

## Making Mindfulness Practice Easy

Over the years, I've heard folks say, about mindfulness: "I can't take on another project." "Being mindful is boring." "I don't have time to stop and smell the roses." "Mindfulness is another fad. Don't do fads." "Mindfulness is too New Age for me." "I've tried it and it's way too stressful." "I don't get the purpose of mindfulness—what does it accomplish?"

These kinds of attitudes toward a mindfulness practice reminds me of The 6 Realms of Existence— a Buddhist mythological classification system that describes life's "levels": the Hell Realm, the Hungry Ghost, Animal, Human, Demi-God Realm and the God Realm. So let's look at our attitudes toward our mindfulness practice in the context of these 6 realms. As I go through them briefly, notice if you see some of your own attitudes about mindfulness.

The Hell Realm is dominated by anger. You are in the hell realm when you struggle to be the perfect mindfulness practitioner. Or when you try to obey some perceived rule or guideline about being mindful—we usually resist "obey"—or when you catch yourself being mind-less— again —and you think, "I can't do this! Being mindful all the time is impossible for me!" If your friends tell you to ease up, you drive them away because you think they're just showing off with all that mindfulness and kindness stuff. So...you struggle to be mindful and you get angry with *yourself* for not being mindful and you get angry at your *friends* for trying to help. That's the Hell Realm.

The Hungry Ghost Realm is characterized by restlessness, craving, strong desires and frustration. You dwell in the Hungry Ghost realm when you are greedy for results in your mindfulness practice. They says, "When you live

in mindfulness miracles are everywhere,” but you haven’t seen any miracles even though you stared at the dang white cloud and blue sky— *Thay’s suggestion!*— for at least a whole minute. Mindfulness feels boring to you. You need to get your work done— you don’t have time to be mindful. You keep looking for some kind of sign outside yourself that your mindfulness practice is “working” but you never find satisfaction. Hungry Ghost Realm.

If you dwell in the Animal Realm you are driven by impulse and instinct; you are complacent and comfortable; you avoid anything that is new or unfamiliar. You don’t make a big effort to be mindful, you don’t wig out, you certainly don’t over-exert or struggle. You think of your mindfulness practice as adequate. For you mindfulness a relaxing practice, but you get no insight or understanding, no movement to a deeper experience of life, no real joy or delight. Animal Realm

The Human Realm is a mixture of pain and pleasure. Ease and effort. You are aware of and able to work on the 5 mindfulness trainings but you’re frustrated/irritated that you can’t actually follow them.

You can be kind and compassionate but you can also be judgmental, fearful, angry, impatient. You want your mindfulness practice to produce results—to be a good use of your time. Now! You are always looking outside yourself for something new to satisfy your desires. Human Realm

Demi-god Realm is characterized by competition. Who can be the most mindful? Who can be mindful the longest? This sense of competition brings out your jealousy, envy, self-doubt and fear. You consider yourself to be a superior mindfulness practitioner....better than any other mindfulness

practitioner. And you don't have patience for the folks you consider to be your inferiors. But...you outwardly display wisdom and faith and loyalty to the teachings. You *look* Buddhist. Demi-god Realm

When you live in the Realm of the Gods you have the sense of being above it all. You remove yourself from the confusion and messiness of life and focus on your pleasures. Mindfulness, you say, is a beginner's practice, so you don't need it—it's a waste of your time and effort. You are generous and kind but mostly blind to the suffering of others. You have a strong attachment to your own pleasure filled life. Realm of Gods

Maybe you see your attitude about mindfulness in some of those realms?

I'd like to offer a Baker's Dozen tips that, if you use them, can make the practice of mindfulness painless, in fact joyful—-with less struggle and craving, more beneficial to yourself and others, more heartfelt, less competitive, more genuine.

This is what Thich Nhat Hanh says about mindfulness, "Mindfulness is the energy of being *aware* and *awake* to the *present* moment. It is the *continuous* practice of touching life *deeply* in *every* moment of daily life. To be mindful is to be truly alive, present and *at one* with those around you and with what you are doing."

Oh dear. Aware and awake? Continuous practice? Every moment of daily life? I'm not some sort of blissed-out Dalai Mama. How am I going to do this mindfulness thing?

## **1. Kindly pay attention**

Thay says that Mindfulness “is the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment of daily life...” Well, yes, that IS our goal. But we have to practice kindness, understanding and patience with ourselves on our journey to that goal. It’s okay not to be perfectly present and focused at all times. It’s not as rich or as miraculous or as fun, but mindfulness is a practice that takes cultivating, nourishing. A practice that takes Time.

First you train yourself to *recognize* what is there, either positive or negative. Notice what you see, hear, taste, touch, smell. When a thought or idea arises, you simply recognize it and smile to it.

Over time, you train yourself to notice when your mind has wandered, and you bring it back to what’s *in* you or in *front* of you. If it is a positive thing like a blue sky or a big sunrise, or a sweet idea, the more mindful you are, the more the beauty of the sky or the idea is revealed to you. Thay says, “That is why mindfulness and concentration are such sources of happiness. You can create a moment of joy, a feeling of happiness, at any time of the day.”

