

Everyday Mindfulness

A guide to using mindfulness to improve your well-being and reduce stress and anxiety in your life.

by

Colin Thompson

Notes to readers.

1. This book has a number of web links embedded in the text and are underlined to indicate a link. If you have a printed copy of this book and don't want to type the links then you can access them at www.stillmind.com.au/MindfulnessbookLinks.htm.
2. I welcome feedback in any form. If you are new to mindfulness, I would be particularly interested to hear about passages that you found difficult to understand. Those familiar with mindfulness might want to question my ideas. Feedback in any form to colThompson@gmail.com is welcome.

About the Author

Colin Thompson is a psychologist and counsellor in private practice in Melbourne, Australia. His practice is largely based around teaching people how to use mindfulness to live fuller and healthier lives. He has practised Buddhist meditation for thirty years, currently in the Zen tradition. His website is www.stillmind.com.au

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Introduction

What is this thing called mindfulness ... Has it been around for thousands of years ... How can it help me? This book is about answering these questions.

Mindfulness is a time-honoured way of improving your well-being, happiness and sense of fulfilment. It has been shown to reduce depression, anxiety, substance abuse and even pain. The practice of mindfulness was developed in India over 2500 years ago. It was part of a path to enlightenment and awakening and most religions including Hindu, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam have meditation traditions. These ancient techniques of meditation have recently been adapted to address twenty first century pressures of modern living, and that's what this book is about.

Have you ever felt a bit down, maybe upset about what someone said to you or perhaps anxious about a meeting in a few days time? Possibly you've found your thoughts running out of control or you worry a fair bit. Maybe you even have a serious disease, are in pain, or suffering from a mental illness such as depression or schizophrenia? Mindfulness may help in all these situations.

So what does it mean to be mindful? As a child I was occasionally told, "Mind your manners". This I think meant that I should be aware of what I was doing and how it was affecting other people – usually adults! That's not a bad start, mindfulness certainly is about paying attention. Paying attention to what is happening right now, right before our eyes ... and ears and noses and other senses, including our internal ones. What pains and tensions are there in my body, how am I feeling right now, am I aware of what I am thinking or am I on automatic, daydreaming, or perhaps going over and over a difficult encounter?

Many of the problems mentioned above relate to the future or the past. Anxiety and stress can result from worrying about future events. Depression is often associated with replaying past events in our mind. We go over past events or are anxious about the future. Much of our thinking is not in the present, and the present is the only time we've got – a series of present moments.

By moving our life more into the present moment, we relate to the past and the future in a different way and our habitual unhelpful thinking about past and future events drops away, becomes less insistent, and we find *right here, right now* a more vibrant and alive place to be. "Since I've been practising mindfulness, I've regained a lot of the energy spent fighting off sadness and anger, my mind is much clearer now," said one client. "The flowers seem brighter," said another with a puzzled expression on her face.

Tuning in to the present moment is where sensations come in – a sensation is always in the present. Feel your legs and buttocks pressing on the chair for a few seconds ... listen carefully to any sound nearby. Congratulations, you have just been practising mindfulness! By doing mindfulness exercises based around sensations (e.g. the breath) and by becoming more aware in our daily life of what's going on around us, we can spend more time in the present.

When our habitual repetitive worry or anxious thinking fades we find we have more time and energy for what our brain was made for: creativity, problem solving, appreciating music to name a few.

So, is that it? Observe my sensations, live in the present and all my problems evaporate? Almost. There's two aspects to mindfulness. Siddhartha Gautama, known as the awakened one, or the Buddha, spoke of mindfulness as "Seeing things, as they are, right now". John Kabat-Zinn, the father of modern mindfulness therapy, paraphrases this as "Paying attention to the present moment – non-judgementally". Observing without judgement is the second aspect of mindfulness.

Have you ever thought, "What'd I say that for? That was stupid", or imagined all the things that might go wrong in a future situation or maybe in your life? Perhaps you even have a strong internal critic commenting on most of your actions. "She wouldn't go out with someone like you," or "That's much too difficult to even try."

These are all judgements. We are a judging species. Often it's how we change and head in the right direction. We are about to enter a dark street at night. A combination of fear and judgement allows us to come up with a decision on how to proceed. Our habit of judging can let us down however as when a student attends a lecture and doesn't quite understand the first five minutes. She thinks, "This is too hard", and feels a little nervous. As a result she cannot concentrate so well. She misses the next couple of lines and thinks (judges herself), "I'll never understand this", resulting in more anxiety. "If I don't understand it perfectly, I must be dumb" is accompanied by a sinking feeling in the stomach. "Why am I so stupid?" Eventually to give some sense of relief to her anxiety, she leaves the lecture. It is these self judgements that have snowballed and brought on anxiety, a nagging feeling in her stomach and perhaps a sense of unworthiness.

In many small ways too, we are constantly judging: this tastes nice, that looks awful, such a beautiful flower, it's horrible feeling this way. The point is, it becomes a habit and we don't notice ourselves doing it, especially in self judgements. And many of these self judgements, as in the case of the student, are unhelpful. They don't lead to anything positive; they don't lead to life.

Even positive judgements can take us away from the immediacy of a situation. As I sit outside writing this, early jasmine is in full bloom, filling my garden with its scent. If I have the thought, "How beautiful!", it puts a small space between me and the experience. Just being with the jasmine is vibrant, life affirming. There's no need to stop saying "How beautiful", just note the difference in these two ways of relating.

In following the mindfulness approach, you'll be invited to observe your breathing as it is right now, shallow, deep, relaxed, whatever; breath coming in, breath going out. No need for judging here. You'll be similarly invited to choose daily tasks to do with full awareness, such as brushing your teeth, perhaps realising how automatically you have done them in the past. You'll gradually become aware (if you were not already) of your own "favourite" negative judging thoughts and see them for what they really are, just thoughts you happen to be thinking right now, not ideas to be believed uncritically.

As a result you may find negative thinking drops away, resulting in less anxiety and stress. Depression might lift. Even pain can cause less suffering when you start being mindful of it rather than fighting it or wishing it less.

So that's what this book is about, how to deal with life's issues and live a fuller, more vibrant life by staying in the present. Simple? Yes. Easy? No.

You can find an introductory discussion of mindfulness by the gentle Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aubF7v-MlMM>. That's another thing about this book; it has a lot of links to further material on the internet. References are listed at the end, but in most cases they are also embedded in this text and are underlined to indicate a link. If you have a printed copy of this book and don't want to type the links then you can access them at www.stillmind.com.au/MindfulnessbookLinks.htm.

This book takes you in stages through the practice of mindfulness. First I discuss some of the benefits of mindfulness, such as improved well-being, a more stable and balanced mind and a reduction in stress and anxiety. In chapter three, Mindfulness Practice, you will learn how to practise mindfulness of the breath, do a body scan and also how to establish your own mindfulness practice. Breath awareness simply means sitting comfortably and paying attention to the breath as best you can for a few minutes. This often results in people finding how many thoughts they have bouncing around in their head, often banal or self-critical thoughts. Thoughts lead to more thoughts, especially if you pay attention to them or believe them. By focussing on some sensation, in the present, unhelpful thoughts are starved of oxygen. Slowly, as the thoughts are not fed, their influence wains and often the number of thoughts reduce and you feel a little calmer and more in control. Insight into the mind and its habits grows.

The body scan practice, on the other hand, puts us in touch with our body, its tensions and stresses. As these are frequently connected to emotions it gives us the ability to learn more about our feelings and in particular to cope with troublesome emotions better.

Chapter four discusses why sitting and observing can be so beneficial and lead to peace and tranquillity. It explains how unhelpful thoughts lose their power and why feeling our feelings works better than fighting or ignoring our feelings.

While the formal mindfulness practices of breath and body awareness are very helpful, it is important to connect them with daily activities, and that is the subject of chapter five. Here, you will learn how to practise mindfulness in everyday situations such as brushing your teeth or eating a meal. Mini-mindfulness practices are introduced that may be practised regularly throughout the day. All this is the more formal part of the practice, but it is important to learn how to use mindfulness in difficult life situations, and so in chapter six, we look at a few of these, such as those leading to depression and anger.

Thoughts, emotions and body sensations are important aspects of the mind, and chapter seven shows how these develop as a difficult situation evolves. Instead of getting overwhelmed and upset, this chapter demonstrates how you can work with each aspect to gain control of your mind and not allow the situation to spiral out of control.

In the next chapter, we see how stress occurs and how mindfulness may help in its management to prevent normal stress developing into chronic stress. Chapter nine, Mindful Movement, discusses the benefits of walking meditation, yoga and exercise – all done mindfully of course.

Mindfulness was developed for much more than dealing with difficult situations in life. It is a whole philosophy of life and if you are inspired to look further into this aspect then the final chapter, Deeper Benefits of Mindfulness, gives you some pointers.

While this book will get you started, it is useful to obtain help from a good teacher throughout the process. A teacher can help you establish a practice and lead you towards using mindfulness to deal with your specific life difficulties. Ideally you would look for a teacher with a strong mindfulness practice of their own, and who is also skilled in some form of psychotherapy so that they can show you how to apply mindfulness to your personal life situation and help guide your practice.

Introduction – Summary

- *Everyday Mindfulness* describes how you can use the ancient techniques of mindfulness in a modern day context to deal with difficult situations in your life, and experience an increased enjoyment and sense of well-being. It may also inspire you to seek further and discover the deeper experiences of mindfulness and meditation in general.
- It will also be of help to health professionals who want to understand better how mindfulness can help their clients.
- Mindfulness means paying attention to the present moment, non-judgementally and in so doing fully experiencing life.
- You will learn various formal mindfulness practices such as mindfulness of the breath, the body scan and mini-mindfulness exercises, as well as how to use mindfulness in difficult situations such as those provoking stress and anxiety.
- You will learn how to work with your thoughts, emotions and body sensations.
- *Everyday Mindfulness* is available on the web at www.stillmind.com.au/Mindfulnessbook.htm and links can be found at www.stillmind.com.au/MindfulnessbookLinks.htm

2. Benefits of Mindfulness

No-one is likely to start something new unless they have a reason. So let's talk straight away about the benefits of becoming more mindful. Benefits fall broadly into three areas: well-being, mental benefits and therapeutic benefits. Well-being benefits include having more energy or perhaps enjoying a walk in the local park more, while mental benefits include an increased self understanding and stability of the mind. Therapeutic benefits are seen in areas such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and pain, all of which can be improved with a mindfulness practice.

Well-Being

People who practise mindfulness regularly, talk of a number of improvements in their life. One client told me her practice was an "island of peace" in her stressful day where she could leave her concerns behind for a time. Others talk of seeing trees or people "more clearly" often for only brief periods, but it fills them with a sense of really being there and connected to the landscape or to another person. Before digital and cable TV, if a TV was not perfectly tuned, there would be a hiss or "snow" in the picture. Sometimes as I moved the antenna around the picture would suddenly become clear. Mindfulness can bring moments of clarity such as this which make us feel that much more alive and connected.

Since mindfulness usually reduces the flow of mindless chatter some people experience, clients often tell me that they have more energy, that they "experience" themselves more and/or simply feel better about themselves.

Since one of the practices is to scan the whole body for sensations, occasionally people experience their body for the first time, resulting in a richer experience of emotions and life.

Mindfulness Affects the Mind

Mindfulness tends to make our mind more balanced and flexible. Concentration may improve, we become more self aware and we understand our own mental processes better. We become less reactive.

Have you ever found your mind jumping uncontrollably from work to family to someone you are annoyed with. Mindfulness addresses this directly. In the breath awareness practice in the next chapter you will be constantly returning the focus of your attention to the breath. The mind however, often goes off on a train of thought about say your job or the next task you need to do. When you realise you have been distracted, you are encouraged to gently bring the focus of attention back to the breath, perhaps as many as twenty times in five minutes. You bring the mind back without any annoyance or judgement about being unable to keep it fixed on the breath and without judging the thought you were having. Breath awareness is a great practice for controlling your own mind and choosing for yourself what you will focus on.

Most of us have experienced a dull mind. It's a bit like the mind we have when we first wake up, only it continues throughout the day. On the other hand there is the highly agitated mind, going at a hundred miles an hour which cannot slow itself down. Mindfulness tends to bring these two extremes into balance, resulting in our mind being in an alert clear space. Much of this comes

from a reduction in the wheel spinning thoughts that often accompany modern living. The result of becoming mindful of our breath or body, is that our thoughts and emotions tend to throw us around less, which in turn results in a clear balanced mind.

