering, “should be exhorted, settled, and established in the development of these Four Foundations of Mindfulness.”

“

We can assume that the word “bhikkhu” is used to mean anyone seriously interested in meditation. In that sense, we are all bhikkhus.

In this sutta, the Buddha is primarily addressing the community of bhikkhus, monks and nuns who have dedicated their lives to spiritual practice. Given this, you might wonder whether people with families and jobs and busy Western lives can benefit from mindfulness practice. If the Buddha’s words were meant only for monastics, he would have given this talk in a monastery. But he spoke in a village filled with shopkeepers, farmers, and other ordinary folk. Since mindfulness can help men and women from all walks of life relieve suffering, we can assume that the word “bhikkhu” is used to mean anyone seriously interested in meditation. In that sense, we are all bhikkhus.

Let’s look briefly at each of the four foundations of mindfulness as a preview of things to come.

Mindfulness of Body

By asking us to practice *mindfulness* of the body, the Buddha is reminding us to see “the body in the body.” By these words he means that we should recognize that the body is not a solid unified thing, but rather a collection of parts. The nails, teeth, skin, bones, heart, lungs, and all other parts—each is actually a small “body” that is located in the larger entity that we call “the body.” Traditionally, the human body is divided into thirty-two parts, and we train ourselves to be mindful of each. Trying to be mindful of the entire body is like trying to grab a heap of oranges. If we grab the whole heap at once, perhaps we will end up with nothing!

Moreover, remembering that the body is composed of many parts helps us to see “the body as body”—not as *my* body or as *myself*, but simply as a physical form like all other physical forms. Like all forms, the body comes into being, remains present for a time, and then passes away. Since it experiences injury, illness, and death, the body is unsatisfactory as a source of lasting happiness. Since it is not *myself*, the body can also be called “selfless.” When mindfulness helps us to recognize that the body is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless, in the Buddha’s words, we “know the body as it really is.”

Mindfulness of Feelings

Similarly, by asking us to practice *mindfulness of feelings*, the Buddha is telling us to contemplate “the feeling in the feelings.” These words remind us that, like the body, feelings can be subdivided.

Traditionally, there are only three types—pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings, and neutral feelings. Each type is one “feeling” *in* the mental awareness that we call “feelings.” At any given moment we are able to notice only one type. When a pleasant feeling is present, neither a painful feeling nor a neutral feeling is present. The same is true of an unpleasant or neutral feeling.

“

The mind alone cannot exist, only particular states of mind that appear depending on external or internal conditions. Paying attention to the way each thought arises, remains present, and passes away, we learn to stop the runaway train.

We regard feelings in this way to help us develop a simple nonjudgmental awareness of what we are experiencing—seeing a particular feeling as one of many feelings, rather than as *my* feeling or as part of me. As we watch each emotion or sensation as it arises, remains present, and passes away, we observe that any feeling is impermanent. Since a pleasant feeling does not last and an unpleasant feeling is often painful, we understand that feelings are unsatisfactory. Seeing a feeling as an emotion or sensation rather than as *my* feeling, we come to know that feelings are selfless. Recognizing these truths, we “know feelings as they really are.”

Mindfulness of Mind

The same process applies to *mindfulness of mind*. Although we talk about “the mind” as if it were a single thing, actually, mind or consciousness is a succession of particular instances of “mind in mind.” As mindfulness practice teaches us, consciousness arises from moment to moment on the basis of information coming to us from the senses—what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch—and from internal mental states, such as memories, imaginings, and daydreams. When we look at the mind, we are not looking at mere consciousness. The mind alone cannot exist, only particular states of mind that appear depending on external or internal conditions. Paying attention to the way each thought arises, remains present, and passes away, we learn to stop the runaway train of one unsatisfactory thought leading to another and another and another. We gain a bit of detachment and understand that we are not our thoughts. In the end, we come to know “mind as it really is.”

