

The Mindful Heart

Sermon by Sara Milnes, 06/22/2014

There's lots of talk about mindfulness these days.

Celebrities and CEOs and sports figures say they practice it—Richard Gere, Oprah, and Kobe Bryant to name a few. It's on the cover of TIME magazine, and the subject of hundreds of research articles.

Books come out every month on mindfulness. A quick perusal of amazon.com yields books on mindful parenting, mindfulness-based stress reduction, mindfulness skills for clinicians, mindfulness exercises for kids, mindfulness in everyday life, mindfulness for finding peace, and the benefits of mindfulness. Sometimes they're based on sound research, or long practice, or the teachings of the Buddha. Sometimes, sadly, they combine seemingly sound practices with rather wild assertions.

Neurological research and health studies have documented a long list of benefits to be derived from mindfulness:

- improved immune system
- increased positive emotions and decreased negative ones
- increased density of gray matter in the brain, linked to learning, memory, emotion regulation and empathy
- improved memory and attention
- increased happiness
- increased altruism and compassion—the list goes on.

The word itself has worked its way into everyday language, with various meanings—be mindful of your step, pay attention to the present moment, pay attention, focus on an object. The usage of the word began to increase in Western culture in the sixties, and its usage has quadrupled since 1990. Much like the word karma, which in the Eastern culture from which it comes refers to the sum of one's actions, but in western culture has become fate, destiny, or even retribution, the word mindfulness also strays from its original meanings.

So what is mindfulness? And more important, what's the value of it?

To touch on the second question first, I would say that the value is the awareness and insight developed through the practice of mindfulness, and the opening of the heart that comes with that insight. Now, Dwane always says "opening the heart" is a bit abstract for him, so let me say a few more words.

The everyday response to others is kindness and good will. It's response to someone who is suffering is compassion; towards someone who has good fortune is empathetic joy. An open heart takes appropriate action towards others, and in the world.

The point of mindfulness meditation is not to be able to perfectly concentrate—sadly there are quite a few people who are adept at concentration meditation, but whose actions are not "those that the wise would approve," to quote the Buddhist texts. The point is to be aware of the thoughts and emotions of the body and mind, because awareness brings appropriate responses in mind and action.

So back to the first question of what is mindfulness: Mindfulness is a meditation technique, and it can be used sitting quietly, but it can also be used standing in line at the bank. With practice, it can become an everyday way of looking at the world.

There are many meditation techniques going back at least 5,000 years, in both Western and Eastern culture—prayer, focus on an object of meditation, repetition of a mantra or prayer. Mindfulness meditation is one of the innovative practices of the Buddha about 2,500 years ago. While the Hindu culture from which Buddhist practice arose included mindfulness in the sense of paying attention or concentrating, the sheer variety of ways to be mindful in Buddhism is breath-taking. It even includes the mind itself as an object of mindfulness.

In Western culture, both secular mindfulness and mindfulness as a part of a Buddhist practice are practiced. Secular mindfulness takes the practice of mindfulness separate from other Buddhist practices, and may mix in modern psychology and research. It's often used in health settings, prisons, schools, even corporations. Mindfulness practiced as a part of a Buddhist practice would include other teachings of the Buddha.

There are many flavors of Buddhist practice—Tibetan, Theravadan, Zen and others; all seem to agree on the core teachings of the Buddha, but some include later practices that practitioners found useful and incorporated. To my knowledge, none of them require “belief” in doctrines, and for many who practice Buddhism, it is not a religion. The Buddha's instruction was to practice, and “see for yourself.”

So here's the practice. Before we've made mindfulness a habit, it's generally hard to learn it in the long line at the bank, so it's recommended to start in a reasonably quiet place, sitting with the back reasonably straight. Sitting cross-legged on the floor is quite optional.

To begin, you would start by paying attention to the breath—not trying to control it or change it, but just to notice it. If you breathe in a long breath, you're aware of a long breath; breathe in a short breath, you're aware of a short breath. Breathing out, your breath is long, or short. Sometimes there's a space between breaths, which is often when the mind decides to take a hike, and if that happens frequently it's often helpful to notice a physical touch point, like the hand lying on the thigh or the buttocks on the seat.

Whenever the attention wavers, which it will, notice the thought or feeling or sensation that the mind has wandered to. Perhaps you make a brief mental note that the thought was “thinking” or “planning” or “anger” or “itch”, and let go of it, without judgment. It's just a thought or a feeling, not a bad thought or feeling. It's just a moment, or five minutes, or more, of inattention. It's all right. Just return to the inbreath or outbreath.

You return again and again to the breath, from wherever your mind has gone—planning your vacation, balancing the checkbook, telling yourself you'll never get this, looking at the haircut of the person in front of you.

The purpose of focusing on the breath is not to become a good breather. It's to calm and stabilize the mind. When we start to practice mindfulness meditation, the mind is

all over the place, like a hyperactive monkey—in fact, it’s often called the monkey mind. By focusing on the breath and returning to it, the mind becomes calmer and less distractible. When the mind is reasonably stable, there are other subjects to pay attention to.