Eventually you train yourself to look deeply into something. For example, if you are feeling anxious, you look deeply into the causes of your anxiety. What are some of the *internal* reasons? What are some of the *external* causes? When you understand the causes and conditions, you have the insight that helps you transform your anxiety into something positive. Your anxiety becomes a teacher.

If you lose your awareness 5 times in a minute, you’re *not failing* at mindfulness. You’re practicing it.

## **2. Meditation Time, Come On!**

A sweet place to *rehearse* mindfulness, to practice it over and over and

over, is on your cushion or meditation chair. You just sit down in some comfortable position, upright but not up tight, and you close your eyes lightly and you smile a little bit at how amazing you are for taking this moment for yourself— and you just watch your breath. It's really sweet. Then thoughts come rolling in—uninvited but there they are—and you notice what the thoughts are about—planning? worrying? making lists? old conversations?— you just notice the topics of the thoughts, their themes—and you smile and when you breathe out you send the thoughts out with your out-breath and you bring your attention, your awareness—your mindfulness— back to your breathing and you notice what your *breath* is all about—in breath? out? slow? short? deep? long?— and here comes another thought so you notice it, smile to it, breathe it out. That's it! You're practicing mindfulness! If you do this every day for a week or so, you'll see that this “catch and release” mindfulness practice on your cushion begins to show up in your daily life.

### **3. Present moment, *wonderful* moment?**

Sometimes the present moment that we're mindful of does NOT seem like such a *wonderful* moment. It's easy to be mindful of a full moon, a sleeping baby, a bowl of homemade granola, but many details of our daily lives aren't all that enjoyable so we're not so keen to be mindful of them.

I don't know about your house, but my house has yet to clean itself. They (and Gustavo) taught me that when you pay attention to what you are cleaning—toilet, floor, dishes, clothes—when you are *really* mindful to the details of the job and go slowly, the not-so-wonderful moment becomes just fine. Actually becomes a wonderful moment.

Traffic isn't a wonderful moment for everyone. Maybe traffic is boring to you—well, actually, that's just *your attitude* about the traffic. Mindfulness

can help you change your attitude.

Maybe you see the news as depressing— Mindfulness can remind you that your TV, computer, radio, iPad and phone all have off buttons.

Your co-worker or partner is annoying—ok, but when people (including you) are annoying, there are good reasons. With mindfulness, you can try to understand those reasons. And understanding helps make the moment with them wonderful.

Maybe someone criticized your work and you feel awful but you since you don't want anyone to know you're hurt, you stuff that non-wonderful-moment. With mindfulness you can look directly and deeply at the hurt and transform it.

You may have said something to someone that you regret: A not so wonderful moment. They says: "You may have resolved not to say certain things but then find yourself saying them anyway. Mindfulness can help you stop before you say things that create conflict for yourself or others."

So...What if we were to stop wishing that reality were different and just got curious about it?

We might find ways to enjoy the traffic. We might learn that our coworker is going through a messy divorce. We might find something more interesting to do than watch the news. We might find being vulnerable and authentic results in deeper relationships.

And we might remind ourselves that we are doing the best we can and give ourselves a break.

#### **4. Mind the gaps**

Look for gaps throughout your day when you can bring your mind and body together into the present moment. With mindfulness, notice what's going on inside you and outside you in these little gap moments.

I recently noticed that when I heat the water for my tea in the microwave, I get busy doing something else—putting up the dishes or making Gustavo’s coffee or something to be “productive” for those 90 seconds. So now I’ve begun training myself to stop for that minute and a half and just enjoy that tiny gap. I look out the window at the chickens. I listen to the clock. I notice the temperature. Or I just enjoy my in-breath and out-breath. It sounds like a simple thing to do but I’ve noticed I feel restless after 30 seconds or so. I’ve got some more training to do.

## **5. Slow Down You Move Too Fast**

There is a Buddhist story about a fellow who is on a run-away horse, galloping at break-neck speed down a road. A by-stander shouts, “Where are you going?” and the rider shouts back, “I don’t know. Ask the horse!” This horse story is a metaphor for us and our run-away mindless minds.

When Simon was with Garfunkel they offered us an antidote to the run-away mind:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xhJcQEfD5s>

Slow down, you move too fast  
You got to make the morning last  
Just kicking down the cobblestones  
Looking for fun and feelin' groovy  
Ba da da da da da da, feelin' groovy

Hello, lamppost, what'cha knowin'?  
I've come to watch your flowers growin'  
Ain't'cha got no rhymes for me?  
Doot-in doo-doo, feelin' groovy  
Ba da da da da da da, feelin' groovy

I got no deeds to do  
No promises to keep  
I'm dappled and drowsy and ready to sleep  
Let the morning time drop all its petals on me  
Life, I love you

All is groovy

## **6. Little Things Mean A Lot**

Before you “touch life *deeply* in *every* moment of daily life” as Thay instructs, you might *begin* training yourself in mindfulness by noticing the *little* stuff.