Mindfulness of Dhammas

By telling us to practice *mindfulness of dhammas*, or phenomena, the Buddha is not simply saying that we should be mindful of his teachings, though that is one meaning of the word “dhamma.” He is also reminding us that the dhamma that we contemplate is within us. The history of the world is full of truth seekers. The Buddha was one of them. Almost all sought the truth outside themselves. Before he attained enlightenment, the Buddha also searched outside of himself. He was looking for his maker, the

cause of his existence, who he called the “builder of this house.” But he never found what he was looking for. Instead, he discovered that he himself was subject to birth, growth, decay, death, sickness, sorrow, lamentation, and defilement. When he looked outside himself, he saw that everyone else was suffering from these same problems. This recognition helped him to see that no one outside himself could free him from his suffering. So he began to search within. This inner seeking is known as “come and see.” Only when he began to search inside did he find the answer. Then he said:

*Many a birth I wandered in samsara,
 Seeking but not finding the builder of this house.
 Sorrowful is it to be born again and again.
 Oh! House builder thou art seen.
 Thou shall not build house again.
 All thy rafters are broken.
 Thy ridgepole is shattered.
 The mind has attained the unconditioned. ❀*

Reproduced from *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Plain English*
 (Wisdom Publications)



10 Tips for a Mindful Home

Karen Maezen Miller offers 10 simple tips for keeping a a mindful home. How simple? Well, as Karen says, “If you can do the first one, the next nine take care of themselves.”

1. Wake with the sun

There is no purer light than what we see when we open our eyes first thing in the morning.

2. Sit

Mindfulness without meditation is just a word.

3. Make your bed

The state of your bed is the state of your head.
Enfold your day in dignity.

4. Empty the hampers

Do the laundry without resentment or commentary and have an intimate encounter with the very fabric of life.

5. Wash your bowl

Rinse away self-importance and clean up your own mess. If you leave it undone, it will get sticky.

6. Set a timer

If you're distracted by the weight of what's undone, set a kitchen timer and, like a monk in a monastery, devote yourself wholeheartedly to the task at hand before the bell rings.

7. Rake the leaves

Rake, weed, or sweep. You'll never finish for good, but you'll learn the point of pointlessness.

8. Eat when hungry

Align your inexhaustible desires with the one true appetite.

9. Let the darkness come

Set a curfew on the internet and TV and discover the natural balance between daylight and darkness, work and rest.

10. Sleep when tired

Nothing more to it. 🌸



Here, Now, Aware: The Power of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the essence of the contemplative path and the key to transforming our lives. Insight Meditation teacher **Joseph Goldstein** describes this simple yet profound expression of our mind's natural awareness.

MINDFULNESS IS THE KEY to the present moment. Without it we cannot see the world clearly, and we simply stay lost in the wanderings of our minds. Tulku Urgyen, a great Tibetan Dzogchen master of the last century, said, “There is one thing we always need, and that is the watchman named mindfulness—the guard who is always on the lookout for when we get carried away by mindlessness.”

Mindfulness is the quality and power of mind that is deeply aware of what's happening—without commentary and without interference. It is like a mirror that simply reflects whatever comes before it. It serves us in the humblest ways, keeping us connected to brushing our teeth or having a cup of tea.

Mindfulness also keeps us connected to the people around us, so we don't just rush by them in the busyness of our lives. The Dalai Lama is an example of someone who beautifully embodies this quality of caring attention. After one conference in Arizona,

His Holiness requested that all the employees of the hotel gather in the lobby, so that he could greet each one of them before he left for his next engagement.

Mindfulness is the basis for wise action. When we see clearly what is happening in the moment, wisdom can direct our choices and actions, rather than old habits simply playing out our patterns of conditioning. And on the highest level, the Buddha spoke of mindfulness as the direct path to enlightenment: “This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearing of pain and grief, for the attainment of the Way, for the realization of nirvana.”

I began to practice meditation when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. At the time I was very enthusiastic about philosophical discussion. When I first went to visit Buddhist monks, I arrived with a copy of Spinoza’s *Ethics* in my hand, thinking to engage them in debate. Then I started going to discussion groups for Westerners, held at one of the temples in Bangkok. I was so persistent in my questions that other people actually stopped coming to the groups. Finally, perhaps out of desperation, one of the monks said, “Why don’t you start meditating?”

I didn’t know anything about meditation at the time, and I became excited by the prospect of what I saw as an exotic Eastern practice. I gathered all the paraphernalia together, sat myself down on a cushion—and then set my alarm clock for five minutes.

Surprisingly, something important happened even in those few minutes. For the first time, I realized there was a way to look inward: there was a path for exploring the nature of my mind.

This realization is a turning point in everyone's spiritual life. We reach a certain point in our lives when something connects, and we acknowledge to ourselves, "Yes, I can do this." All of this was so new and interesting to me that, for a while, I'd invite my friends over to watch me meditate. Of course, they didn't often come back.