With a calmer more attentive mind, we might let the breath keep breathing in the background, and turn the mindfulness purposefully to the body. Is it tight anywhere? Is there a feeling that goes along with the tightness? Does it itch? Is its position shifting? Is the brow furrowed? Everyone’s body will be different, and tell them different things.

For example, for years my left hand would tighten up. I’d notice it, and relax it, and sometime later notice that it had again tightened up of its own accord. When I stopped trying so hard to do everything right, the hand stopped tensing with stress. When my brow is furrowed, I usually find that my mind has taken a road trip and is busy, busy, busy. Body restlessness often accompanies a restless or anxious mind. Sleepiness comes to everyone at some time or another. The mind and body aren’t separate, and awareness of the body helps us know what’s going on in the mind.

Another way of being mindful is to notice the feeling tone—that is, is something pleasant, unpleasant or neutral? Everything we experience has a feeling tone that precedes whether we like it, dislike it, or pay no attention to it. It’s extremely instructive to pay attention to feeling tone and see how it instantly leads to a response.

If the weather is hot and sticky, most of us consider it unpleasant. We don’t like it. Watch what the mind does with that—the church should really get some air conditioning, it’s so uncomfortable . . . but that’s too expensive. Or at least better fans . . . maybe I should change my usual seat for the summer . . . how can anyone be expected to pay attention . . . after church I’ll do something to cool off . . . The list goes on as the mind rambles.

By paying attention to the feeling tone, we start understanding the mind. We also begin to realize that everything changes, everything is impermanent. For example, as our mind is off discussing the weather with itself, a breeze kicks up and floats through the windows. How pleasant. So cooling. I can smell the roses. I hope the breeze will keep blowing. The mind is fickle.

A third major way of being mindful is to notice perceptions—the thoughts and emotions that come and go in the mind and body. By paying close attention, but not identifying with them, we soon realize that they do come and go. It’s not so much that “I” am stressed or happy or excited or sad, but that there is a feeling of happiness, or sadness, or anxiety.

For example, you may feel depressed, and think you have been solidly depressed for weeks. But if you can look carefully at your thoughts and feelings, moment by moment, you realize that there are many moments that you are neutral or even happy. The depression is not an immovable, solid mass, but fluid, coming and going. And if it can come, it can also go.

Likewise the thoughts in the mind will often string out a long narrative story. We’ll endlessly rehearse an upcoming job interview, what they will say, what we will say, what is just the right outfit to wear, what magic response will get us the job. But if we compare our internal stories to what actually happened, it never happens the way it

did in the story. And while I like to pretend my musings are just prudent planning—and there’s nothing wrong with planning, it’s quite necessary at times—mostly I’m mulling anxiously, and not particularly productively.

Our thoughts and feelings don’t define us at all. In fact, modern research using functional MRIs that show the brain at work, has shown that the impulse to act precedes the conscious awareness of that action by something like 39 milliseconds. In other words, the impulse to act or think occurs without our willing it. By understanding this, and the transient nature of thoughts and emotions, we realize that our thoughts and feelings don’t define us, and the hold negative thoughts and feelings have on us begins to loosen. Instead of “my thoughts and feelings”, they’re just thoughts and feelings. They come and go without agency.

And that insight allows us to dis-identify with our thoughts and feelings, and to know that these thoughts and feelings are impermanent. What we actually have is not free will--remember that the impulse to act precedes the awareness of the impulse--but “free won’t”, and free won’t is extremely important, and freeing. This is an insight into the way things are.

Negative thoughts are inevitable. How do we respond? With the ability to see what’s going on in our minds and bodies before we respond, “free won’t” becomes a powerful tool to respond appropriately. When we’re not aware we’re irritated, we don’t recognize our feelings, and don’t acknowledge them. We respond with an automatic response, and it may be hurtful to ourselves and others. When we’re aware, we can consider the best response in the circumstances.

Awareness allows us to pause, to put on the brakes, and respond with kindness and good will. This doesn’t mean we have to be wishy-washy. We can be firm if necessary, as we might be in fighting an injustice. But we can to respond appropriately, with good will.

This is purpose of mindfulness, to develop wisdom and compassion, to develop an appropriate response. We don’t practice mindfulness meditation just to be healthier, or calmer, or less stressed, even though research has shown that these dimensions can improve in as little as 8 weeks.

Ultimately, we want to respond to others and to situations in the most appropriate way possible. More and more, as we become aware through practice, an appropriate response arises spontaneously, or at least more quickly. It’s not always easy to calm the mind, even after many years of practice. The mind does what it does. With practice, we have a chance to say “I won’t” before we act, and we learn to be aware and to respond compassionately. This is what I call the mindful heart.

As UUs, we aspire to live our UU principles, and the symbol of a bird with wings of wisdom and compassion is familiar, a symbol also used in Buddhism. I think the reason Buddhist practice is appealing to many UUs is because it’s a practice which strengthens insight and compassion, and doesn’t involve adopting a set of beliefs. So if it interests you, follow the Buddha’s advice and “see for yourself.”