Our mind has mental grooves it runs along. We need to be able to do things without thinking too much about them. Suppose driving a car required the thinking and concentration of our first drive, every time we drove. Clearly automating the ability to tie our shoe laces is an advantage. But what if we automate getting angry or if avoiding conflict becomes a habit. Worse still, avoiding conflict is a habit we may be totally unaware of. We can run a habit like avoidance, often feeling a bit uneasy, without even realising we are doing it. Mindfulness allows us to become aware of these mental grooves, or habits, and gives us the possibility of changing them.

Becoming mindful can be a bit like being promoted from the factory floor to being in charge of the whole production line. A person in a car factory line may not know whether the two bits of hose they are joining together are part of the cooling system or part of the braking system. This is a bit like not knowing why we are feeling sad or even that sad is what we are feeling. The supervisor has a view of the whole line and can see the car taking shape. Similarly with mindfulness you start to be able to see anger or anxiety building and your own inputs to it. This view allows the possibility of choosing how to respond to a situation that used to end in anger. Maybe walking away, maybe laughing or maybe even getting angry and using the energy this gives us for effective action. Often we do not need to consciously change our habit patterns; seeing them in action is sufficient to allow us to let go. For instance we might become conscious that we are trying to manipulate someone to act in a particular way. Simply being aware of such motivation may be sufficient to change our habitual behaviour.

We all have habitual reactions to situations and there are many possible responses to a single event. Nearby, a child slips and grazes himself and starts to cry. One person may feel sympathy for the child, another recoils in horror at the blood. A third rushes in to help the child. One blames an unwatchful parent; another slips off, feeling a sense of relief at being away from a difficult situation. In fact many of these responses are to reduce our own discomfort rather than deal with the situation in hand. The point is that a lot of these reactions are automated, habitual. With mindfulness we get a chance to see our habits for just what they are, ways of acting in similar situations that have sort of worked before, learned behaviours that can be unlearned if they are unhelpful. Mindfulness gives us a chance to reflect on the effectiveness of our responses and perhaps to choose to try a different option.

This leads us to the question of reactivity. We all react. We feel an itch and we scratch it. Someone dangerously pushes in front of us in traffic; we get angry. Maybe we blow the horn or yell. We have reacted from habit. Many people, when talking of an angry reaction they've had, say that the reaction "just happened" without any conscious input from them. With mindfulness we start to see such things building up. We might note our stress levels rising as we get into the car and drive into the traffic. We might notice our vigilance for not allowing anyone in front of us or the fear as they make their sudden move. All of these have contributed to our outburst and we can become aware of them.

Therapeutic Benefits of Mindfulness

Anxiety, depression and stress are some of the mental problems that can be helped by mindfulness. Anxiety is a fear-like response to the future. You have a feeling of anxiety, feel a bit

jittery and nervous and also have some body sensations such as butterflies in the stomach or sweating palms. Often anxiety is fed by thoughts that keep it alive and maybe even rising. Mindfulness tends to change our attitude to these thoughts. They move from being something we must believe absolutely, to a thought we happen to be having at the moment and so there is less need to continue on to another anxious thought. Similarly that jittery feeling of anxiety may become a feeling that we happen to be experiencing right now rather than something overwhelming that feels it will take us over and perhaps never end. Much of our difficulty with anxiety and panic can come from the body sensations, a pounding heart or a clutching stomach. With awareness and practise, these symptoms can be observed simply for what they are, physical sensations. This perspective can help alleviate the anxiety symptoms. This highlights a major aspect of mindfulness. **Mindfulness works mostly by changing our attitude to the symptoms, rather than changing the symptoms themselves.** It is often said that mindfulness involves moving towards the symptom, embracing and accepting it, rather than pushing it away and fighting it. Thoughts become thoughts we are currently having, not something to be believed uncritically. Emotions are just part of current experience, not something to be fought off. In the case of emotions like sadness some people are surprised to find a richness in fully feeling their sadness. Similarly, body feelings which are closely associated with strong emotions such as anxiety and sadness are not half so bad when they are viewed simply as a tightness in the stomach.

This change in attitude was particularly clear in a group of people with schizophrenia. After they had undergone a course in mindfulness, they reported no reduction in the frequency of symptoms but their hospital admissions were cut in half. They still experienced paranoia and hallucinations but these were not so troublesome any more.

Stress reduction is another benefit of mindfulness to which a whole chapter is devoted later.

Finally mindfulness has proved very useful in the alleviation of pain. I have a long standing injury in my back, brought on from trying to bowl too fast as a teenager. I can still feel the weakness as I type and it has given out on me a number of times. When I did my first meditation course in Delhi in the seventies we did a body scan for days on end and my most painful spot was the weakness in my back. It was excruciating to scan through that area. Once though, I had the quite amazing experience of nothing changing, all the aspects of the “pain” were the same, only it no longer hurt. I cannot explain it in any other terms. I have a friend who gets bad headaches on bushwalks. I am not allowed to talk to him for some hours as he gets “beneath” the pain. Michael Anderson who taught me mindfulness therapy says in his book *Mindfulness Practice*, “I have observed both personally and professionally that rather than avoiding the pain or trying to block it out, individuals who practise being non-discriminating with their experience of pain are able to manage the pain more successfully. In some situations the pain fades away completely.” By non-discriminating he means not fighting the pain such as by wishing it was less.

Life, the Universe and Everything

A final “benefit” of mindfulness that I and many others find, is that it helps explore deeper existential issues like, who am I, what is life’s purpose and even death. This personal exploration was the reason mindfulness was first developed by people such as Siddhartha Gotama, known as the Buddha or awakened one. The final chapter gives a bit of the flavour of this.

Comments on mindfulness

- Mindfulness gives me a daily check in. Calm, still, balanced. I can go back there during the day when I need to.
- More clarity, less fog.
- Mindfulness validates me and makes me know I exist. It's about breath and a beating heart.
- I didn't know my thoughts were so mundane.
- Everything goes into synch, togetherness. Before, my head was in one place and my body somewhere else.
- It gives me more choices. Mindfulness is the general leading the army.
- I do breath awareness for five minutes, just to get thoughts out of my head.
- Yes I tried it a couple of times, but I got bored – not going to do it again. (And he didn't!)
- It helps clear my mind if there's a lot to think about.
- I have more anxiety now, but it's not bothering me.
- Mindfulness is my foot soldier.
- Meditation is an essential part of my care plan. Days flowed together with no freshness. Now I get a new day and a new start.
- It gives me an insight into how my brain works.
- Mindfulness makes me more aware of my feelings and what is their [other people's] stuff.

Benefits of Mindfulness – Summary

- Mindfulness improves our well-being, particularly in gaining a richer more connected experience of life.
- It makes our mind more alert, balanced, and reduces unhelpful thoughts.
- It gives an overview of situations and aids a more flexible response.
- Mindfulness helps alleviate pain and many mental conditions.
- It changes our attitude to our symptoms, rather than the symptoms themselves.
- Mindfulness can help us address the big questions of life.

3. Mindfulness Practice

How to Sit

The aim of a mindfulness session of the breath is, to observe our breath (as best we can), and return to the breath, any time we realise we have been distracted, e.g. by a thought. There is nothing else to a mindfulness session!

To do this it is helpful to take a particular posture, a dignified posture that says we are doing something important. Settle into a comfortable position, by sitting in a firm, straight backed chair or on a cushion on the floor. Make sure your upper body is self supporting. Your back should be vertical, with a gentle “S” bend, not stiff. Mild rocking from side to side and forward and back may help to find a relaxed upright position. Allow your neck to be free so your head can float upwards and your back lengthen and widen. Tucking the chin in a little, allows you to feel an upward stretch in the back of the neck. It may help to imagine a light thread attached to the back of your scalp pulling your head gently upwards and allowing your spine to lengthen. Adjust your posture back to this comfortable self supporting position at any time during the exercise. ([photo link](#) - see page two for information on internet links in this book)

Mindfulness of Breath

Mindfulness of the breath is about selecting some part of the breath cycle and paying attention to it as fully as possible. You might choose the touch of the breath as it passes in through the nostrils, or the cool sensation of the breath above the roof of the mouth or, more usually, the expansion and contraction of the abdomen. Note that the focus is on observing a real everyday physical sensation, nothing special. Naturally you will be distracted from this from time to time, e.g. by thoughts or nearby sounds. When thoughts arise, the aim is to let them be, without getting caught up in them. Just keep observing the breath. Allowing the thoughts to simply be, is quite tricky and often you’ll get caught up in a train of thoughts. And train it can be, sometimes rattling on for minutes with no real awareness of breath. No matter, in this case simply briefly note what you were thinking about and gently escort the attention back to the breath.

This all constitutes the first part of mindfulness, namely, “being as aware as possible of the present moment.” The second part is “without judgement”, which in the case of this exercise means accepting that the mind will wander. It also involves understanding that the thought you had is just a thought, even if it is a negative one and there is no need to judge the thought as bad. Thoughts are just thoughts. If a thought such as, “Gee I was stupid,” or “He’s a real dickhead,” or “Wasn’t it lovely on the beach at Noosa,” pops up, then there is no need to condemn or judge the thought, simply note it as a thought you are currently having and return your attention to the breath.

“Surely it makes a difference if we have a hundred distracting thoughts in ten minutes or two thoughts?” suggested a student. Well no, in terms of the exercise, no difference. At one time we are learning to sail in rough seas and at another the we are practising sailing in calmer waters. Both lessons are necessary.

So what’s so special about the breath? Nothing really. For mindfulness we could focus on anything that’s in the present. For example the wind in our face, the sounds nearby, what we are

eating and so on and we will discuss the benefits of doing this later, but for a mindfulness exercise the breath is very useful. It's always there, it's a little calming, it can give us some indication of our stress levels. We can observe the breath at any time, such as in a supermarket queue or traffic, not just when we are doing a formal exercise. Because the breath comes and goes, and then comes again, it is a great metaphor for "letting go and letting be." Just as we let the breath go, so we can allow thoughts (and emotions) to run their course without getting too involved in them. As a result they exert less control on us. In this way, mindfulness of the breath can be particularly useful for people who suffer depression or anxiety as thoughts can often trigger or escalate both of these. In later chapters we will discuss how you can work in a mindful way with your particular troubling thoughts or emotions.

Mindfulness of the Breath

[\(Audio version available free on the stillmind website\)](#)

Having taken an erect, dignified and comfortable posture. Gently allow your eyes to close.

Bring your awareness to the level of physical sensations by focusing your attention on the sensations of touch and pressure in your body where it makes contact with the floor and whatever you are sitting on. Spend a minute or two exploring these sensations.

Now bring your awareness to the changing patterns of physical sensations in the lower abdomen as the breath moves in and out of your body (When you first try this practice, it may be helpful to place your hand on your lower abdomen and become aware of the changing pattern of sensations where your hand makes contact with your abdomen. Having "tuned in" to the physical sensations in this area in this way, you can remove your hand and continue to focus on the sensations in the abdominal wall.)

Focus your awareness on the sensations of slight stretching as the abdominal wall rises with each inbreath, and of gentle deflation as it falls with each outbreath. As best you can, follow with your awareness the changing physical sensations in the lower abdomen all the way through as the breath enters your body on the inbreath and all the way through as the breath leaves your body on the outbreath, perhaps noticing the slight pauses between one inbreath and the following outbreath, and between one outbreath and the following inbreath.

There is no need to try to control the breathing in any way—simply let the breath breathe itself. As best you can, also bring this attitude of allowing to the rest of your experience. There is nothing to be fixed, no particular state to be achieved. As best you can, simply allow your experience to be your experience, without needing it to be other than it is.

Sooner or later (usually sooner), your mind will wander away from the focus on the breath in the lower abdomen to thoughts, planning, daydreams,—whatever. This is perfectly OK—it's simply what minds do. It is not a mistake or a failure. When you notice that your awareness is no longer on the breath, gently congratulate yourself—you have come back and are once more aware of your experience! You may want to acknowledge briefly where the mind has been ("Ah, I've been away thinking"). Then, gently escort the awareness back to a focus on the changing pattern of physical sensations in the lower abdomen, renewing the intention to pay attention to the ongoing inbreath or outbreath.

However often you notice that the mind has wandered (and this will quite likely happen over and over and over again), as best you can, congratulate yourself each time on reconnecting with your experience in the moment, gently escorting the attention back to the breath, and simply resume following the changing pattern of physical sensations that come with each inbreath and outbreath.

As best you can, bring a quality of kindness to your awareness, perhaps seeing the repeated wanderings of the mind as opportunities to bring patience and gentle curiosity to your experience.

