

The Art of Mindfulness

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

So habitual is the trance of ordinary life that one could say that human beings are a race that sleeps and awakens, but does not awaken fully. Because half-awake is sufficient for the tasks we customarily do, few of us are aware of the dysfunction of our condition.

—[Arthur J. Deikman](#), *The Observing Self*, p. 129

"Mindfulness" is a mind full of attentiveness. Attentiveness happens spontaneously when there is a moment of alarm, when we are startled into involuntary alertness. Then our attention becomes acutely focused on the object or situation that causes us to be alarmed. Our nervous system automatically clicks into the flight-or-fight mode. Mindfulness proper, however, is a type of attentiveness that occurs only when we are relaxed, or serene, rather than alarmed or feeling threatened. It is the nonjudgmental, noninterpretative witnessing of the activities of the body and the mind.

The concept of mindfulness is most commonly associated with Buddhism where mindfulness pertains to the seventh limb of the Buddha's eightfold path and is known as "right remembering" (*samyak-smriti*). It is a mental discipline leading to and underlying the core practice of concentration (*samādhī*), which is the eighth limb. (For a detailed account of the Buddhist meditation stages, see the treatment by the Sri Lankan meditation master [Henepola Gunaratna](#).)

Mindfulness, however, need not necessarily have a Buddhist frame. Jiddu Krishnamurti called it "choiceless awareness," while others have referred to it as "bare attention." This suggests that it has no ideological coloring, no conceptual overlay. As the German-born Theravada Buddhist master Nyanaponika Thera explained:

By bare attention we understand the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens *to* us and *in* us, at the successive moments of perception. It is called "bare" because it attends to the bare facts of a perception without reacting to them by deed, speech or mental comment. Ordinarily, that purely receptive state of mind is . . . just a very brief phase of the thought process of which one is often scarcely aware. But in the methodical development of mindfulness aimed at the unfolding of its latent powers, bare attention is sustained for as long a time as one's strength of concentration permits. (Cited in Jonathan Spear, ed., *The Experience of Meditation*, pp. 133-134)

As a discipline, mindfulness must be sustained and therefore sufficiently acute ("ardent"), which requires cultivation through repeated effort. Gradually, the mind learns to stay with the task at hand.

Awareness is a fundamental aspect of the mind. Yet, much of our life unfolds in a dimly aware or even unaware state of consciousness. In the spiritual traditions, this “consensus trance” ([Arthur Deikman, Charles Tart](#)) is considered undesirable, as the mind is allowed to enter into merely reactive patterns that perpetuate themselves. Reactive patterns typically involve unwholesome mental activity, especially negative drives and emotions, which set up chain reactions that occlude the faculty of awareness. From a Buddhist perspective, lack of attentiveness is responsible for the creation of unwholesome karma, that is, the creation of a mental thrust toward insalubrious states of mind and experiences and the reduction of inner freedom.

Mindfulness, or sustained nonjudgmental attentiveness, by contrast engenders wholesome karma, which is expressed in greater equanimity and a greater sense of inner freedom. In turn, these are trustworthy foundations for insight (*prajñā*) into the nature of things, leading to benign attitudes and a harmonious life.

Above all, mindfulness interrupts the automatic process of becoming lost in one’s mental processes, of wrongly identifying oneself with one’s inner activities. As any beginner in the art of concentration and meditation quickly discovers, the mind is largely on automatic. Thoughts and emotions seem to perpetuate themselves in us, even when we would like them to stop. After just a few seconds of conscious self-observation, we find ourselves lost again in our own thoughts. Also, more fatefully, we typically identify with strong unpleasant emotions, such as anger or jealousy, and thereby give tacit permission to those emotions to run their course, sometimes to a person’s utter ruin.

Through the discipline of mindfulness, we can prevent such reactivity. In other words, we can learn to gain control over our mind’s automaticity, which is connected with the brain and nervous system.

Mindfulness can be formal or informal. That is to say, it can be practiced in a special contemplative session; or it can be engaged as an aspect of one’s daily activities. Ideally, to maximize the benefit of this kind of voluntary attentiveness, mindfulness should be practiced both formally and informally.

Buddhism, which has developed the practice of mindfulness to a fine art, distinguishes four focal points of mindfulness, which are

1. the body as a whole
2. feelings
3. the mind as a whole
4. mental activity

Mindfulness in regard to the body involves being attentive to the body’s position in space and movement. For instance, the practitioner of mindfulness notes—always without judgment—whether his body is leaning to one side or the other, sitting upright or collapsed, or whether there is motion of the arms and legs, and so forth. A favored technique is to focus on the movement of the breath. He does not inquire into why the body is behaving the way it is, just as he is not inquiring into the causes of arising mental phenomena. Thus there is no analytical dimension to this exercise of “remembering” (Sanskrit: *smṛiti*; Pali: *sati*). It can, however, lead to an equally disciplined examination of

bodily and mental activity, which in Buddhism is known as “insight” (Sanskrit: *vipashyana*; Pali: *vipassana*).

Mindfulness in regard to feelings, or sensations, consists in focused attention on bodily sensations, which can be of three varieties: painful/uncomfortable, pleasant/comfortable, and neutral. But the practitioner merely notices when one or the other type of feeling/sensation is present; he does not interpret what this means.

Mindfulness of the mind “in of itself” involves being acutely attentive to the mind, specifically the presence of attachment, aversion, or delusion. Again, beyond this witnessing, no conceptualization is engaged in.

Mindfulness focused on arising mental phenomena, in Buddhism, means attentiveness to the presence or absence of sensual desires, ill will, sloth, drowsiness, restlessness, anxiety, and doubt.

Obviously, the present moment is all-important in the practice of mindfulness. Past and future are irrelevant to this discipline, and therefore the mind is prevented from wandering off into the past or the future. If we are not present here and now, where are we really?

As the *Dhamma-Pada* (21) declares:

Mindfulness is the path to the deathless;
Heedlessness is the path to death;
The mindful do not die;
But the heedless are as if dead already.

What this stanza from a popular Buddhist work proposes is that mindfulness places us into Mind as it exists prior to all conceptual elaborations and emotional confusions. This primordial Mind is not the conditional brain-mind but our true nature, which the Buddha and subsequent Buddhist masters assure us is immortal. By contrast, when we succumb to “heedlessness,” or inattention, we are involuntarily identifying with the brain-mind and thus mortality.

Expressed in a nonmetaphysical manner, mindfulness makes us real; heedlessness stands for semi-aware automaticity, or what Arthur Deikman and others have called “consensus trance.” We are free to choose.

References

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