Mindfulness: Being Where You Are and Doing What's Important

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I purposely did not title this "meditation" because it seems to me the word "meditation" now has quite a number of different and contradictory meanings. One meaning is a practice that produces the "relaxation response", the opposite of the "stress response".

I think relaxation is a great thing, but that is not what I mean to talk about here. There are lots of good instructions to achieve a "relaxation response". Simply focusing on your breathing and noticing that while you can control your breathing, if you do nothing at all, breathing goes on all by itself. Focusing on this continual process of inhaling and exhaling, inhaling and exhaling and bringing yourself back to the process whenever your "mind wanders" is one good way to achieve relaxation. I've known a number of people who use it as an aid to falling asleep. If you are tired and you "relax", sleep will often follow.

The problem of the "wandering mind" is that you may find you simply are no longer psychologically where you are physically. That's not so bad unless your aim is to do something you consider important. Since there is no time or place when one can do ANYTHING—including important things—except right here and right now, then psychologically, being some place other than the present moment is a problem.

Thus the aim of this article is to assist in bringing ourselves into “the present moment” or, said another way, “being right here, right now”, or said yet another way, being psychologically where we are physically.

Why? So we can better do what we choose to make important with our life.

I’m going to call this “becoming mindful”. The problem isn’t so much that one’s mind wanders. The problem is more that we go “wandering” along with it. There is a certain sense in which each of us is “our body”. However, in another more psychological sense, we “have bodies”. These are MY hands, MY feet and this is MY mouth.

From this more psychological point of view, your body is something you “possess” rather than something that you “are”. The same thing can be said of your thoughts, by which I mean those “radio programs” inside your head, or your images (by which I mean any experience with a “picture”), or your bodily sensations (I’ll just call them “sensations” for short). By sensations, I mean things like your heart is beating faster or slower, your hands feeling cooler or warmer, or your stomach feeling tense or more relaxed.

Sometimes we can control our thoughts, images and sensations. Many times we cannot. Thoughts like, “What a loser I am,” or craving sensations to use a psychoactive substance, or sexual images more or less just “show up”. We don’t ask them to be there; they just “arrive” whether we want them or not. If I ask you not to think of a white bear, my guess that you have already thought of one. You didn’t “ask” it to come… it just did!

While we may not be able to stop our thoughts, images and sensations from “arriving”, we don’t have to “believe” them when they do. There is a big difference between having the thought, “My life is awful!” and BELIEVING the thought, “My life is awful!”. There is a big difference between “surfing an urge” and “tumbling around in it”. You don’t have to avoid urges, or thoughts, or images, in order to avoid being controlled by them.

One thing that can really help in choosing whether to “buy” a thought or image or sensation is to first notice, “Hey, that’s a THOUGHT! Hey, that’s an IMAGE! Hey, that’s a SENSATION!” That “psychological YOU” that does the choosing can then better choose whether to take a thought or an image or a sensation “seriously”. YOU will make that choice much more mindfully if YOU first recognize them for what they are… namely nothing more than a bunch of YOUR thoughts, YOUR images and YOUR sensations. They aren’t YOU… YOU are the person having them.

There are some characteristics of this “psychological YOU” that are worth noting. First, the “psychological YOU” has been around for about as long as you can remember. When you were five or eight or ten and had a completely different body, pretty much the same YOU that is here now, was there back then. Secondly, this psychological YOU is a little like the eye of a hurricane. While thoughts, images and sensations swirl around and come and go, this psychological YOU remains pretty much as it always has been. The experience is a little like the way a playing field remains pretty much the same even though the many games played on it may be very different; or like the way a kitchen remains pretty much the same even though the many meals prepared in it may be very different. Sometimes it is nice to experience a sense of

stability in life especially if many other places are changing. This “YOU” provides that sense of stability.

A third (and perhaps most important) characteristic is that when in contact with this psychological YOU, it is quite clear that no matter how “out of control” YOUR thoughts, images or sensations seem to be, YOU are very much in control of YOUR hands, arms, feet and mouth. No matter how much YOU have the thought, “I MUST drink,” YOU can choose to do things with YOUR hands, arms, feet and mouth other than drink. No matter how strongly YOU have an urge to avoid work, YOU can choose to do things with your hands, arms, feet and mouth that keep you focused on work. No matter how vividly YOU have an image of a short run of enjoyment, YOU can do the things that are important to you in the long run.

So, the kind of mindfulness I am talking about includes being present with YOUR thoughts, images and sensations while recognizing they ARE only a bunch of thoughts, images and sensations, and also recognizing YOU can exert control over your hands, arms, feet and mouth.

The mindfulness I am talking about also includes “being mindful” of what direction you are taking with your hands, arms, feet and mouth. It asks the question, “Am I—right here, right now—in this present moment moving my hands, arms, feet and mouth in a direction that is actually important to me?”

“If I choose to be the best student I can be, are these movements that I am making—right here, right now—in that direction?”

“If I choose to be the best parent I can be, are these movements that I am making—right here, right now—in that direction?”

“If I choose to be the best mate I can be, are these movements that I am making—right here, right now—in that direction?”

“If I choose to be the best worker I can be, are these movements that I am making—right here, right now—in that direction?”

“Whatever direction I choose, are these movements that I am making, in this present moment—right here, right now—taking me in that direction? If not, then with my very next movement, I will put my actions in line with the direction in my life that I choose to make important.”

How does a person “be where they are and do what’s important”?

Like anything else, *by practicing*! Our thoughts and images and sensations invite us to take a ride out of the present moment and off to… well who knows where!!! However, when we notice they are ONLY thoughts, ONLY images, and ONLY sensations, we can “let them leave the station” without us. We focus on doing—in this very moment—whatever the moment requires for us to move in directions we choose to make important with our life.

Practice, practice, practice and most likely, we’ll get better at:

1. **Being mindful that our thoughts, images and sensations are only that;**

2. **Being mindful of our control over our hands, arms, feet, and mouth; and**

3. **Being mindful of choosing the direction in which we exert that control.**