Continue with the practice for 15 minutes, or longer if you wish, perhaps reminding yourself from time to time that the intention is simply to be aware of your experience in each moment, as best you can, using the breath as an anchor to gently reconnect with the here and now each time you notice that your mind has wandered and is no longer down in the abdomen, following the breath.

Tips

- At the start of sitting it is helpful to bring your attention quickly to the practice of mindfulness. Perhaps by deliberately letting go of whatever you were last doing, perhaps by intentionally looking at your chair or cushion. A small bow can help focus the mind.
- So far as is possible, drop any expectations of how the practice will be today, of doing it well or badly or how you'll feel at the end.
- You may wish to focus your concentration by counting your breaths. On the outbreath say "one" quietly to yourself and then "two" on the next outbreath. When you reach "ten", start at the beginning again, saying "one", "two", "three" on the outbreaths. (If you find yourself missing ten and ending up in the twenties and beyond, try counting backwards from ten).
- Use your normal natural breath, without trying to control it in any way.
- Understand that the mind drifting away is a normal, even expected activity. There is no need to be upset or self critical of this.
- Bring qualities of curiosity and gentleness towards the breath and kindness and patience towards yourself.
- [Attitudes](#) that are useful to bring to mindfulness practice are: beginner's mind, patience, persistence, non-striving, self trust, letting go and acceptance. These are in turn cultivated by the practice.
- If you experience difficulties such as repeated urges to look at the clock or get up and leave, then observe the urge very closely following your thoughts - "I'm bored, I've got to stop". Note what emotions you are having, perhaps anxiety or agitation, and the body sensations e.g. tensing or breathing changes and then return to the breath. Do this twice and on the third occasion follow the urge, get up or look at the clock. Do it with full

awareness and without self criticism. You may also experiment with getting up and walking mindfully (chapter nine) around the room.

- At least once per week practise mindfulness without the aid of a recording.
- It is useful in the early stages of establishing a mindfulness practice to keep a record of your daily mindfulness exercises. Also record when you do not do the exercise and note any self critical thoughts which may arise. ([Mindfulness record link](#))
- Transitions are times when we often lose mindfulness, so at the end of the practice try to extend your awareness into the next activity, either by continuing a focus on the breath or by bringing the mind fully to bear on the next activity.

If you wish to establish a regular mindfulness practice then choosing a regular timeslot such as after your morning shower or before the evening meal will help. Using the same place each day will help you settle more quickly, especially if it is a quiet spot. Turn off your mobile phone, radio, and TV. However any distractions such as noise from traffic or from others nearby can be noted and let go of, in much the same way as thoughts.

Mindfulness is about being in the present moment, non-judgementally. Part of this comes from not judging yourself when you are sidetracked by a train of thoughts, but just as important is not judging yourself if you do not do your practice on a given day or on many days. Simply note that you have not done it and continue with your current activity. “Shoulds”, such as “I should do the practice every day” can be treated in much the same way. If you feel guilt or anxiety then simply say to yourself, “I see that I am feeling guilty about not doing my practice”, perhaps noting that in that moment you *are* practising mindfulness!

Mindfulness of the breath may be returned to at any time either when you are experiencing stress or when you choose to do a bit of mindfulness on the run. We will discuss this later in the section on mini-mindfulness (chapter five).

Equal Breathing – a Different Breathing Exercise

Equal breathing is not strictly a mindfulness practice, though like anything else, it can be done mindfully. Equal breathing is a calming breathing practice which is very useful when your thoughts are racing or out of control. It has two parts. The first is to get the “breath count”. To do this you simply count to yourself slowly (approximately seconds) as you breathe in and again as you breathe out. It may take a couple of breaths to get “the count”. Let’s say you take a count of four to breathe in and a count of three to breathe out. The second part of the practice is then to lengthen the shorter, in this case the outbreath, to four so that your breath is now equal, a count of four in and a count of four out. Continue this slower breathing for four or more breaths. If your counts above were both equal to start with, e.g. five in and five out, then the technique is to lengthen both by one count. The count becomes six in and six out. If you are going to use this breath technique, you need to learn it by practising it say six times a day for a few days until you can do it fairly easy. Then use it whenever you need it to calm your mind.

This practice works to calm the mind in a number of ways. It is a little bit tricky so the effort involved distracts you from any “stinkin’ thinkin’ ”. Secondly the breath is close to the emotions and so paying attention to the breath tends to take a little energy out of strong emotions. Finally

in lengthening the breath we are working to slow things down throughout the body. ([Equal breathing web link](#))

Sleep

Mindfulness of the breath can be very helpful if you wake up and cannot get back to [sleep](#). It takes a little discipline but if you can do mindfulness of the breath when you awaken during the night, then you are already getting around 80% of the restorative value of sleep, even if you are wide awake. It tends to keep awkward night time thinking in check and many clients report that they get back to sleep and sleep better as well. I myself discovered this when I was regularly waking up with stiff legs and could not get back to sleep. Eventually I hit on the idea of making this my regular meditation time, so I now get up around four a.m. when I awake, meditate for half an hour and then go back to sleep. I've only had half a dozen full night's sleep in 20 years, but I always sleep well and usually wake refreshed.

Body Scan

With the body scan ([audio link](#)) you visit each part of the body in turn, starting with, for example, the left foot and working up to the top of the head. After this you may scan the major parts of the body such as a whole leg or even the whole body. It is best done initially by being guided through by a teacher or a recording. The aim is simply to observe whatever sensations you are experiencing at the point you are observing. These may be external sensations such as temperature or the touch of clothing, or internal sensations such as a pulse or current of energy, but there is no need to name them. Note that any relaxation which may be felt is a by-product. Paradoxically, the more you do mindfulness exercises as pure exercises in awareness, without getting caught up in their hoped for benefits, the more your well-being tends to improve. As with any other mindfulness exercise, whenever you are distracted, simply return your awareness to wherever you are up to or wherever the recording is at when you “come to”.

Emotions are often felt in the body. Sadness might have a weight in the stomach, love is often felt in the heart region, stress or anger in the shoulders or face. It's not surprising that emotions are felt in the body as many emotions are associated with chemicals in the blood such as adrenaline in the case of anger and cortisol in the case of stress.

It is primarily in dealing with difficult emotions that the body scan helps us. Later you will see how you can work with a difficult emotion such as anger or sadness by observing its effects in the body. It is for this reason that I recommend persevering with the body scan until you can comfortably feel sensation all over the body, or at least over the torso, neck and head. When you guide yourself through a body scan, stay a bit longer at places that appear blank.

Tips

- Most of the tips for mindfulness of the breath apply to doing a body scan.
- You may wish to experiment with occasionally doing the body scan lying down.

- When observing the body as a whole, you may wish to allow the breath, in your imagination, to reach the furthest points of your body, the soles of your feet, the palms of your hand and the roots of your hair.
- Whenever you experience a tension in the body, have a sense of letting go, allowing any tension to release.
- Leave aside any notion of “I’m not doing it properly”. Falling asleep, drifting off with thoughts or other distractions are all experiences in the moment.
- Treat sensations at other points as distractions similar to thoughts or outside noise.
- Do the body scan regularly without use of the recording. If you have any blank areas then spend a little longer in these areas to allow any sensation to arise. Never get annoyed that an area has no sensation and never try to create a sensation. The body scan is simply an exercise of observation.

Attitudes that Aid Mindfulness Practice

Learning mindfulness is like no other task. It’s not something we can “DO”. It must be allowed to happen. So far as is possible you must bring your whole being to the process. Your attitude is crucial. It is the soil in which you will be cultivating your ability to calm your mind, relax (de-stress) your body, concentrate and see more clearly. Seven interrelated “pillars” of mindfulness practice will help. In turn these attitudes are naturally enhanced by practising mindfulness.

- Beginner’s mind
- Patience
- Persistence
- Non-striving
- Self trust
- Letting go
- Acceptance

Beginner’s mind is the attitude that any situation you are in, however familiar, is a whole new situation. “The last few times I did the body scan, it was very relaxing, but right now this is a new time. I wonder what it will be like today?” “I’ve been enjoying the crunchy feel and taste of my breakfast cereal, maybe the experience will be different today – or the same.” Interestingly, it is possible and even common to see something as regular and predictable as a sunrise with fresh eyes each day. Beginner’s mind is particularly useful in helping us come back to the breath with freshness again, and again and again.

Which brings us to **patience**. “How do you cultivate patience?” a despairing Judy once asked me. Jon Kabat-Zinn says in *Full Catastrophe Living*, that, “Patience is a form of wisdom ... why rush through some moments to get to ‘better’ ones ... to be patient is simply to be completely open to each moment, accepting its fullness, knowing that, like a butterfly, things can only unfold in their own time.” “Yair yair, meanwhile my body clock’s ticking away,” was Judy’s response. Giving yourself the time allotted for your practice may help here, but if all else fails, adopt the rule of three. The first two times you feel bored or impatient, observe the thoughts

and body sensations associated with it, especially any body sensations along the mid-line from the neck to the heart to the abdomen to the stomach. On the third time, get up, walk around, mindfully if possible, and then either return to your practice till the time allotted is over, or get on with whatever's next.

The attribute of **persistence** can help here too. Persistence means to keep on going, even through dark times or when little benefit seems to be flowing from the practice. Some teachers say, "You don't have to like it, just do it," which has a quality of persistence to it. For me persistence came in the form of sticking with my practice, at least minimally through a difficult period of over one year.

Non-striving is the other side of the persistence coin. It is possible to try too hard and this can particularly be the case in the early days of a practice. We can strive in many ways, striving to feel the right way, to have as few thoughts as possible, striving to feel less depressed or anxious, striving to feel more relaxed (now there's an idea). It's useful to remember when we are striving that all we can do in a mindfulness practice is to observe what's happening (e.g. a sensation) and return to the focus of our practice when we realise we have been distracted – nothing else. I usually ask my clients to list the goals they hope for in coming to a mindfulness session. Having identified them, they can forget them for a while. Striving for these goals, particularly in any wishing or wanting way is counterproductive, though it's of course OK to e.g. keep looking for a job if that's a goal.

As a result of settling back patiently and persistently, with a beginner's mind, we develop a **self trust** and the ability to let go and accept things as they are. "Self trust is about intuition, honouring your feelings and growing a trust in your own basic wisdom and goodness," says Jon Kabat-Zinn. There's a famous saying in Buddhism – if you meet the Buddha along the path, then kill him. I think this refers to eventually finding your own path and not getting caught up with your teacher's or anyone else's path. Developing self trust is an early step in this direction.

In India, the way to catch a monkey is to put a small hole in a coconut and put something sweet inside. Along comes a monkey. He slips his hand in, grabs the sweet, but now his hand is too large to be withdrawn. It's said that the monkey never lets go. **Letting go**, non-attachment, is central to mindfulness. Just as we let go of each breath and allow the next to come, and in its turn let go of that (easy!), so we let go of this thought, and another and another (not so easy). Similar things apply to our inner experiences, some of which really want to be held onto. The way a past friend treated us, a fear about a future meeting, the anticipated pleasure of weekend sport. With mindfulness we can learn to let go of these experiences, or not - it's a choice. It's worth noting that we are at least a little experienced in letting go – it's the only way we can fall asleep.

With letting go, we arrive at [acceptance](#). This does not mean accepting our current condition or sickness as something that will always be so. It does not mean accepting injustice in the world as being normal and there's nothing we can do about it.

It means accepting the truth of this present moment as just that, the way things are right now. If you are lost in the bush, it's best that you accept that truth rather than rush around in all directions with no clear plan. You can then put your full attention to getting out. "Acceptance as we are speaking of it, simply means that you have come around to a willingness to see things as they are," says Kabat-Zinn.

Dealing with Barriers to a Regular Mindfulness Practice

“Yes it’s simple, no it isn’t easy.” Nowhere does this apply more than in setting up a regular mindfulness practice. People constantly come back to me surprised at how hard it is, and there are no clear ways to deal with the difficulties. Yes, it is helpful to choose a regular time slot such as just after your morning shower or before the evening meal. It’s also helpful to sit in the same place, reasonably quiet with phone and entertainment turned off – but still many things may get in the way.

Perhaps the biggest barrier is having too fixed an idea of what’s the right way to do it, or the right way to feel. Often a mindfulness practice results in us feeling more relaxed and because this is what we want, especially if we are stressed, it’s easy to think we are doing it wrong if we find ourselves agitated. There are a million ways to think you are getting it wrong. A client once said, “I couldn’t get to that still calm balanced point, so I stopped.” While calmness is one of the many benefits of mindfulness, it’s important to realise that there are many times we are not calm. The benefit of mindfulness may not be as obvious in such situations, but it is important to become familiar with and accept ourselves in the full range of our moods.

