

Why Practice Mindfulness?

Now that you have some idea of what mindfulness is, the next natural question is “Why bother to do it?” The answer is simple: *so you can have what you really want!*

And what, to paraphrase Freud, do people *really* want?

1. We want **to be free from suffering due to physical discomfort**. (Note that this is not necessarily the same as being *without* physical discomfort.)
2. We want **to be free from suffering due to emotional discomfort**. (Analogously this is not necessarily the same as being *without* emotional discomfort.)
3. We want **to derive great fulfillment from physical pleasure**. (Note that your level of sensual fulfillment is a dimension in its own right and is not necessarily dependant on the intensity, variety, or duration of the physical pleasure itself.)
4. We want **to derive great fulfillment from emotional pleasure**. (Analogously one’s level of emotional fulfillment is a dimension in its own right and is not necessarily dependant on the intensity, variety, or duration of the emotional pleasure itself.)
5. We want **to change habitual behaviors** that have negative consequences. (Substance abuse, food behaviors, expressions of emotion that are inappropriate in kind or intensity, procrastination, and so forth.)
6. We want **to understand deeply** who (and eventually what) we really are.
7. We want **to joyously serve** our fellow beings.

Let’s address each of these individually.

ITEMS 1 & 2: Wanting to be free from suffering due to physical and emotional suffering.

It turns out that...

- When you bring clarity and equanimity to physical discomforts in your body (sensations of pain, tiredness, sleepiness, nausea, and so forth) those discomforts cause you less suffering, i.e., they bother you less.
- When you bring clarity and equanimity to emotional discomforts in your body (sensations of sadness, fear, anger, shame, impatience, and so forth) those sensations cause you less suffering, i.e., they bother you less.

It also turns out that...

- The reduction in suffering due to uncomfortable body sensations described above is proportional to the amount of clarity and equanimity you can bring to those sensations.
- With sufficient practice, your baseline of clarity and equanimity can be increased to any required degree.
- On the other hand, physical or emotional discomfort cannot increase without limit, i.e., it can only grow to reach a certain finite level – the maximum possible activation level of the underlying neuronal circuits.

The above empirical facts lead to an extraordinary logical conclusion: With time and practice, it is possible for you to dramatically reduce or completely eliminate suffering due to physical or emotional discomfort, even when the discomfort itself cannot (or should not!) be eliminated.

ITEMS 3 & 4: Wanting to derive great fulfillment from physical and emotional pleasure.

It also turns out that...

- When you bring clarity and equanimity to physical pleasures in your body (relaxation, eating, making love, and so forth) those pleasures end up giving you greater satisfaction, i.e., they fulfill you more than usual.
- When you bring clarity and equanimity to emotional pleasures in your body (joy, love, enthusiasm, and so forth) those pleasures end up giving you greater satisfaction, i.e., they fulfill you more than usual.

ITEM 5: Wanting to let go of old negative behaviors and acquiring new positive ones.

At any given moment, the force that drives us to do negative behaviors or prevents us from doing positive ones can only come up as...

- Physical discomfort
(For example, the physical withdrawal symptoms during abstinence.)
- Emotional discomfort
(For example, the anxiety, teariness, irritability, impatience, and so forth that are temporarily relieved by a certain behavior.)
- Physical pleasure
(For example, the pleasant physical sensations that arise when you use a substance.)
- Emotional pleasure
(For example, the pleasant emotional sensations that arise when you engage in or even think about engaging in a certain behavior.)
- Mental images (of desired objects, situations).

- Internal talk (that justifies the negative behavior).

When physical and emotional discomfort cause less suffering, (due to increased clarity and equanimity) they no longer goad you into doing undesired behaviors.

When physical and emotional pleasure bring more fulfillment (also due to increased clarity and equanimity) they no longer seduce you into doing undesired behaviors.

Moreover, when you bring clarity and equanimity to the thought part of an urge (the Image Activity and Talk Activity), it becomes possible to just observe that thought without automatically buying into it.

Thus, your ability to let urges arise and pass within the container of clarity and equanimity is closely tied to your ability to resist those urges.

To summarize, clarity and equanimity reduce suffering and increase fulfillment on the inside. And this in turn makes it easier to change behaviors and become the person you want to be on the outside.

Thus, mindfulness skill represents a powerful tool for achieving external changes as well as internal happiness.

ITEM 6: Wanting a deep understand of oneself.

It should be obvious that in order to deeply understand who you are, you must experience yourself as you are. Clarity could be looked upon as the *ability* to experience something just as it is. Equanimity could be looked upon as the *willingness* to experience something just as it is.

The clarity component in mindfulness is a kind of awareness extending tool that allows us to better understand our inner world, just as a microscope is an awareness extending tool that allows us to better understand our outer world.