The Practice of Mindfulness

We can start the practice of mindfulness meditation with the simple observation and feeling of each breath. Breathing in, we know we're breathing in; breathing out, we know we're breathing out. It's very simple, but not easy. After just a few breaths, we hop on trains of association, getting lost in plans, memories, judgments, and fantasies. Sometimes it seems like we're in a movie theater where the film changes every few minutes. Our minds are like that. We wouldn't stay in a theater where the movies changed so rapidly, but what can we do about our own internal screening room?

This habit of wandering mind is very strong, even when our reveries aren't pleasant and, perhaps, aren't even true. As Mark Twain put it, "Some of the worst things in my life never happened." We need to train our minds, coming back again and again to the breath and simply beginning again.

As our minds slowly steady, we begin to experience some inner calm and peace. From this place of greater stillness, we feel our bodies more directly and begin to open to both the pleasant and unpleasant sensations that might arise. At first, we may resist unpleasant feelings, but generally they don't last that long. They are there for a while, we feel them, they're unpleasant—and then they're gone and something else comes along. And even if they come up repeatedly, over a period of time, we begin to see their impermanent, insubstantial nature and to be less afraid of feeling them.

A further part of the training is becoming aware of our thoughts and emotions, those pervasive mental activities that so condition our minds, our bodies, and our lives. Have you ever stopped to consider what a thought is—not the content but the very nature of thought itself? Few people really explore the question, “What is a thought?” What is this phenomenon that occurs so many times a day, to which we pay so little attention?

Not being aware of the thoughts that arise in our mind, nor of the very nature of thought itself, allows thoughts to then dominate our lives. Telling us to do this, say that, go here, go there, thoughts often drive us like we're their servants.

Once, when I was teaching in Boulder, Colorado, I was sitting quite comfortably in my apartment. Thoughts were coming and going, when one arose in my mind that said, “Oh, a pizza would be nice.” I wasn't even particularly hungry, but this thought lifted me out of the chair, took me out the door, down the stairs, into the

car, over to the pizza place, back into the car, up the stairs, and into my apartment, where I finally sat back down to eat the pizza. What drove that whole sequence of activity? Just a thought in my mind.

“

Not being aware of the thoughts that arise in our mind, nor of the very nature of thought itself, allows thoughts to then dominate our lives.

Obviously, there is nothing wrong with going out for pizza. What does merit our attention, though, is how much of our lives is driven by thoughts. Unnoticed, they have great power. But when we pay attention, when we observe thoughts as they arise and pass away, we begin to see their essentially empty nature. They arise as little energy bubbles in the mind, rather than as reified expressions of a self.

Just as there was no all-powerful wizard behind the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz*, the only power our thoughts have is the power we give them. All thoughts come and go. We can learn to be mindful of them and not be carried away by the wanderings of our mind. With mindfulness, we can exercise wise discernment: “Yes, I will act on this one; no, I’ll let that one go.”

Working with Emotions

In the same way, we can train ourselves to be mindful of emotions, those powerful energies that sweep over our bodies and minds like great breaking waves. We experience such a wide range of emotions, sometimes within quite a short period of time: anger, excitement, sadness, grief, love, joy, compassion, jealousy, delight, interest, boredom. There are beautiful emotions and difficult ones—and for the most part, we are caught up in their intensity and the stories that give rise to them.

We easily become lost in our own melodramas. It's illuminating to drop down a level and look at the energy of the emotion itself. What is sadness? What is anger? Seeing more deeply requires looking not at the emotion's "story," but at how the emotion manifests in our minds and bodies. It means taking an active interest in discovering the very nature of emotion.

The American monk Ajahn Sumedho expressed this kind of interest and investigation very well. He suggested that in a moment of anger or happiness, we simply notice: "Anger is like this," "Happiness is like that." Approaching our emotional life in this way is quite different than drowning in the intensity of feelings or being caught on the rollercoaster of our ever-changing moods. To do this takes mindfulness, attention, and concentration. We need to take care, though, not to misunderstand this practice and end up suppressing emotions or pushing them aside. The meditative process is one of complete openness to feelings. From the meditative perspective, the question is, "How am I

relating to this emotion?” Am I completely identified with it or is the mind spacious enough to feel the grief, the rage, the joy, the love without being overwhelmed?