Making or finding a time is another barrier. “I’m just too busy to find time to meditate,” said one client. There’s a couple of ways to go with this. One, which I use with my clients, is to become curious about it. What are these things that have to be done? Be clear that at the moment they have a higher priority, and note this without judgement. Perhaps breakfast, sleeping an extra five minutes, answering the phone and washing the dishes were all chosen ahead of mindfulness practice. It’s important that you just note that was how it was today, rather than make any judgement – so be it. In that moment you are bringing mindfulness to bear on the situation.

Similar to not having the time is, “I’ll just do ... first.” Maybe it’s an email, a cup of tea or some housework. Again, bringing mindfulness to bear can be useful. Perhaps a clarity that, yes I’ll do the email and then my practice, will work for you. But be very aware when you have completed the email or other tasks that are presenting themselves as alternatives to practice.

Why is it that we keep putting mindfulness practice off? My own private theory is that our ego doesn’t like it. It’s used to being in control, calling the shots and demanding entertainment. One thing I’ve discovered though is that the ego will relinquish control for a short period – about three breaths. There were periods in the eighties that I found my meditation practice too hard to do. During such periods I would commit to sitting on my cushion every day for a short period – three breaths. Sometimes less than that. So if you miss your time, you might try sitting briefly in your spot, acknowledging this as your practice time and then getting up and going on with the day without any self criticism.

Another technique I recommend to my clients is that if they find at the end of the day they have not done their practice then simply do it as they get into bed and lie down – it’s a good time to be aware of breath and can help with sleep.

“It didn’t work, I’ll have to try harder.” This is the response of some students – a very understandable one in our individualistic achiever society. And yes sometimes persistence is helpful. The Buddha taught about right effort and even backed it up with a Goldilocks example of the violin string. Too tight and it’s screechy, too loose and there’s no sound at all. Straining your concentration too much is counterproductive and so too is allowing the mind to wander

with no serious intention of refocussing. This is where you need to practise skilfully, ratcheting up the effort a little (this can be useful at the beginning of a sit) at times; maybe dropping back into a more allowing, observing attitude at other times.

Perhaps you find the body scan less difficult than breath awareness. Then in the early days of practice, by all means focus more on body scans if it helps establish your practice. Do the alternative practice once or twice a week, but in the early days, stick with what works.

Whatever barrier might be in front of you now, it's important to remember the second fundamental – “without judgement.” If you didn't do the practice today, then OK, that's the truth right now – let it be – and you've just practised some mindfulness.

Mindfulness Practice - Summary

- A dignified, erect posture helps with a mindfulness exercise.
- Mindfulness of the breath means to observe some real physical sensation connected with breathing, e.g. the rise and fall of the abdomen and to return non-judgementally to this awareness whenever we realise we have been distracted.
- Equal breathing is very useful to calm the mind when thoughts are racing or out of control.
- The body scan is a part by part observation of the sensations at each part of the body in turn.
- Breath awareness is very useful when we cannot sleep.
- Seven attitudes that help with mindfulness are beginner's mind, patience, persistence, non-striving, self trust, letting go and acceptance.

4. How does Mindfulness Work?

While most of what we achieve is by “doing”, mindfulness achieves its ends by “not doing,” simply by observing – there is nothing to “achieve” in a mindfulness session.

Negative Thoughts Lose their Power Over Us

The essentials of a mindfulness exercise are to stay in the present as much as possible by observing some sensation, such as the breath and to return to the breath every time we find we are distracted. The second part of mindfulness, being non-judgemental, means that we return to the breath without criticising our self for having been distracted and also that we exercise no judgement on the thoughts we are having or on our state of mind – e.g. agitated. The attitude is, “Hmm my mind seems a little agitated today.” “Ah I see I’ve been distracted” or, “Oh, there’s that ‘I’m stupid’ thought”. Practising mindfulness in this way allows us to see our thoughts and emotions for what they are, thoughts we are having at the moment and emotions we are experiencing. This is the basis for many of the benefits we gain from mindfulness. It also allows us to see much of life around us with fresh eyes.

Thoughts like “I must be stupid” or “I’m lonely, no-one loves me” can be subtle and we generally believe them uncritically, especially when we are feeling a bit low. By being mindful of the present moment and simply allowing our thoughts to be, paying them no special attention, and in particular not judging them, we disempower them. “Starve them of oxygen,” was how one client put it. As a result of this, we gradually get the idea that they are just thoughts that we are having and there is no need to believe them uncritically. Similarly with a feeling like anger or any other strong emotion, we start to realize that it is a feeling that is currently strong within us but no more than that. We currently have anger, but it doesn’t define us and it will pass. We stop identifying with the thoughts and emotions. Our mind ceases to be in the control of strong feelings and thoughts and slowly comes under our own control. In essence, we do not change our thoughts or push them away. They’d only come back in some other form anyway. Rather it’s our **attitude** towards them that changes.

I have thoughts but I am not my thoughts

I have feelings but I am not my feelings

I have body sensations but I am not my body sensations

Familiarity with our Thoughts

Mindfulness of the breath allows us to observe our thoughts. As a result, we gradually become familiar with our common thought patterns. To aid this, I sometimes ask clients to fill in thought diaries, in which they write down the thoughts they were having when they were experiencing particularly difficult situations or troubling emotions. As a result of becoming aware of our difficult thoughts, such as ones that lead us to depression or anxiety, we can note quickly when a thought arises that in the past has led us in this direction. We can then disempower the thought in any of a number of ways, such as shutting it off, doing an [equal breathing](#) (chapter three) exercise, or labelling the thought unhelpful and moving the attention to a sensation (i.e.

practising mindfulness). Shutting off a thought by, for example, the technique known as [thought stopping](#), is not a mindfulness technique but is sometimes helpful as temporary measure.

Less Reactivity

With more awareness of our thoughts and behaviour patterns we are more likely to see a difficult situation as it develops. We might note with our partner that we are heading into territory which often ends in anger or dispute. If we can see this developing, we have the chance of dealing with the situation in some other way – or continuing down the habitual path. Even if we continue on the habitual path, we may choose different responses from our habitual, reactive ones.

Feeling our Feelings

There is a vast range in our ability to feel our feelings. Some of us avoid or fight off most of our emotions, perhaps in the belief that it's not manly or because we are troubled by them, especially the more unacceptable ones. It has been a long road for me personally to learn that most feelings I am having are just that, emotions that I am currently experiencing along with their bodily counterparts such as a sinking feeling in the stomach or the flush that often accompanies anger. Mindfulness, especially the body scan, helps enormously with this. By practising awareness of body sensations (the body scan) we can move on to experiencing the body sensations that accompany emotions so that we may more fully experience the whole of the feeling, the bodily part as well as the psychological component.

Initially Simon told me that he often felt “bad”. He knew little more about his feeling than this. As a result of mindfulness and guided exploration of his feelings and their associated thoughts Simon realised he had constant feelings of worthlessness which were accompanied by a tightness in his chest. I encouraged him to focus on the feeling in his chest while at the same time allowing the sense of worthlessness to just be. He gradually stopped fighting both feelings and gained much better well-being and sense of self.

Peacefulness, Connection and Deeper Wisdom

As we practise mindfulness, occasionally the chatter of thoughts dies down and we achieve a sense of peace. This peace can allow a deeper wisdom to arise. Sometimes I'm meditating and the thought arises of a client I am having difficulty understanding. I allow this thought to be and even (somewhat against the pure spirit of mindfulness) ask for an insight or dwell there a while. Often an insight will develop.

In daily life, many people report a greater sense of connection to other people and even to inanimate objects such as trees and cups, which become more alive as a result of paying attention to what is present now.

Metaphors

We learn a lot by metaphor during a mindfulness practice. Observing the breath (or another sensation) is a metaphor for letting go of grasping and greed and not craving for something we don't currently have. Each breath comes and we observe it. We don't hold on to it, we don't regret its passing, we don't look forward to the next breath. We just accept each breath as it arises, as it passes.

As such, it is an exercise of seeing the present moment as it is. Just as we accept the breath as part of what is, right now, so too we may accept that we are ill or that we are angry or that there is injustice in the world. This doesn't mean that we can do nothing about such things; rather it is an assessment of the current situation from which to move forward.

By returning again and again to the breath (or any other sensation), without judgement, we cultivate patience and gentleness towards ourselves. This can be particularly useful for people who have a tendency to perfectionism or who have a strong inner critic that continually gives them a hard time. Such people must be particularly careful not to judge their practice. "Today it was bad, yesterday was better." Note that it's fine to say, "Today I was restless", as this is a truth about the situation; it's the judging of a situation as good or bad that takes us away from experiencing it fully.

As a final metaphor, in mindfulness we are practising placing our mind where WE choose to put it. Too often we find ourselves drawn away into thoughts we do not choose, maybe obsessive, maybe mundane. Mindfulness puts YOU back in control of where YOUR mind goes.

Paradoxes

We generally start practising mindfulness for a purpose, like gaining peace or reducing our depression. Paradoxically the less we focus on such potential outcomes and the more we focus on the practice of staying in the moment (say by awareness of breath), the more the benefits tend to flow. This is because wanting a particular outcome is a desire that takes us into the future and out of mindfulness of the present moment. As indicated above, mindfulness works best by practising the exercise, not by focussing on future gains. A good analogy is the batsman in the nineties who gets himself out by shifting his focus to scoring a century rather than on playing this ball, right now.

Many people report feeling more relaxed after a mindfulness exercise. Relaxation is a side effect. If you practise mindfulness for its relaxation, there is a danger you will tense up, especially as you realise you are not relaxing. Better just to do a [relaxation exercise](#) or accept the relaxed experience as what happened this time. Next time may be completely different – no expectations!

How does Mindfulness Work? – Summary

- Negative thoughts and difficult emotions are accepted as the truth of the moment.
- Our attitude towards negative thoughts and difficult emotions changes from fighting them or identifying with them to seeing them as transient.
- We become familiar with our habitual thought patterns and behaviour and less reactive, giving us a more flexible response.
- We feel our feelings more fully and satisfactorily.
- We may gain peace and even wisdom.

5. Mindfulness Practice in Daily Life

When I first started meditating, I had practiced daily, but found that the sense of peace, and awareness I often experienced did not extend easily into my life. This resulted in me switching to mindfulness, a technique that was much easier to practise in everyday life. There are a number of ways of practising mindfulness ‘on the run’ such as choosing to be mindful of one or two regular daily activities, punctuating the day with a few mini-mindfulness exercises and taking advantages of opportunities for mindfulness as they arise.

Tooth Brushing

You probably brush your teeth once or twice a day. For most of us, this is done on automatic and we might be thinking of the upcoming day’s activities at the same time. But what if we paid attention to the tooth brush in our hand, the taste of the paste, the feel of the brush against each individual tooth and any accompanying sounds? Well, we’d be having a two minute mindfulness session. All these are sensations and therefore in the present, the first characteristic of mindfulness and tooth brushing presents limited opportunities for judgement, the second characteristic. Brushing your teeth mindfully may even diminish the judgements from your dentist on the next visit!

Of course you can choose any regular activity for this purpose. If it takes longer than a few minutes, then choose the first couple of minutes as your exercise. People often chose activities such as walking the dog, eating a meal or driving to work. One person chose to pay attention to the first five minutes of her university lectures and was surprised to find how much information she gained in that time. Whatever the activity, focus your attention on the sensations: the wind in your face, the food in your mouth, or the voice of the lecturer. Stick with any chosen activity for at least a week, or even months before changing it and allow your awareness to flow into the next activity, while not making that activity an exercise.

As a general idea, becoming more mindful in mundane daily activities is a great advantage. It can make ordinary activities alive! One of my clients talked of being really present as she hung out the washing – “I really saw those pegs for the first time”. Thich Nhat Hanh talks in a couple of pages of the pleasure he gets from washing the dishes.

Mini-mindfulness

To help us maintain mindfulness throughout the day and to give us daily breaks from our tasks, it is useful to take about three mini-mindfulness breaks during the day. The technique is explained in the box below (and [mini-mindfulness audio link](#)). But the aim is to do short regular mindfulness exercises a few times during the day. Depending on your routine, you may wish to set regular times for this or you may take opportunities as they present themselves such as in supermarket queues or during breaks in domestic chores. I have my phone set to remind me three times a day to do such an exercise. If I am working at my computer, I have a [program](#) that sounds a Japanese bell approximately hourly. Not only does it remind me to practise, but it gives me an opportunity to stop and stretch as well!