Try being mindful when you brush your teeth or as you water your plants or while you’re drinking your coffee or warming your tortillas.

Pause before you hit the send button. Take a breath before you snap at the AT&T rep.

When you stop at a traffic light, you have on the average 120 seconds to practice mindfulness. So enjoy that mini-mindful moment: bring your mind to your body, your breath, the sounds and sights around you. And when the light turns green, smile and bring your full wakeful relaxed attention back to driving.

As you wait in line at the grocery store, instead of scanning those sleazy magazines at the check out, take the time to enjoy your breathing. Notice, without judgment, who and what is around you. Notice the light. Colors. The smells. The sounds. Or scan your body. Notice the way you are standing.

## **7. Easy Does It**

~Albert Einstein “There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is a miracle.” Which sounds a lot like what our teacher says: “When you live in mindfulness miracles are everywhere.”

Maybe you have become interested in mindfulness because you want to change something about yourself. You want to yell less at your partner or your kids or the TV. You want to stop criticizing yourself and others so

much.

Mindfulness is always helpful in difficult moments, but our brains have a hard time doing something new when they're under stress so the more you practice paying attention to an *easy* moment— when you're calm and happy— the easier and more effective it'll be when you're freaking out.

Thay says, “Try to be intelligent and skillful in your practice of mindfulness, approaching every aspect of it with curiosity and ease. Enjoy your practice of mindfulness with a relaxed and gentle attitude, with an open mind and receptive heart.”

## **8. Computer, iPad and smartphone Oh My!**

I've noticed that some people reach for their electronic devices— smartphone, iPad—in unlikely places: I've seen the little white lights of phones turn on during the intermission at the opera and in elevators. I've noticed people looking at their photos on their phones while pushing their carts in the store and in airplanes.

Probably most of the time *you* use *your* electronic devices wisely to do a specific task. But maybe there are times when *even you* mindlessly reach for your devices and, instead of turning toward something useful or important, you turn away from yourself. You get busy with your device so you don't have to *be* you or *feel* your feelings. It's a very subtle thing— maybe you're not actually sure what you're avoiding (because you've avoided it).

You can make reaching for your electronic device a reminder to be mindful, to be aware of the action you're taking. You might notice that you need the device to do a task. Or.... if you notice you're wanting to distract yourself, to fill your mind with thoughts that are not your own, you can stop and take

a breath, make more space for yourself and your feelings, and turn your device into a useful tool again, instead of a digital ball and chain.

### **9. Take it to the Buddha (within)**

This is from a talk That gave at a Congressional Retreat on October 27, 2011:

“In the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness is the essence of a Buddha. A Buddha is someone inhabited by the energy of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the energy that allows you to know what is going on. What is going on is that you are alive. What is going on is that you have a body. What is going on is that there is a paradise of forms and colors available in the here and the now. What is available is the Kingdom of God, not only around you, but in you. That flower is a wonder and if we get in touch deeply enough with that flower, we get in touch with the Kingdom and we get in touch with God. That is thanks to mindfulness.”

### **10. Take it to the Dharma**

Take your doubts or fears about or lack of enthusiasm for mindfulness to the Dharma: to Thay’s books about the Buddha’s teachings, his books about our modern challenges—eating, anger, death, power, prayer, relationships, the earth, and so on—his books of poetry, his practice songs, chants, ceremonies. Listen to his Dharma talks on YouTube, watch or read them on the Plum Village website. Drench yourself in the Dharma Rain. You might begin with the book I began with: *The Miracle of Mindfulness*.

### **11. Take it to the Sangha**

I heard this somewhere: “Practicing mindfulness is easy. Remembering to practice mindfulness is hard.” That about sums up my experience of mindfulness. Our brains are wired to plan, predict, rehearse, anticipate,

worry—also to remember, reminisce reflect, regret—and worry. Mindfulness asks us to swim against the tide of these mental habits. So we need support in this practice to come back to the present; we need a Sangha—a community of friends with the same intention to be mindful, friends who will openly share *their* experiences and listen to *ours*. We need the support and guidance of weekly Sangha gatherings, days of mindfulness and retreats. We need Sangha.

## 12. It's just a thought

The next time you notice yourself thinking that you can't practice mindfulness because you're too distracted, restless or busy, because it's boring or feels unnecessary or because you don't have the energy—remember this: that's just a thought. That's all. You can either choose to take that thought seriously and turn it into your reality, or you can notice it, maybe get curious about it, and then let it go in favor of more useful ideas.

I promised you a Baker's Dozen tips for making your mindfulness practice easy. We've looked at a dozen tips. **Here's your free donut:** remember that no matter how spaced-out, scatterbrained, impulsive, rash, careless or reactive you've been, you can always begin again, fresh.

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Dharmacharya, Terry Cortés-Vega

May the fruit of our study and practice of mindfulness benefit us which includes our teacher and all beings.