The Practice of Letting Go

As you meditate, keep bringing your attention back to what is happening in the moment: the breath, a feeling in the body, a thought, an emotion, or even awareness itself. As we become more mindful and accepting of what’s going on, we find—both in meditation and in our lives—that we are less controlled by the forces of denial or addiction, two forces that drive much of life. In the meditative process we are more willing to see whatever is there, to be with it but not be caught by it. We are learning to let go.

In some Asian countries there is a very effective trap for catching monkeys. A slot is made in the bottom of a coconut, just big enough for the monkey to slide its hand in, but not big enough for the hand to be withdrawn when it’s clenched. Then they put something sweet in the coconut, attach it to a tree, and wait for the monkey to come along. When the monkey slides its hand in and grabs the food, it gets caught. What keeps the monkey trapped? It is only the force of desire and attachment. All the monkey has to do is let go of the sweet, open its hand, slip out, and go free—but only a rare monkey will do that. And similarly, the twentieth-century Japanese Zen teacher Kosho Uchiyama speaks of “opening the hand of thought.”

Another quality that develops in meditation is a sense of humor about our minds, our lives, and our human predicament. Humor is essential on the spiritual path. If you do not have a sense of humor now, meditate for a while and it will come, because it's difficult to watch the mind steadily and systematically without learning to smile. Someone once asked Sasaki Roshi whether he ever went to the movies. "No," he replied. "I give interviews."

“

In the meditative process we are more willing to see whatever is there, to be with it but not be caught by it. We are learning to let go.

Some years ago I was on retreat with the Burmese meditation master Sayadaw U Pandita. He is a strict teacher, and everyone on the retreat was being very quiet, moving slowly, and trying to be impeccably mindful. It was an intense time of training. At meal-time, we would all enter the dining room silently and begin taking food, mindful of each movement.

One day, the person on line in front of me at the serving table lifted up the cover on a pot of food. As he put it down on the table, it suddenly dropped to the floor making a huge clanging noise. The very first thought that went through my mind was, "It wasn't me!" Now, where did that thought come from? With awareness, one can only smile at these uninvited guests in the mind.

Through the practice of meditation we begin to see the full range of the mind's activities, old unskillful patterns as well as wholesome thoughts and feelings. We learn to be with the whole passing show. As we become more accepting, a certain lightness develops about it all. And the lighter and more accepting we become with ourselves, the lighter and more accepting we are with others. We're not so prone to judge the minds of others, once we have carefully seen our own. The poet, W.H. Auden, says it well: "Love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart." Spacious acceptance doesn't mean that we act on everything equally. Awareness gives us the option of choosing wisely: we can choose which patterns should be developed and cultivated, and which should be abandoned.

Just as the focused lens of a microscope enables us to see hidden levels of reality, so too a concentrated mind opens us to deeper levels of experience and more subtle movements of thought and emotion. Without this power of concentration, we stay on the surface of things. If we are committed to deepening our understanding, we need to practice mindfulness and gradually strengthen concentration. One of the gifts of the teachings is the reminder that we can do this—each and every one of us.

Practicing in Daily Life

In our busy lives in this complex and often confusing world, what practical steps can we take to train our minds?

The first step is to establish a regular, daily meditation practice. This takes discipline. It's not always easy to set aside time each day for meditation; so many other things call to us. But as with any training, if we practice regularly we begin to enjoy the fruits. Of course, not every sitting will be concentrated. Sometimes we'll be feeling bored or restless. These are the inevitable ups and downs of practice. It's the commitment and regularity of practice that is important, not how any one sitting feels. Pablo Casals, the world-renowned cellist, still practiced three hours a day when he was ninety-three. When asked why he still practiced at that age, he said, "I'm beginning to see some improvement."

The training in meditation will only happen through your own effort. No one can do it for you. There are many techniques and traditions, and you can find the one most suitable for you. But regularity of practice is what effects a transformation. If we do it, it begins to happen; if we don't do it, we continue acting out the various patterns of our conditioning.

The next step is to train ourselves in staying mindful and aware of the body throughout the day. As we go through our daily activities, we frequently get lost in thoughts of past and future, not staying grounded in the awareness of our bodies.

A simple reminder that we're lost in thought is the very common feeling of *rushing*. Rushing is a feeling of toppling forward. Our minds run ahead of us, focusing on where we want to go, instead of settling into our bodies where we are.