Mini-mindfulness Exercise.

This is a brief exercise of mindfulness of five or six breaths to be practised five times per day. It can be practised anywhere at any time.

1. *Step out of automatic pilot and become aware of what you are doing right now, where you are and what you are thinking*
2. *Become aware of your breathing for about a minute or half a dozen breaths.*
3. *Expand your awareness to your whole body and then to your environment, if you wish.*

The first thing we do with this practice, because it's brief and we want to come into the moment quickly, is to take a very definite posture, relaxed, dignified, back erect, but not stiff, letting our bodies express a sense of being present and awake.

Now, closing your eyes, if that feels comfortable for you, the first step is becoming aware, really aware, of what is going on with you right now. Becoming aware of what is going through your mind? Again, as best you can, just noting the thoughts as mental events. Then note the feelings that are around at this moment, in particular turning toward any sense of discomfort or unpleasant feelings. So rather than try to push them away or shut them out, just acknowledge them, perhaps saying, "Ah, there you are, that's how it is right now." And similarly with sensations in the body... Are there sensations of tension, of holding, or whatever? Again, become aware and simply note them. OK, that's how it is right now.

So, you've got a sense of what is going on right now. You've stepped out of automatic pilot. The second step is to collect your awareness by focusing on a single object—the movements of the breath. So now we really gather ourselves, focusing attention down there in the movements of the abdomen or other breath focus point such as the nostrils or roof of the mouth, the rise and fall of the breath spending a minute or so to focus on the movement of the abdominal wall, moment by moment, breath by breath, as best we can. So you know when the breath is moving in, and you know when the breath is moving out. Binding your awareness to the pattern of movement, using the anchor of the breath to really be present.

And now as a third step, allow your awareness to expand. As well as being aware of the breath, include a sense of the body as a whole so that you have a more spacious awareness. A sense of the body as a whole, including any tightness or sensations related to holding in the shoulders, neck, back, or face following the breath as if your whole body is breathing. Holding it all in this slightly softer, more spacious awareness.

Then, when you are ready, allow your eyes to open and mindfully continue with your daily activity.

Two alternatives

1. *Just do the second section of the above exercise, i.e. one minute of breath awareness or about six breaths.*
2. *Three Breath Practice*

We 'come to' at various times during the day. It may be the time we've chosen to do a mini-mindfulness exercise or it may be when we have become 'aware', say in the midst of impatience or eating or any other activity. Stay with the visceral texture of the present-moment experience.

*"The commitment is to reside in the present moment experience whether it is distressful, neutral or enjoyable, experiencing as many aspects of it as you can in the space of three breaths. Stay with the breath, the experience of the room or open space, the overall awareness of the body and of any emotion present." **Zen Heart** by Ezra Bayder*

Already you may experience times in the day when you 'come to' suddenly realising where you are and perhaps feeling a bit more alive or awake. As you practise mindfulness, this may happen more often. It is useful to take any opportunity to 'come to' during the day. When this happens, you may simply dwell there for some time or practice some mindfulness such as following the breath or any strong sensation in your field of view for a couple of minutes. Perhaps noting what you are seeing or experiencing and as always allow the mindfulness to flow into your next activity .

Opportunities for Mindfulness

Much of the day we are on automatic pilot, not fully aware of what we are doing. We might worry about what someone is thinking or about a future event. Every so often we ‘come to’, realise where we are and what we are doing. These moments are gold and with regular practice they happen more often. Seize these moments. Recognise that you are aware and quickly move fully into the moment, perhaps by observing your breath for three or more breaths or by going with the strongest sensation. If you are walking in a park perhaps that’s the smell, the wind or the colour of the trees. Maybe it’s the taste of the coffee you are drinking, the smell of your food or your lover’s face.

You can help such moments occur by incorporating a few mindfulness trigger events into the day. I try to be mindful of the first mouthful of food in a meal. I have a mark on my shower that reminds me to feel the water hitting me and passing over me at the start of a shower. Other daily events like switching on the car ignition or passing a regular point in a daily walk can be used. Getting caught in traffic is a good one – choose each time whether you are going to get uptight or be mindful of your feelings. More on this next chapter.

In addition some daily experiences lend themselves to mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh’s “Peace is Every Step” has a few examples such as Eating, Walking and Driving meditations. Here’s his dishwashing meditation.

Dishwashing meditation

To my mind, the idea that doing dishes is unpleasant can occur only when you aren’t doing them. Once you are standing in front of the sink with your sleeves rolled up and your hands in the warm water, it is really quite pleasant. I enjoy taking my time with each dish being fully aware of the dish, the water, and each movement of my hands. I know that if I hurry in order to eat dessert sooner, the time of washing dishes will be unpleasant and not worth living. That would be a pity for each minute, each second of life is a miracle. The dishes themselves and the fact that I am washing them are miracles!

If I am incapable of washing dishes joyfully, if I want to finish them quickly so I can go and have dessert, I will be equally incapable of enjoying my dessert. With the fork in my hand, I will be thinking of what to do next, and the texture and the flavor of the dessert, together with the pleasure of eating it, will be lost. I will always be dragged into the future, never able to live in the present moment.

Each thought, each action in the sunlight of awareness becomes sacred. In this light, no boundary exists between the sacred and the profane. I must confess it takes me a bit longer to do the dishes, but I live fully in every moment, and I am happy. Washing the dishes is at the same time a means and an end – that is, not only do we do the dishes in order to have clean dishes, we also do the dishes just to do the dishes, to live fully in each moment while washing them.

Thich Nhat Hanh – *Peace is Every Step*

Any activity can be done mindfully!

Mindfulness Practice in Daily Life - Summary

- Choose a regular daily activity like tooth brushing, eating a meal or going for a walk and practise the first two or three minutes of it fully mindfully, paying particular attention to the sensations involved.
- Do a couple of three breath or three minute mini-mindfulness exercises each day.
- Look for opportunities to practise mindfulness of sensations such as in traffic or a supermarket queue, taking a shower, washing dishes – anything really.
- As with all mindfulness activities, do not leave them too abruptly, always try to continue being mindful into the next activity.

6. Using Mindfulness in Difficult Situations

It's all very well to have a mindfulness practice and to become more mindful in daily activities such as brushing the teeth or washing dishes, but how can mindfulness help us when we are depressed, when we are angry or in pain?

Working with Depression

Over many years I experienced depression, about two days a week. It was not mild but neither was it deep enough to stop me functioning – I'd soldier on, feeling flat and bad, sometimes withdrawing to bed, sometimes burying it in a lot of activity, sometimes just having the feelings with me and feeling something was wrong but not quite knowing what. Following a suggestion from a friend I started to observe what was happening to my body on such days. I found that two areas of my body were feeling a particular way. My chest was tight and my abdomen was feeling a great heavy weight. I found that, by lying flat and allowing my hands to go where they pleased they invariably ended up in these same two spots - chakra points, or energy centres three and four according to Hindu writings. By observing the sensations closely and occasionally imagining that my breath was entering the area (breathing into them), I found that my depression would lighten. Later, through a combination of mindfulness practice and a familiarity with the sensations and feelings associated with depression, I was able to start observing much more quickly. Today they still return, but not so often. When I experience a certain flatness and feeling down, I do two things. I say "Ah there you are, back again, where are you going, what are you doing today?" It's a bit like I'm talking to a familiar (grumpy?) old acquaintance. There is no hostility on either side. I also observe the physical sensation in my heart and solar plexus. Mostly, though not always, the feelings leave. If they do not, I've learnt that that's OK, that's how things are right now, no need to get upset about it. It was only much later that I realised I was practising both parts of mindfulness, non-judgement and staying in the present.

I've also learnt the situations where depression may come, mostly when something I might interpret as rejection happens or I am feeling lonely, though sometimes it arrives out of a "blue sky". Surprisingly, but perhaps because these methods are largely successful, I have little knowledge of what thoughts go with my depression, though I suspect they are old stuff about being unlovable or worthless – common themes of depression. *The Mindful Way through Depression* (see references) is a very useful guide, and includes a CD of mindfulness exercises.

So what is the mindful way of dealing with strong and difficult emotions? Certainly a mindfulness practice helps. It tends to create calmness in our life, like changing the radio from heavy metal to classical a friend once said. At least as important is getting to know your own mind and how it works. What situations trigger these emotions, what thoughts start the ball rolling downhill? Mindfulness will help you see that a strong emotion such as anger or sadness is temporary. It doesn't define us. We aren't angry in the sense that we and anger are one, we are experiencing anger. If we think we are stupid or that no-one cares for us then mindfulness can help us towards the realisation that I am not stupid, I am simply having a thought, that I happen to believe, that I am stupid, or unloved - a different thing entirely.

With difficult emotions, it is important to identify the emotion. This is not as easy as it sounds, as some emotions are not acceptable to us. In particular, I have met a number of people for

whom anger is unacceptable and hence difficult to acknowledge. You need to become skilful in identifying your emotions and this may take some professional help. Asking friends can help, though standing over them hands on hips and saying “I’m not an angry person AM I?” may not elicit a fearless and forthright response!

Trapped?

Any situation in which we are trapped presents wonderful opportunities for mindfulness. Supermarket queues are excellent, but the best by far is traffic. Thank god for traffic jams, especially if they are making us late! They make us anxious, they may make us angry even prone to rage. What better time to learn about ourselves. What better way to spend the time than in mindfulness and learning about ourselves? What are our thoughts? “Why didn’t I leave earlier, take a different route, maybe Jill will be angry with me for being late?” And what is the effect of these thoughts? Anxiety? Frustration? Name the emotion. Where is it playing out on the body, churning stomach? What would it be like to observe that fully as a physical experience? Maybe it’s time to try mindfulness of the breath or some other breathing technique like [equal breathing](#) (chapter three). And perhaps later on exploring other situations where I have felt similar feelings. Maybe when talking to a superior or to a particular family member – is that “trapped” too?

Early on in a mindfulness course I was running, Judy talked about her frustration at people who used the inside lane to pass a lot of cars and then pushed back into the main line of traffic further on. It got her angry and generally added to the stress of driving. Everyone had a driving story of one sort or another. This one resurfaced a few times and gradually Judy realised that her “justified” anger was of little help to herself and that it was rooted in not being valued. I don’t know what Judy does now when someone pushes in, but hopefully she at least has the opportunity to see her anger as a choice and perhaps feel an emotion, such as being unvalued, prior to the anger.

Anger

Nowhere are the benefits of mindfulness more clear than in dealing with anger. Mindfulness can help us become aware of the early stages of anger, or that we are approaching a situation which has provoked anger before. It can help us identify our common angry thoughts which ramp up the anger, for instance, “How dare they!” or “That’s not fair.” We might see more clearly the surge of energy we so love that anger gives us, often to our later cost. In the full flight of anger or at the very least soon after, mindfulness can allow us to choose to feel the anger fully and viscerally in the head, in the shoulders, arms and chest or wherever it’s strongest. Knowing our anger, or any strong emotion, in all its aspects, allows the possibility of transformation and growth. ([anger link](#)) Again Thich Nhat Hanh says it well ([video link](#)).

Mindfulness of Anger

Anger is an unpleasant feeling. It is like a blazing flame that burns up our self-control and causes us to say and do things that we regret later. When someone is angry, we can see clearly that he or she is abiding in hell. Anger and hatred are the materials from which hell is made. A mind without anger is cool, fresh, and sane. The absence of anger is the basis of real happiness, the basis of love and compassion.

When our anger is placed under the lamp of mindfulness, it immediately begins to lose some of its destructive nature. We can say to ourselves, "Breathing in, I know that anger is in me. Breathing out, I know that I am my anger." If we follow our breathing closely while we identify and mindfully observe our anger, it can no longer monopolize our consciousness.

Awareness can be called upon to be a companion for our anger. Our awareness of our anger does not suppress it or drive it out. It just looks after it. This is a very important principle. Mindfulness is not a judge. It is more like an older sister looking after and comforting her younger sister in an affectionate and caring way. We can concentrate on our breathing in order to maintain this mindfulness and know ourselves fully. When we are angry, we are not usually inclined to return to ourselves. We want to think about the person who is making us angry, to think about his hateful aspects—his rudeness, dishonesty, cruelty, maliciousness, and so on. The more we think about him, listen to him, or look at him, the more our anger flares. His dishonesty and hatefulness may be real, imaginary, or exaggerated, but, in fact, the root of the problem is the anger itself, and we have to come back and look first of all inside ourselves. It is best if we do not listen to or look at the person whom we consider to be the cause of our anger. Like a fireman, we have to pour water on the blaze first and not waste time looking for the one who set the house on fire. "Breathing in, I know that I am angry. Breathing out, I know that I must put all my energy into caring for my anger." So we avoid thinking about the other person, and we refrain from doing or saying anything as long as our anger persists. If we put all our mind into observing our anger, we will avoid doing any damage that we may regret later.

