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Being “in the moment”

Mindfulness can be seen as the practice of “being in the moment” – but what does this actually mean? Does it mean that if we’re mindful we should never think about the past or the future, never try to plan or to reflect on our past experience?

Actually, being in the moment means being mindfully aware of what is going on right here and now, in our experience, and this includes any thinking we do about the past or future. Much of the time our experience does not have this quality of awareness or mindfulness. A lot of the time we are like robots, automatically living out habitual patterns of self-pity, anger, wish fulfillment, fear, etc. These habitual tendencies take us over and run our lives for us – without our being able to stand back and decide whether this is what we actually want to be doing. It can be a real shock when we start to realize just how habitual and automatic our lives are, and when we realize how much runaway thinking leads to states of suffering.

When we’re in this robotic state, we’re not mindfully aware of what’s going on. We may know on some level that we’re angry but we probably don’t realize most of the time that we have an option not to be angry. We fantasize without any discernment of whether what we’re thinking about is making us happy or unhappy. And in fact, a lot of the time when we are letting our habits dominate us we are not making ourselves or others happy – often quite the opposite.

Being in the moment is just another way of saying that we are aware of what is going on in our experience, that we are not just being angry (or whatever) but are aware that we are angry and are aware that we can choose to be otherwise. Of course a lot of the time when we are not being in the moment, we are literally thinking about the past or present. We might be dwelling on the past – brooding about some past hurt. Or we may be fantasizing about a future in which we have won the lottery and are living out our lives in some imagined paradise, or daydreaming about being with the perfect partner.

Often these fantasized pasts and futures are not even real possibilities, but simply fantasies of how things might be or of how we would have liked them to have been. And as with all unmindful activity, we have no awareness that this fantasizing is pointless. All that it does is reinforce unhelpful emotional tendencies that can never truly enrich our lives.

**Reflecting with mindfulness**

There are, of course, ways of mindfully thinking about the past or future. Being in the moment does not mean that we are stuck in the moment. We can mindfully and creatively call to mind past events, or imagine what might happen in the future. We can think about the past and think about how we might have acted differently, or wonder why something happened the way it did. We can think about possible futures, and of how the actions that we commit now will make those futures more or less likely. When we are thinking about the past or future while being in the moment, we are conscious that we are reflecting and we’re not lost in thought. We don’t confuse fantasy with reality. We don’t stray from thinking about the past in order to construct imaginary pasts in which we said or did the right thing – or if we do so then it’s part of a conscious thought experiment to see what we might learn from the experience. We think about the future, but rather than it being idle daydreaming we’re thinking about the consequences of our actions or otherwise reflecting on where we want to go in life.

Sometimes daydreaming can be creative. It can be wonderful to relax the reins of consciousness and allow our creative unconscious mind the opportunity to express itself. But it’s generally far more useful to have a part of our conscious mind standing by, observing, watching for any sign that the creative expression of the unconscious is turning gray – turning into the repetitive and reactive expression of old and unhelpful emotional patterns. The conscious mind can intervene at such moments with a light touch, a gentle redirection of our mental energies so that we stay in the present; aware, mindful, and creative.

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# Being mindful

Mindfulness is tough practice but can transform your life.

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[Mindfulness](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/mindfulness) - usually described as "being in the present moment" - is a really tough discipline! When I first heard of this word, at a conference on [Buddhism](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/religion) and psychology, I thought it very strange because surely I was already in the present moment wasn't I? Where else could I be? But then I started asking myself "am I in the present moment now?" and noticed something very odd: the answer was always "yes" but I got the peculiar feeling that perhaps a moment ago I had not been present at all. It was a bit like waking up. But if so, from what? Had I been asleep - half conscious? What?
I was also acutely aware of my own troubled mind. At that time we were living in Germany where my husband was working while I stayed at home with our two small children, and tried to learn German. I longed to find time on my own to write. I felt isolated, unhappy and, above all, unreal. Nothing seemed alive or vibrant. Our flat in the picturesque town of Tübingen looked out over a beautiful park and I used to stare out at the trees, pinching myself to try to make them seem real, feeling [guilty](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/guilt) for not appreciating them. I loathed this unreality. I felt I was not truly there at all. Certainly I was not "in the present moment".
So when I heard about mindfulness, I decided, right there at the conference, to try it. ‘OK' I thought to myself ‘how long shall I try it for .... an hour? a day?' But that would be to miss the point. If I were to be truly in the present moment I could only do it now, and then now, and then now. So I began.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Bottom of Form