Learn to pay attention to this feeling of rushing—which does not particularly have to do with how fast we are going. We can feel rushed while moving slowly, and we can be moving quickly and still be settled in our bodies. Either way, we're likely not present. If you can, notice what thought or emotion has captured the attention. Then, just for a moment, stop and settle back into the body: feel the foot on the ground, feel the next step.

“

The practice is difficult to remember, but not difficult to do. It's all in the training: sitting regularly and being mindful of the body during the day.

The Buddha made a very powerful statement about this practice: “Mindfulness of the body leads to nirvana.” This is not a superficial practice. Mindfulness of the body keeps us present—and therefore, we know what's going on. The practice is difficult to remember, but not difficult to do. It's all in the training: sitting regularly and being mindful of the body during the day.

To develop deeper concentration and mindfulness, to be more present in our bodies, and to have a skillful relationship with thoughts and emotions, we need not only daily training, but also time for retreat. It's very helpful, at times, to disengage from the busyness of our lives, for intensive spiritual practice. Retreat time is not a luxury. If we are genuinely and deeply committed to awakening, to freedom—to whatever words express the highest value you hold—a retreat is an essential part of the path.

We need to create a rhythm in our lives, establishing a balance between times when we are engaged, active, and relating in the world and times when we turn inward. As the great Sufi poet Rumi noted, “A little while alone in your room will prove more valuable than anything else that could ever be given you.”

At first this “going inside” could be for a day, a weekend, or a week. At our meditation center, we also offer a three-month retreat every year, and at the new Forest Refuge, people have come for as long as a year. We can do whatever feels appropriate and possible to find balanced rhythm between our lives in the world and the inner silence of a retreat. In this way we develop concentration and mindfulness on deeper and deeper levels, which then makes it possible to be in the world in a more loving and compassionate way. ✿

From *A Heart Full of Peace* (Wisdom Publications)



Mindfulness and the Buddha's Eightfold Path

To understand how to practice mindfulness in daily life, says **Gaylon Ferguson**, we have to look at all eight steps of the Buddha's noble eightfold path.

IN HIS FIRST TEACHING at Deer Park, the Buddha praised mindfulness: “The Noble Eightfold Path is nourished by living mindfully.”

From the beginning, the path of awakening includes all aspects of our human lives: physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and social. The aim is a mindful life. This means that our relationship to our sexuality and our consumerist economic system, our parenting, and our politics are all part of the path.

This approach to living fully is outlined in the eightfold path. “Right mindfulness” is one aspect of this path, alongside right view, right intention, right effort, right meditative engagement, right speech, right livelihood, and right action. The Sanskrit word *samyak*—often translated as “right” or “perfect”—can also mean “complete.” Engaging mindfulness encourages complete engagement with life.

Let's walk through these aspects of the Buddhist spiritual path, returning mindfulness to her rightful place among her seven less famous but equally important sisters and brothers.

Right View

The central view of the Buddha's teaching is a middle way, avoiding the extremes of aggressive asceticism (being harsh with ourselves and others) and laissez-faire indulgence (spiritual laziness). We approach all our experience with basic friendliness and respect. In the context of meditation practice, this means gently placing awareness on our bodies and minds in a "not too tight, not too loose" manner. Without this view of fundamental loving-kindness, there is no mindfulness meditation. Practicing mindfulness as mere mental gymnastics leaves us feeling even more depleted.



Experience is the heart of the matter, but we need first to understand what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how mindfulness relates to the rest of our lives.

In a culture where "Just do it" now has the well-worn familiarity of a mantra, jumping into mindfulness practice without first contemplating the view seems an attractive option. Why study the classic teachings on meditation when the main point is to practice? Isn't the whole point not to think too much about it? But the Buddha wisely suggested study and contemplation as supports

to any practice. Yes, experience is the heart of the matter, but we need first to understand what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how mindfulness relates to the rest of our lives.

Right Intention

Why are we engaging in mindfulness? Contemplating our intention at the beginning of a session rouses our motivation. Our aim may be calmness or peace, stability or a more compassionate heart, or all of the above. The point is that we have already entered the session with some sense of purpose or direction. Take a moment for self-reflection and nonjudgmental self-awareness before rushing on. This gesture of self-respect can gently cut some of the momentum of our accumulated neurotic speed.