When we are angry, our anger is our very self. To suppress or chase it away is to suppress or chase away our self. When we are joyful, we are the joy. When we are angry, we are the anger. When anger is born in us, we can be aware that anger is an energy in us, and we can accept that energy in order to transform it into another kind of energy. When we have a compost bin filled with organic material which is decomposing and smelly, we know that we can transform the waste into beautiful flowers. At first, we may see the compost and the flowers as opposite, but when we look deeply, we see that the flowers already exist in the compost, and the compost already exists in the flowers. It only takes a couple of weeks for a flower to decompose. When a good organic gardener looks into her compost, she can see that, and she does not feel sad or disgusted. Instead, she values the rotting material and does not discriminate against it. It takes only a few months for compost to give birth to flowers. We need the insight and non-dual vision of the organic gardener with regard to our anger. We need not be afraid of it or reject it. We know that anger can be a kind of compost, and that it is within its power to give birth to something beautiful. We need anger in the way the organic gardener needs compost. If we know how to accept our anger, we already have some peace and joy. Gradually we can transform anger completely into peace, love, and understanding.

Thich Nhat Hanh – *Peace is Every Step*

Welcoming Adversity

You've probably noticed that in many situations, growth and insight came from dealing with adversity. This has long been recognised, but the difference with mindfulness is that adversity is *embraced* as an opportunity for growth. Eight hundred years ago, the Sufi poet Rumi expressed this beautifully.

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture.

Still, treat every guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
Meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Rumi c. 1250

Welcome and entertain them all – quite a task! It reminds of a Buddhist practice where you pretend that all your adversity has been sent specifically to help you grow.

Another common emotion is sadness, which some feel acutely and others don't recognise. Feeling sad often helps us deal with loss and people frequently report a relief from no longer having to fight it off once they accept their sadness and start to experience it both emotionally and physically. Some talk of sadness as having a sweetness to it, probably from the nurturing that happens from fully experiencing such an emotion. The process of welcoming and examining strong and difficult feelings is largely the same for any feeling, and as usual Thich Nhat Hanh has a view on [transforming feelings](#) in "Peace is Every Step". He speaks poetically of holding, calming and looking deeply at the feeling in much the way a mother does these things with her baby.

The Dalai Lama says, “I try to put these methods [mindfulness] into effect in my own life. When I hear bad news, especially the tragic stories I often hear from my fellow Tibetans, naturally my own response is sadness. However, by placing it in context, I find I can cope reasonably well.”

Negative Thoughts

It is surprising how many people experience negative thoughts, sometimes quite a constant stream of them. Competent people have nagging doubts about their ability, which often drives them to accomplishing great feats. Many people experience a sense of stupidity or worthlessness associated with thoughts that they are not intelligent or good enough. An attractive client of mine, constantly told me of how thoughts that she was ugly sprang up any time she thought of her appearance or looked in a mirror.

The classical way of dealing with such thoughts is to search for the roots in childhood, and perhaps uncover such things as not having been validated or told they were loved or worthy. However, it is also possible to deal fully with our negative thoughts and core beliefs with mindfulness. This is often helped by recording our thoughts to discover what I mischievously call our “favourite” negative thoughts.

Finding these thoughts and working with them, often takes the skills of a good therapist, but the general mindfulness rules of welcoming the thoughts, while not giving them centre stage, acknowledging and naming the emotion and attending to the body sensation in much the way I did with my depression, apply. This is dealt with further in the next chapter.

Mindful Dialogue

It is very difficult to be mindful when in conversation with another person, precisely because this is when a lot of emotional matters play out. I often get a little tense when working with clients or agitated in a conversation, but I find it helps to check in with my body, “where am I tensing up – let go”, “is my breathing changing – become aware of it”. Breathe a little slower and deeper. Also returning to the anchor of the breath, especially when the other person is talking, can help. Gregory Kramer has made conversation into a mindfulness experience with what he calls Insight Dialogue. His basic approach to dialogue has six principals, first to *pause* and *relax*, then allow yourself to become *open* and *trust* that what you say will be OK. Learning to *listen deeply* and *speak the truth* complete the six. The workshops, which run worldwide including yearly in Australia, practise these six points and you can even join net based Insight Dialogue groups. Kramer’s book is called Insight Dialogue and his website is www.metta.org.

Using Mindfulness in Difficult Situations – Summary

- The mindful way of dealing with difficult situations and troubling emotions includes:
- Becoming more aware of our negative thoughts
- Welcoming difficult situations and troubling emotions and learning to work with them
- Learning how to become aware of and breathe into our body sensations in order to deal with troubling emotions

7. Thoughts, Emotions and Body Sensations

How to use them to deal with difficult situations

As indicated in the previous chapter, difficult situations, emotions and pain can be worked with in many ways. If we decide to use mindfulness, we mostly focus on our thoughts, emotions and body sensations.

Suppose we are in a **situation** such as attending a lecture and we start feeling out of our depth, perhaps anxiety sets in and we end up leaving the lecture with our stomach churning, thinking that we are a bit stupid and really should have understood what was going on. How did the situation of attending a lecture, develop into our action of running away? A Freudian psychologist may trace it back to anxiety felt when we failed to meet a strong expectation placed on us by a parent. From another perspective, the behaviour might result from the effect of a cherished self concept, such as “I am smart,” coming into conflict with our experience of not understanding. Modern and ancient mindfulness practitioners explain how the mind works, in particular how we choose what to do, in terms of our **thoughts, emotions** (feelings) and **body sensations**. I prefer the word “emotion” to “feeling” to clearly distinguish it from body sensations which are also a type of feeling.

The diagram below describes the lecture situation where the thoughts move from the particular to the general, and then spiral out of control, resulting in anxiety. Additionally anxiety can cause us to change our breathing and/or have sweating palms or butterflies in the stomach (i.e. have a **body sensation**). Anger may be associated with a tightness in the chest or tension in the head. Sadness may cause a weight or tightness in the chest. There are many variations, but generally it is true that an emotion has an associated body sensation. The discomfort or suffering associated with an emotion can be greatly intensified by our efforts to fight it off, push it away and do the same to its associated body sensations.

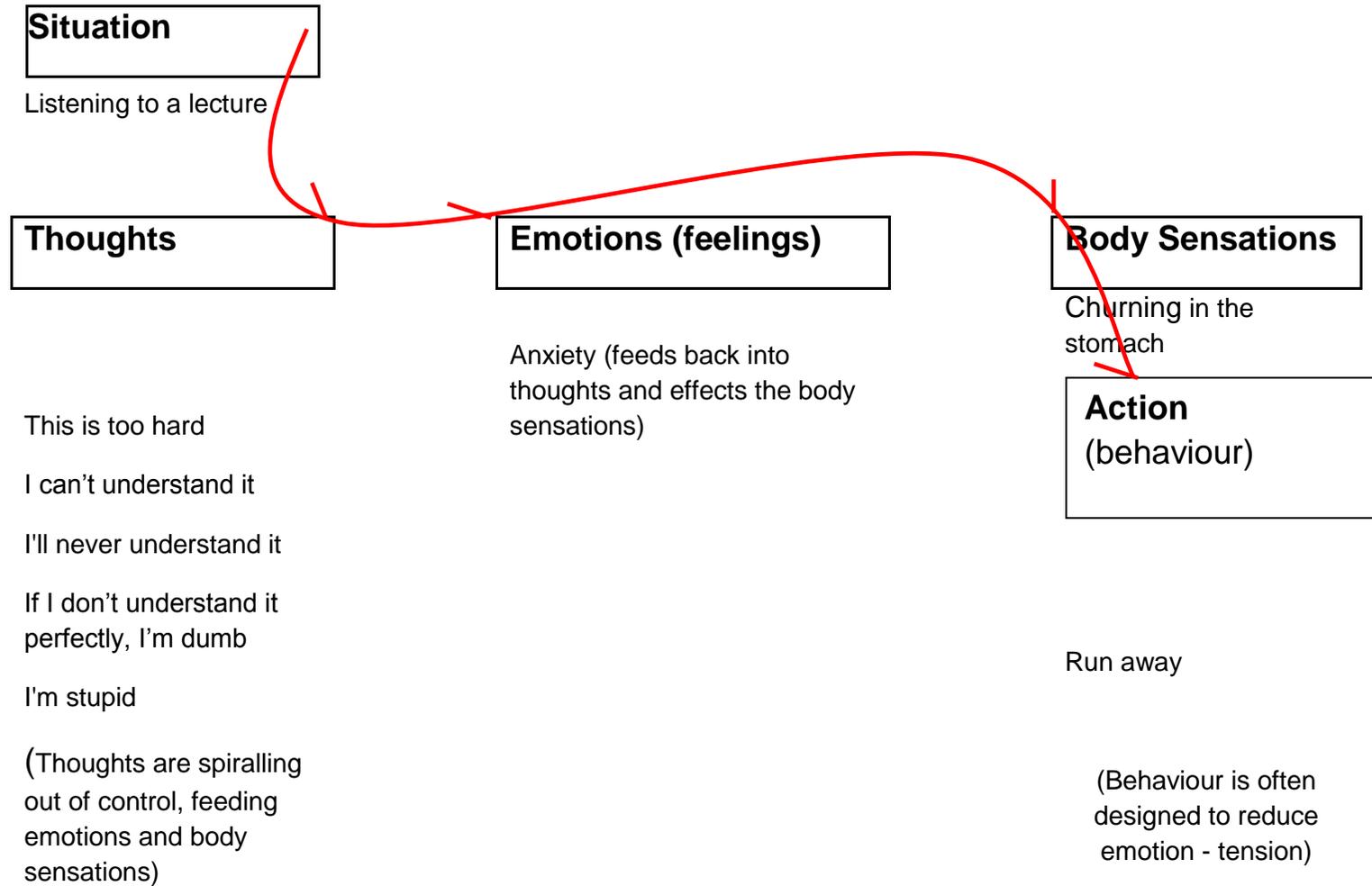
In situations where we experience intense emotions, we often take actions to reduce the tension of the emotion. In the case of the lecture perhaps leaving the room will allow the student to settle their thoughts. Or they may go for a drink to reduce the tension further.

This model of how a situation develops in our mind and leads to an action can give helpful insights into how to manage a difficult situation, that results in a strong emotion.

Mindfulness can help with all aspects, especially if a situation has proved difficult in the past. In the lecture situation we can see that the thoughts become more overwhelming and all encompassing. They develop from, “this is hard,” which may be true, to “I’ll never understand it,” to “I’m stupid”, a global labelling that covers all situations. Clearly the thoughts are out of control. The thoughts of course play into the anxiety, which in turn is feeding the thoughts. – a vicious circle.

Breath techniques are most useful early in the situation. [Equal breathing](#) (chapter three) and also labelling the thoughts as unhelpful and then focussing on the breath, are most likely to disempower the thoughts during these early stages.

How a situation develops through thoughts, emotions and body sensations into action



As an emotion grows, different techniques are generally called for. It is interesting to note that there is nothing we can do directly to change an emotion. However, as thoughts, are brain based, they can be changed or stopped more or less at will. [Try this - think of a blue monkey, right now. ... You probably succeeded even though no such thing exists. Now try this - become sad. ... You probably didn't succeed, or if you did, you did it by thinking sad thoughts, perhaps of a loss or death.] A major difference between thoughts and emotions is that emotions are associated with hormones in the blood. For example, when we get angry we put adrenalin into the blood stream. Even if we do not continue to feed our anger, it will take a minimum of five minutes for the adrenalin to break down.

OK, so we can't directly change an emotion, but we do have the choice of feeling it fully or distracting our self, and we can affect it from either the thought or the body sensation side. Choosing not to feed a difficult emotion with thoughts, often results in it lessening by allowing its chemical messengers (hormones) to break down and wash out of the blood stream. It is these hormones that are largely responsible for the body sensations associated with emotions, and some people do not distinguish between the two. So the surge of energy and rush of blood to the muscles that adrenalin causes IS the anger and the weight in the pit of the stomach IS the dread. It is however useful to distinguish between the psychological component (the emotion) and the physiological component (the body sensation).

In a body scan, we focus on body sensations, the sensation of warm or cold, tightness of the clothing, the movements of the chest. We allow other things around such as thoughts, sounds and emotions simply to be.