The effect was startling - and then frightening. Being in the present moment, which had seemed so uncontroversial in prospect, was terrifying in practice. It meant giving up so much - in fact practically everything. It meant that I was not to think about the next moment, not to dwell on what I had just done, not to think about what I might have said instead, not to imagine a conversation that I might have later, not to look forward to lunch, not to look forward to weekends, holidays or .... anything. But the idea had grabbed me and I kept doing it. In fact I kept doing it for seven weeks.

Most of this process seemed to be about giving up or letting go. As my mind slipped from the world in front of me to thoughts about the past or the future, a little voice inside would say "Come back to the present", or "Be here now", or "Let it go". I remembered John's saying "Let it come. Let it be. Let it go". Now I was doing this for real, not just in sitting [meditation](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/meditation) or on retreat, but in every moment of every day. Everything had to be let go of, apart from whatever was right there, arising in the present moment. I found myself saying "Let it ..." or just "Le ...." and staying fully present, right here.

There is something truly awful about having to let go of so much. Sometimes in bed at night I just wanted to give in - to indulge in some easy sexual fantasy, or pleasant speculation - but the little voice kept going, "Let...". Then odd things began to happen.

First, I had assumed that complicated thoughts about what I had just done and what I had to do next were necessary for living my life. Now I found they were not. I was amazed at just how much mental energy I had been using up when so little is required. To take a simple example, I found that I could go through a series of thoughts like "I think I'll make a butter bean casserole for supper. I've got tomatoes and carrots indoors but I must remember to go out and pick some broccoli before dark" in a flash, and then drop it, and still remember to go and get the broccoli later on. Why had I been wasting so much effort before?

Another oddity was to realise that the present moment is always all right. This bizarre, but liberating, notion crept up on me gradually. Time and again I noticed that all my troubles lay in the thoughts I was letting go of - not in the immediate situation. Even if the immediate situation was a difficult one, the difficulties almost always concerned the past or the future.

Of course, difficult situations have to be dealt with, but oddly enough even these seemed easier, rather than harder, when I was paying attention to the now. I found myself, when faced with one particularly difficult life decision, writing down a list of pros and cons and assessing them. But this was done in a completely new way: I thought through the likely consequences of each decision in turn, paying fierce attention to each one on the list. Then I decided on one of them, without agonising or trying to go back on the decision. Then I got on with the one that had been chosen.

Letting go of what you've done immediately afterwards is enormously freeing but, in conventional terms, rather worrying. A natural [fear](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/fear) is that you will behave idiotically, make a fool of yourself, do something dangerous or, more worrying, that you will let go of all [moral](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/morality) responsibility. Oddly enough this did not seem to happen. Indeed, the body seemed to keep on doing ethical and sensible things, apparently without all the agonising I had assumed was essential. Being able to act and then move on may seem to mean letting go of all responsibility, yet responsible actions still happened. I did not become wicked, selfish and cruel - indeed the change seemed rather the reverse.

There were dangers. I remember once trying to cross a mountain road, holding my two-year-old's hand, and realising that I simply could not judge the speed of the oncoming cars. In the present moment they were frozen, and the next moment was not in my mind. I decided I must have gone a bit too far. I have no idea what happens if you push this even further, or let go of even more of the mind. I have no idea whether continuing this kind of practice all of one's life is either feasible or desirable, although there are many who advocate it. I only know that I worked hard at it for seven weeks and then stopped. Indeed the whole process seemed naturally to come to an end.

Finally, one simple fact I noticed was that instead of being a chore, sitting down to meditate was a blessed relief. It was much easier to just sit and pay attention to the present moment than it was to rush about, look after the children, drive the car, or write letters, while paying attention to the present moment. So from then on, although I gave up the intense mindfulness practice, I meditated every day. And finally, at last, things began to seem real again. The trees were right here and vivid and alive. The kids' shouts were immediate and full of energy, and I was right there with them and what they were doing. I seemed to be less of the self I thought I was before, but I (or someone) felt far more alive.