Acknowledging the motivation we already have can be the first step in an expanding journey. The stress and anxiety we sometimes feel are surely shared by others around us—in our families, our workplaces, our communities. Including a sense of practicing for their well-being and liberation is called “the great motivation.” We are walking a path of awakening that includes being generous and caring, patient and helpful. This expansiveness of intention brings spaciousness and warmth to our sitting practice, allowing those heartfelt qualities to pervade our daily living with others.

Right Effort

Effort also has an associated slogan in contemporary culture: “No pain, no gain.” If we don’t try and try again and try harder, we are told, no result can be attained.

This can lead to a one-sided approach to exertion, as though the Buddha’s meditation instruction was to place the attention “not too loosely, not too loosely.” We can find ourselves practicing with hypervigilance, eager participants in a new spiritual sport called Extreme Effort. Meditators can develop a habitual tightness instead of cultivating the relaxed spaciousness of heart and mind that originally inspired us toward awakening.

My first Buddhist meditation teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, spoke of non-effort as a worthy partner to effort: “Effort, non-effort and effort, non-effort—it’s beautiful.”

“

Mindfulness is an innate capacity,
present in all sentient beings.

Yes, it is important to apply ourselves, to engage fully in mindful living. But it is equally important to release all trying and confidently trust our innate mindfulness to shine through. All the Buddhist traditions of natural wakefulness, original goodness, or buddhanature are based on this sense of inborn wisdom not produced by meditating or walking the path. This is the practice of basic sanity through what is called “just sitting” or

“non-meditation” or “primordial great perfection.” As the pioneering Zen master Shunryu Suzuki Roshi phrased it: “The point we emphasize is strong confidence in our original nature.”

In this view, mindfulness is not a special attainment or an extraordinary event in our life journey. Mindfulness is an innate capacity, present in all sentient beings. Walking the path, we are gently cultivating our own nature, allowing seeds of potential to blossom. From this perspective, awakening is as natural as the dawning of the sun. We are invited to begin each session by feeling this naturally awake quality—and to return to this original openness again and again during practice and everyday life.

Right Meditative Engagement

The Sanskrit word *samadhi* is often translated as “meditative absorption,” but this can suggest being so absorbed in something (such as a favorite piece of music) that we are oblivious to everything around us.

If we engage our bodies and minds and breathing and emotions fully in mindfulness practice, on the other hand, that same quality of spacious connection can continue as we rise from meditation. Mindfulness goes hand in hand with noticing the environment around our body, around our breathing, around our thoughts and emotions. We listen to what our partner is saying rather than mentally replay the tense moments from our day at

work. We notice the swaying of the trees in the wind, just as we notice the movement of our legs in walking meditation. Same directness, same inclusiveness.

Right Speech

From mindful listening can arise mindful speaking. Here non-effort may provide another helpful hint: leaving pauses in our speech allows for genuine dialogue. Slowing down the impulsive momentum of saying one thing after another is a natural result of mindfulness. Mindful communication is the basis of mindful communities.

Mindless speech is speech that causes harm through gossip, slander, lying, and deception. The result of such speech—as when politicians play on our fears to incite hatred—is a divided society; we feel more disconnected from each other. Mindful speech is acting to heal societal wounds.

Right Livelihood

Mindfulness brings a sense of well-being, an inner richness we share with others by our work in a kindergarten or hospice, corporate offices or a bank. The ordinary meaning of “livelihood” connects it with surviving—the way we earn money in order to live. Right livelihood lifts our gaze from the simple mechanics of survival. Our work is the way we contribute to the common good.

Livelihood is our offering, an act of generosity. We are *called*—the root meaning of “vocation”—to serve and inspire, to propagate healthiness and sanity in myriad ways.

Right Action

Meditation in action is the natural expression of mindfulness. These steps on the path of awakening remind us that the proof of our practice is in the pudding of daily life. The whole purpose of this training, it has been said, is to manifest. Sitting still and radiating compassion are useful first steps, but now the old slogan is reborn amid the urgent necessity for compassionate activity to meet the challenges of climate change, increasing social inequality, and disintegrating societies based on fear: “Don’t just sit there, do something!”