The metaphor can be carried further. On a good microscope, you can turn the nosepiece to get greater powers of magnification. This allows you to study the fabric of the outer world at finer and finer scales (tissues, cells, sub-cellular organelles, and so forth). In the same way, as your mindfulness skill grows, you will be able to study the fabric of your inner world at finer and finer levels.

- At the psychological level...
Large scale personality structures, dominant life patterns, why you are the way you are.
- At the system theory level...
How sensory elements (i.e., physical sensations, emotional sensations, mental imagery, and internal talk) act and interact to produce complex subjective states such as will, memory, judgment, suffering, fulfillment, separateness, oneness, "I am-ness," and so forth.

- At the energetic level...
The sensory elements which comprise the mind-body system are themselves made up of vibratory atoms, wave packets of energy. (The word energy here is used in its original Christian sense of “spirit” not in its modern scientific sense of “capacity to exert force over distance.”)
- At the deep spiritual level...
Those “vibratory atoms” continuously arise from and return to the Ground State of Consciousness, the Creator, your Source.

ITEM 7: Wanting a joyously serve others.

This may have struck you as a bit strange. Does everyone really want to serve their fellow beings? Explicitly, perhaps no; but implicitly, yes. This comes about as a (perhaps unintended) consequence of fathoming what you are: To know yourself at the *deepest* level is to directly experience your Source.

But to directly experience *your* Source is to directly experience *everyone's* Source, and therefore, to experience everyone as a sibling.

An abiding sense of connectedness to all of creation and a call to serve in some way follow automatically, as a corollary.

Mindfulness and Concentration

In order to get a complete conceptual picture of what mindfulness is, we need to address one final issue: What is the precise relationship between mindfulness skill and concentration power? By concentration power, I mean your ability to stay focused on what is relevant.

We can look at this question from two points of view. On one hand, mindfulness could be looked upon as a particular way of applying one's concentration power. In other words, concentration power is a generic skill and mindfulness is a specific application of that skill.

The first person in recorded history to formalize a theory of mindfulness was Prince Siddhattha Gotama, known as the Buddha, or Awakened One. Indeed, it was the discovery of the method of mindfulness that gave him the key he needed to achieve awakening.

As a young boy, Siddhattha would sometimes spontaneously enter states of deep concentration by focusing on simple objects such as freshly plowed earth. Later on, his innate concentration skills were honed to extraordinary depth under his first two teachers, Arada Kalama and Uttaka Ramaputta. These masters taught that deep withdrawn concentration states were the ultimate goal of spiritual practice.

Siddhattha came to see things differently. His great innovation, the great discovery that led to the Awakening, was that one could use concentration as an investigative tool to understand the underlying mechanics of suffering and selfhood. Specifically, one could use concentration to dissect the perception of “self as thing” into its basic sensory building blocks and then use

concentration as a microscope to see into the vibrating vacuous nature of those building blocks. Concentration when used this way is called mindfulness.

So from this perspective, mindfulness skill is a specific way of using a more generic skill – concentration power. For this reason, some people spend a lot of time concentrating on simple objects before undertaking mindfulness practice.

But the converse point of view can also be taken. Even if one has little concentration power to begin with, the attempt to practice mindfulness techniques will in and of itself teach you how to concentrate. From this point of view, mindfulness training delivers yet another benefit in addition to the ones mentioned previously.

Mindfulness training dramatically increases your general concentration ability.

Why is that important? Simply stated, **concentration power is the single most universally applicable and most deeply empowering skill that a human being can cultivate.**

Any other skill you wish to attain depends on your ability to focus. Likewise, the success of any endeavor you undertake depends at least somewhat on your ability to focus. Yet concentration skill, which logically speaking, should be the leitmotiv in all education from grade school onward, is seldom even mentioned, let alone systematically taught. No wonder things get so screwed up!

Even people who are interested in cultivating concentration often have an erroneous concept of its nature. There is a tendency to think of concentration as always involving a narrowing of attention. But narrowing one's scope is not the defining characteristic of the concentrated state. Here's how I like to define concentration power.

Concentration is the ability to attend to what is deemed relevant at a given time and to let go of what is deemed irrelevant, any time you want, for as long as you want. What is deemed relevant could be quite narrow, but it could also be quite broad.

For example, when you drive your car, what's relevant are the sights and sounds of the road plus the touch sensations that link you physically to the car. What's irrelevant (most of the time) are mental images, internal talk, and emotional feeling in your body that constitute memory, planning, fantasy and judgment.

Conclusion

Scientists sometimes speak of the “unreasonable effectiveness” of mathematics. By that they mean that when simple mathematical methods are used to model the natural world, they often confer power and insight beyond what one would have expected. The payoff seems to be disproportionately large relative to the investment.

Hopefully it is now clear that the method of mindfulness is an unreasonably effective way to increase human happiness.