If we are strongly affected by an emotion such as anger, sadness or anxiety, this is the truth of the present moment - so feel the emotion, be fully with it (if that's safe). One of the best ways to do this without getting overwhelmed, is to pay attention to the physiological side, the associated body sensation. When I got depressed, I found that sitting with it worked best. I experienced my depression in part as a lump in the abdomen. It felt dense and weighty with a distinct boundary – I could trace my finger around its edges. It didn't feel either hot or cold and was stationary. By focussing mostly on the sensation, but still acknowledging and feeling the associated discomfort (being a participant observer is how my Zen teacher puts it), I found that the suffering was less and I could bear the experience without getting caught up with it. I've used the technique with many clients and most report a similar experience. Here's a set of questions I use to help clients experience a troubling emotion fully, viscerally in the body.

- Where is the physical sensation? Trace your finger around its edge.
- Is it heavy or light?
- Is it tight or loose, compacted or dense?
- Is it hot or cold?
- Is it moving around or stationary?
- Is the area getting bigger or smaller?

The answers to these questions do not matter. The questions are simply a device to keep the focus on the physical and may be dropped as you become more familiar with an emotion and its associated sensations.

An extremely useful technique here is to **breathe into the sensation**. By this, I mean you imagine that your breath flows into the area of the sensation as you breathe in, and back out on the outbreath. In doing this, you are focussing on the breath as well as the body sensation and it often helps in working through the emotion.

All this can be quite hard to do when you are out and about, particularly if you are involved in an emotionally charged conversation. However, the more you can “find your body” at this time, generally the better it will go. If the emotions and sensations are still with you when you get home, and they often are, then give yourself the time to experience them fully.

Below I’ve provided a summary of ways in which you can deal with a developing situation. The more mindfully based interventions are in bold type. As a very rough rule, the earlier strategies are easy to do and effective short term, compared with mindfulness strategies which require a bit of persistence, but go much deeper.

Situation

You can:

- Avoid the situation, (don’t go to the lecture!).
- Modify the situation.
- Prepare yourself for the situation (read up on the lecture material beforehand)
- Learn, perhaps through mindfulness, which types of situations are typically tricky for you
- Enter the situation **fully, mindfully**, with as **few expectations** as possible (this gives you a beginner’s mind which allows for a flexible approach).

Thoughts

You can:

- STOP the thought ([Thought stopping](#) is a common cognitive behavioural therapy technique).
- Challenge/answer the thoughts (“I have studied difficult subjects before and done OK in them and am in fact intelligent”).
- Use a breath technique such as [equal breathing](#) (chapter three) to slow your thoughts and regain control.
- Learn, by mindfulness and/or a thought diary, what your “favourite” negative thoughts are so that you may swiftly move to mindfulness or other interventions
- Label such thoughts as ‘**Unhelpful**’
- When you are aware of your thoughts becoming unhelpful, label them as such and **focus on the breath or any other strong sensation**. This will take you more fully into the present and weaken the grip of the thoughts - they’re just thoughts, not given truth and

they don't have to be believed uncritically. They will usually give way to other thoughts as the mind moves on.

Emotions

You can do nothing directly to change an emotion!

You can:

- Distract yourself from feeling the distress of an emotion (listen to music, go for a run).
- Use a breath technique to slowly reduce the emotion – e.g. [equal breathing](#) (chapter 3).
- Become experienced and skilled at dealing with your troubling emotions e.g. by **fully experiencing the emotion** (if it is safe to do so). Sit with it for a while, feeling it mindfully rather than fighting it off. Acknowledging (naming) the emotion, e.g. “I’m sad”, can be useful. Emotions must also be dealt with via their associated body sensation.

Body Sensations

The best way to deal with body sensations is to sit with them and mindfully **feel them fully and viscerally** as part of feeling the emotion. Breathing into the sensation can be particularly helpful. Body sensations that may result in significant physical symptoms such as a headache, diarrhoea or vomiting should be observed with caution, making sure that you can deal with any consequences. Allow in as much of the emotion as you can handle.

Action

In highly charged situations, what you do is often directed at quickly reducing the emotional load or tension. The mindful alternative is to become aware of what the emotion is trying to get you to do. Then mindfully **choose your course of action**. (e.g. to stay and listen to the rest of the lecture to get what you can from it, or to leave and do something else).

Thoughts Emotions and Body Sensations – Summary

- Enter a difficult situation fully, mindfully.
- Label difficult thoughts as “Unhelpful”.
- Name the emotion and enter it fully (if safe).
- Experience associated sensations fully and viscerally. Use questions to focus on the physical such as, “Where are its edges?” “Is it tight or loose, heavy or light, hot or cold.”
- Mindfully choose your course of action.

8. Stress

Modern day life is very stressful. Stress levels have increased 45% in 30 years. Work pressures and family disruptions are major causes of stress. We are all familiar with such statements, but just what is stress?

If a tiger were to approach you right now, you'd have to act pretty quickly. The smart move might be to run away, slamming the door behind you. Or if there was nowhere to run, you might pick up a chair and fight it off. You would probably be unaware until later of a number of other things you had "done". In dangerous situations your heart and breathing speed up, blood flows to the muscles, and hormones like adrenalin are excreted into your arteries. Your mind becomes fully focussed. This is the fight or flight mechanism that developed some millions of years ago, and served us well as hunter gatherers. You even have a whole system, the sympathetic nervous system, whose job it is to switch on these changes.

This example shows the basic elements of stress. First there is a **stressor** that puts pressure on us – the tiger. Then there is the **stress reaction**, our response to the stressor, in this case our physiological and other reactions.

Today (sadly) the tigers have gone and modern stressors come in the form of job or exam pressures, shortage of money, accidents and illnesses, relationship problems and even pollutants and food additives. In many cases however, the responses are still a faster heart and breathing as well as sweating and vigilance. Not particularly useful responses if we are put on the spot at a meeting, or are arguing with our partner.

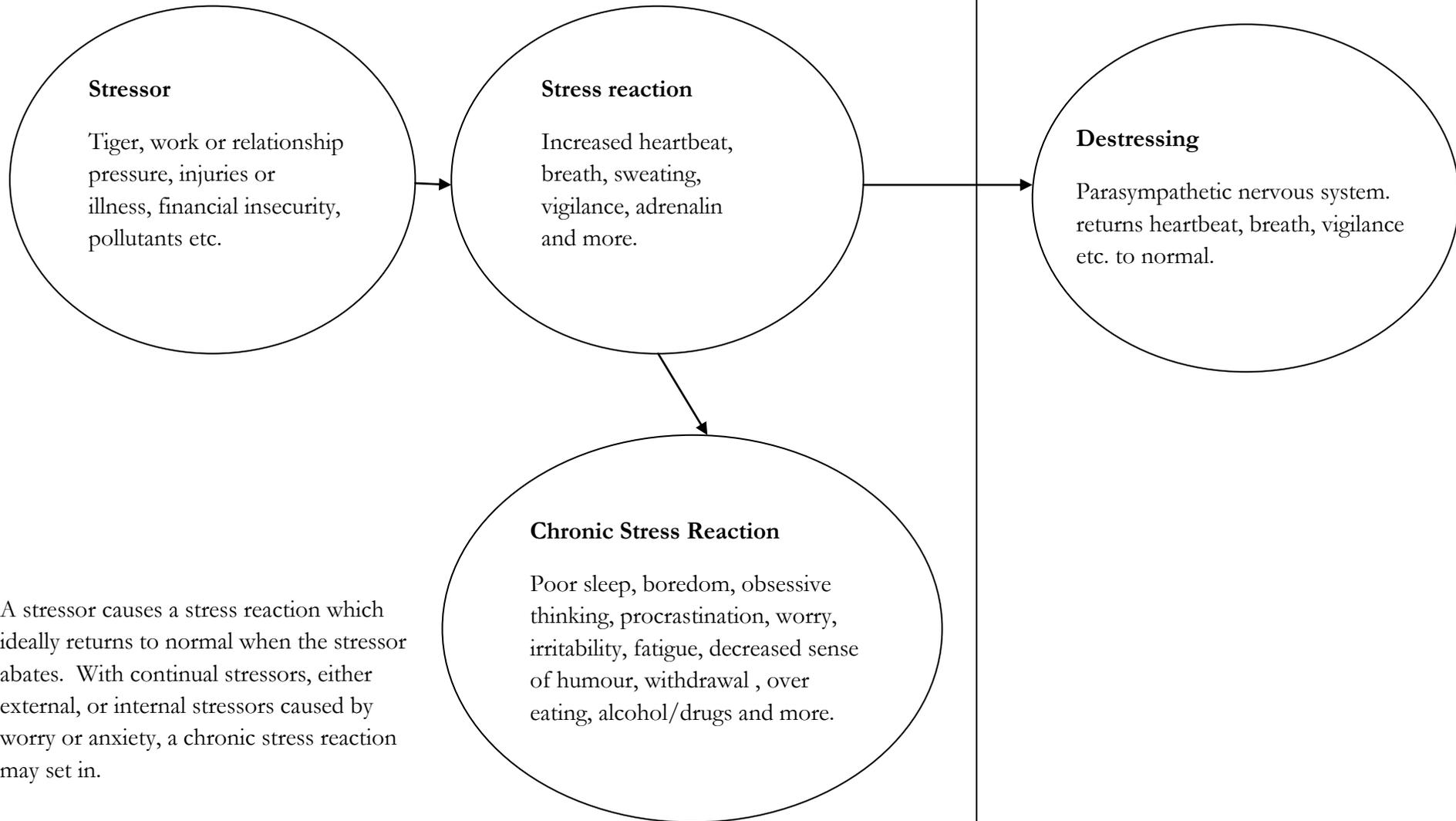
Still, at this stage there is no need to worry as we have another whole system, the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) designed to bring our body back to its normal unaroused state. When the stressor abates, the PNS slows the breath and heart, starts breaking down the hormones and generally brings us to a more relaxed state.

Two things can occur to interfere with this process. The first is continual stressors as when we are awakened by an alarm, grab a coffee and dash off to work where there are constant deadlines and perhaps a lunch time meeting. A peak hour commute home to yelling children and an argument with our partner completes the day. OK, this is a parody of a stereotype; the point is that continual stressors do not allow us to return to a relaxed state. Our body stays aroused.

Long after perfecting the fight and flight system, humans expanded the brain and discovered thinking and language. As a result we can relive past stressful situations such as an argument, an accident or even severe traumas. While the reruns are an attempt to deal with the situation, they often act as a continual stressor. Similarly we can anticipate a future work presentation or dentist visit, feel the associated anxiety or fear and keep ourselves aroused for days before the event.

The result of many stressors, and the ability to play them over and over in our mind, keeps us constantly aroused and can result in a chronic stress reaction. Our blood pressure stays high, being aroused makes sleep difficult and we become fatigued. We might withdraw, start drinking or overeating, become irritable or anxious. The diagram on the next page summarises this.

Stress



A stressor causes a stress reaction which ideally returns to normal when the stressor abates. With continual stressors, either external, or internal stressors caused by worry or anxiety, a chronic stress reaction may set in.

There are a number of ways to avoid chronic stress which include drugs of various kinds, exercise and therapeutic interventions. Since a stressful situation can be compounded with stressful thoughts and emotions that result in body sensations and a course of action, most points in the previous chapter apply. For instance, look at what is running through your mind as you face stressful situations such as an interview? Are your thoughts racing? How are you feeling - anxious, relaxed? What are the body sensations, butterflies, increased heart rate?

Since stress is largely a body reaction, becoming aware of and familiar with these sensations can be particularly helpful. Simply observe the heart beating faster with the attitude, “Oh, I see my heart is beating faster – I wonder how far I can feel it through my body – ah there it is in my legs.” Be curious. Breathe into these sensations.

One physical reaction is particularly important. The breath can be observed, and if you choose, changed. If your breathing has speeded up or gone shallow, you may choose to slow it or deepen it, or try [equal breathing](#) (chapter three). Simply observing your breath will help it return to normal. Since stress is often associated with tension, you may choose to do a relaxation exercise ([audio link](#)) and of course a regular mindfulness practice will aid you to quickly become aware and deal with stress. If you are caught up in an emotionally stressful situation, again finding your breath or the body sensation will help.

Stress – Summary

- Stress is a normal part of life, but chronic stress is a serious problem.
- We can experience many different stressors such as tigers, work and family relationship pressures, money shortages or illnesses. They result in a stress reaction such as quickening heart and breath rates, readying us for fight or flight.
- Usually we return naturally to an unaroused state.
- Chronic stress reaction occurs when stressors do not abate.
- This can be caused by a continually stressful life or by constantly replaying the stressors in our mind.
- There are a number of ways to avoid chronic stress including drugs, exercise and therapeutic interventions.
- Mindfulness of all stages of stress is helpful, particularly observing the associated body sensations and breathing into them.