Let’s conclude our contemplative walk by returning to where we began: the Buddha. The practice of mindfulness meditation and the teaching of the eightfold path have been handed down to us in human lineages of transmission beginning with the Awakened One. Thus, the Buddha stands as original ancestor as well as embodiment of the teacher principle. Living human teachers—sometimes called “spiritual friends”—remind us of the necessarily expansive quality of walking the path. We all have habitual blind spots, and so we contract from time to time into our own narrow versions of the path of awakening. Spiritual friends encourage and provoke and challenge us to engage mindfulness as a step toward a completely awakened life. ✿



Mindfulness is the Best Medicine

After thirteen years as a Buddhist nun, **Sister Dang Nghiem** looks back on her medical career and realizes monastic practice and medicine aren't really that different.

I HAD GRADUATED from medical school and was doing my residency in family practice when I met Thich Nhat Hanh and his monastic community. Soon after that, my partner died suddenly in an accident. His death helped me make a decision to follow a life of Buddhist practice. I left medicine after seven years of training and became a nun.

I have been a monastic for thirteen years. Yet I see now that you do not need to leave your profession in order to live a mindful life, whether it's medicine or another kind of work. In everything you do, you can bring to it awareness of your breath and body. You can unite body and mind, instead of keeping them separate from each other. When you stand up, you can be aware that you are standing up. When you stretch your body, you can follow your breathing and your movements. With mindfulness of the body, your listening becomes deeper and you are more aware of what's going on around you. Then take that awareness into your daily life and into your work.

Imagine that you're a doctor and you're listening to a patient. If you're thinking about other patients in other rooms and you ask the patient the same question several times, this will only add to their sickness and fear. The patient already feels vulnerable from being sick in the hospital. Now they feel that you're not truly present for them. If your mind is thinking of other patients in other rooms, you're wasting your time and your patient's.

“

In everything you do, you can bring to it awareness of your breath and body. You can unite body and mind, instead of keeping them separate from each other.

The present moment is the only moment we have.

It's the only moment in which we can make a difference for ourselves and others. Whatever we are doing and whomever we are with — whether it's ourselves, patients, clients, friends, or strangers — if we are truly anchored in our breath and our body, we can touch the moment deeply and be of benefit.

When I was a medical student, I took on a patient with end-stage gallbladder cancer. It was only three months into his diagnosis, but the cancer was already full blown. The patient, in his sixties, had become depressed and refused to eat. He was abrupt and harsh toward the nurses and doctors.

In the beginning, he wasn't friendly to me either, but slowly he opened up. Then he was given the option to have an operation to see whether or not the cancer could be removed safely. He

was reluctant and afraid. I told him that he had my full support in whichever decision he made. He decided to go through with the operation. Unfortunately, when the surgeons went in, they found that the cancer had metastasized to adjacent organs, and they closed his abdomen immediately.

That night I was on call and went to visit him. It was two o'clock in the morning. The other patient in his room was already sleeping, and the only illumination was from the light in the hallway. I sat quietly next to his bed. He said to me, "You know, doctor, I have no more hope. Yet, strangely enough, I feel more at peace in this moment than I have ever felt before."

I just sat with him. Before the operation, I had told him about my grandmother's death in Vietnam. She knew she was going to die and was peaceful about it. She called for all of her children to gather around her and she reminded them not to let me and my young brother know about her passing, because we were in the United States then and she didn't want to affect our studies.

My grandmother remained alert and peaceful during the last hours of her life. When I heard this account six months after her death, it changed my way of thinking about dying. When we live beautifully and when we die beautifully, it's a gift to ourselves, but it's also a gift to those who witness our lives and our deaths. This gift of non-fear is in fact the greatest gift that we can offer to our beloved.

I said to my patient, “My grandmother died peacefully and beautifully. You can also choose to die like that. You can recall all of the grace you’ve received throughout your life and you can give thanks. You can die, knowing your time of death and staying peaceful.”

When my patient was sent home, he was put on morphine for pain control, and he became confused and violent. His wife was frightened and saddened by this. Yet, during the last moments of his life, he became lucid. She called me the next day and told me, “He was so quiet and peaceful. Even though he couldn’t talk to me, he knew I was there, and it made me so happy!” At least twice she told me that she was happy.

In my spiritual practice as a nun, I don’t feel that I have left medicine. In fact, mindfulness is the most profound medicine that I can use in my daily life to take care of myself, and it’s the greatest medicine that I can offer to others. I do not regret that I spent twenty-four years in school, then became a nun. There’s no regret when you have done everything you can. If you give your whole heart to something, then when you make a shift to do something else, there is nothing to regret. Every moment is an opportunity to live and discover ourselves. ✿