9. Mindful Movement

Most of the work I do myself and with clients is mindfulness of the breath or body. Any activity however, mental or physical can be done in a mindful way and there is a large body of mindfulness devoted to mindful movement, principally walking and yoga.

Walking meditation

Usually we walk for a reason. The body is the chauffeur of the mind. If the mind is in hurry, the body rushes. If the mind is attracted to something it finds interesting, then the head turns and the body may change direction. And of course all kinds of thoughts cascade through the mind, often without our least awareness.

It helps with mindfulness of the body, and for using mindfulness in everyday life, if we learn to move mindfully. Walking meditation can be very useful for this. To practise walking meditation, stand in an erect dignified pose, with your head held lightly. Allow your neck to be free so your head floats upwards and the back widens. Look forward about 45 degrees below the horizontal. Traditionally your hands are loosely clasped in front just above the belly but let them drop if that feels more comfortable. Then walk forward and coordinate the walking with the breath. Pick up a foot as you breathe in, and slowly, mindfully place it down with the heel just past the toe of the other foot, as you breathe out. You will find you walk very slowly. It takes me about five minutes to walk once around the room. This is “official” walking meditation as practised in Zen temples and can be useful as a mindfulness exercise. Of course, you can practise walking mindfully at any time, anywhere, simply by becoming aware of the movements of your legs and the touch of your feet on the ground. Thich Nhat Hanh talks of the attitude to take while walking mindfully (Thich Nhat Hanh [Walking Meditation](#) 6mins, Yuttadhammo [Walking meditation](#) 10min)

Yoga

Another type of mindfulness movement comes from the practices like Yoga, or Tai Chi. The term yoga survives in English in the word yoke. A yoke typically joins two oxen together so that they can work as a pair. Similarly yoga refers to the yoking of the mind and the body. The postures of yoga are designed to tone up each part of our body and keep it supple. In yoga when you move into a posture you are invited to be fully mindful within that pose. Experience the stretch in a muscle in much the same way as you experience a part of the body in a body scan, not judging, simply allowing the experience to be, not forcing and of course returning to the body sensation when you realise you have been distracted. I recommend that you find a suitable yoga teacher in your neighbourhood. In particular look for a teacher who has a traditional approach rather than a fitness approach and encourages awareness during the yoga session, as well as including a period of mindfulness at the end. Thich Nhat Hanh has developed a series of [mindfulness exercises](#).

As always, any movement at any time can be done mindfully, or not. This leads us to the concept of mindful exercise.

Exercise

Exercise is a very effective way of improving well-being and mitigating the problems of depression, anxiety and stress. A [study](#) that combined many other studies on the effect of exercise states, “There is now ample evidence that a definite relationship exists between exercise and improved mental health.” Our bodies are made to move and work hard physically every day. If you do a lot of exercise you probably know how nourishing it can be both physically and mentally. This is partly because of brain “feel good” chemicals called endorphins that are produced when we exercise.

Joining a gym or local sports or walking club, or going for a regular walk or swim can immensely benefit your well-being. Many jobs now are indoors so here’s a few suggestions for exercising if you have a job that is largely desk based.

Walk (or jog) to the next train station. Park an extra 200m from work. Leave your lunch in the car. Stand up to answer and speak on the phone. Use the stairs e.g. by using the rest room on a different floor. Get a pedometer and aim for 6,000 to 10,000 steps per day. Deliver messages personally rather than by email! Attach a rubber strap to the foot of the desk and use it for exercising. Use water bottles as dumbbells. Every hour stand up and move around. You can make the [mindfulness clock](#) chime every so many minutes to remind you to exercise (or practise mindfulness!) Switch your chair for a swiss ball. And finally my son tells me that having stand up meetings with high tables and no chairs allowed, improves fitness and meeting efficiency! The following websites have an office work out and more ideas. ([Office exercise link 1](#) [Office exercise link 2](#)) Naturally you will be wanting to do all these exercises mindfully.

Regular exercise is much easier to do if you find something you have a passion for. It is worth spending time experimenting to find what exercise or sport you enjoy the most, for example team sport, running, swimming, martial arts or walking. Note that many of the tips for yoga above are applicable to all movement. In particular be mindful of your body and tune into your breath from time to time.

Mindful Movement - Summary

- The principal “formal” styles of mindful movement are walking meditation, yoga and various practices like Tai Chi.
- Movement and exercise are very important for well-being.
- There are lots of ways of working out at your job.
- All movement and exercise can be done mindfully.

10. Deeper Benefits of Mindfulness

In medieval times the Earth was thought to be at the centre of the universe with the sun and other stars passing overhead each day. Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo dragged us into the modern scientific era by demonstrating that the sun was the centre around which we and the planets orbited. This was a shock, but with Newton completing the picture during the seventeenth century we settled into a new displaced view of ourselves. About one hundred years ago scientists started probing inside the atom. During my training as a nuclear physicist in the sixties I learnt about this in some detail. The first surprise was how much space there was inside an atom. With some relief a central nucleus was found, that was very dense, hard and solid. The atom started to look a bit like the solar system that scientists were used to - a large central mass, the sun or the nucleus and lighter orbiting bodies of the planets or electrons. Some sort of order was restored. Later as the nucleus was penetrated, solidity again evaporated. The nucleus proved to be a dance of particles and energy, without any substance. There was no firm place anywhere. About the same time Albert Einstein was explaining that everything, especially motion, was relative - anywhere, any speed was as good as any other to view the universe. Again there was a feeling of nowhere firm to stand.

It has been an assumption of this book to date that we have a witness that observes our experiences and is occasionally overwhelmed by thoughts, emotions and body sensations. This witness, or essential self makes decisions and directs the body in its actions. Most of us seem to have an intuitive idea of our essential self; it is what is fundamentally us, our ongoing sense of our self. In the sixth century BC, Siddhartha Gotama, later known as the Buddha, or awakened one, started a search, as had many people before and since, for the essential *me*. The eternal question, “Who am I?”

As the story goes Siddhartha examined and penetrated the self deeper and deeper using the lens of meditation and found ... nothing. He found nothing of substance and nowhere for the Self to reside. The experience of scientists 2,400 years later in the physical world resonates with this search in inner space. As we look closer and closer at who we are, anything substantial evaporates. According to the Buddha this is the truth we discover by further investigation. Many modern disciplines also focus on this idea. Consciousness philosopher Dan Dennett, in *Consciousness Explained*, argues strongly against dualism, the idea that there are two realms, the material realm and the conscious realm. Consequently there is no place for a concept like the traditional view of a soul. His multiple drafts view of consciousness demonstrates that consciousness is constructed from various ongoing sensory experiences on the fly and seriously questions the concept of any enduring Self. Brain scientists (neurobiologists), who map the brain via scans, similarly question the idea that there is anywhere for a Self, at least in the brain. They have come up with some intriguing (and apparently infuriating) [experiments](#) that challenge the concept of free-will and even a part of the brain that is responsible for religious experience. Stimulating this area induces that feeling of awe we get when we feel we have contacted something deep. Cognitive scientist, Susan Blackmore explains how the illusion that there is a conscious enduring Self or ego actually leads to suffering – something noted by the Buddha in his sermons.

While it sounds scary, by following this path of self observation or mindfulness and the consequent dissolving of the ego, people have reported a great freedom and the ability to just live each day as it is without too much worry. The result seems to be a richer life with all the feelings and experiences of life fully felt, but with less associated suffering or becoming overwhelmed by events. People choose to act out of compassion rather than self interest. This is of course not an all or nothing process, generally there are benefits to yourself and others to be found at all stages.

Jack Kornfield's *A Path with Heart* and Charlotte Joko Beck's *Everyday Zen* are accounts of this journey and how to travel it, while Australian John Tarrant's *The Light inside the Dark*, gives a fascinating account of the journey, blending eastern and western ideas.

If, after finding some of the benefits of mindfulness, and perhaps reading around, you decide to take the quest further, it's a good idea to increase your daily meditation above half an hour and to find a teacher. The Buddhists are probably the experts at meditation teaching and most traditions offer introductory courses. Since meditation practices vary (e.g. from the drums and chanting of Tibetan practice to the more austere Zen and Insight traditions) it's a good idea to try more than one, to find what suits you. Regular meditation in a group with a good teacher can be a great benefit and can usually be done without feeling you are joining a new religion. <http://www.buddhanet.net/> contains a useful directory of resources. Many yoga groups have a heavy emphasis on meditation and there are numerous Christian meditation groups. You can also look around for culturally and religiously neutral meditation practices and groups.

May you find the many benefits of mindfulness, for yourself and others.

Deeper Benefits of Mindfulness – Summary

- Meditation, science and philosophy all seem to come up with the idea that there is no enduring Self.
- As we continue to meditate we reach a space where ego is less important.
- This results in living more and more in the now.
- Life is still as full of difficulties and challenges as before, but the associated suffering may be far less.
- Compassion grows.
- A good teacher and a group to meditate can be most helpful.

This is currently the end of Everyday Mindfulness, but as an internet book it is constantly updated. Keep a check for the latest version at www.stillmind.com.au/Mindfulnessbook.htm

References

An idiosyncratic list of books, videos and internet articles which largely reflect my current position, which is Zen, so far as my own practice is concerned and *Mindfully-Based Cognitive Therapy* adapted from Jon Kabat-Zinn, as my therapeutic orientation.

Charlotte Joko Beck, *Everyday Zen*. A summary of lectures she has given about using every day events as a means of treading a mindfulness path.

Fritjof Capra, *Tao of Physics*. Seminal work showing how modern physics supports many of the basic theories of ancient eastern philosophy, such as the interconnectedness of all things, non-dualism and even the age of the universe.

Dan Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*. Argues strongly against dualism, the idea that there are two realms, the material and the conscious. Consequently there is no place for a concept like the traditional view of a soul. His multiple drafts view of consciousness demonstrates that conscious is to some extent constructed from various experiences, seriously questioning the concept of any enduring Self.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*. Quoted throughout this book. He is a Vietnamese monk who lives in his community of Plum Village in France. He has written many insightful and challenging books.

Thich Nhat Hanh. 6 min. Talks about mindfulness and nature in his gentle monkish style
www.youtube.com/watch?v=aubF7v-MlMM

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Mindful Movement*. 9 min. Brief introduction to mindfulness followed by a series of exercises developed by TNH for the purpose of enjoying our body and breath and the physical sensations of stretching while cultivating mindfulness.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWerJwf3-3I&feature=related>

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Walking meditation*. 6 min. TNH talks poetically about how to walk while slowly walking back and forth with his students.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdO1vZJgUu0>

Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*. This is the book that arguably started the modern mindfulness therapy movement. Ancient mindfulness techniques are adapted in an eight week program called *Mindfully Based Stress Reduction* at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre

Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Mindfulness*. 72 min. Jon gives a fairly detailed explanation of mindfulness including a mindfulness exercise about 25 mins in.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nwwKbM_vJc

Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart: A Guide through the Perils and Promises of the Spiritual Life*. A practical manual, full of techniques for mindfulness written in a friendly and warm style by a meditation teacher in the Theravada tradition of Buddhism which most closely follows the original teachings of the Buddha.

Gregory Kramer, *Insight Dialogue*. <http://www.metta.org/> A book and workshops on how to maintain mindfulness while talking to someone else. He runs workshops worldwide including regularly in Australia.

www.Stillmind.com.au – my website, which includes a number of mindfulness exercises, the latest copy of this book and information on mindfulness.

Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale, *Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*. Readable by anyone, but probably more of a practitioner's guide to mindfulness therapy and the book that most closely informs my own practice.

John Tarrant, *The Light inside the Dark*. A brilliant work combining western, mostly Jungian ideas with a Zen mindfulness approach.

Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal and Jon Kabat-Zinn, *The Mindful Way through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness*. A practical guide to using mindfulness to work through depression and other mental problems by the originators or modern mindfulness therapy. Includes a very useful CD of mindfulness exercises.

Yuttadhammo, *Walking meditation*. 10 min. Explains walking meditation in some detail. First Yuttadhammo explains the benefits of walking meditation such as teaching patience, improving the digestion and having a longer lasting effect than sitting. His method is a little different to mine. I emphasise the feeling of the foot touching the ground and coordinating walking with the breath whereas he talks what he is doing, "Stepping left", "turning" etc. Both are equally valid methods of walking with mindfulness.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFvablc6EI&NR=1>