

Practicing Mindfulness

A major aspect of spiritual development is to linger increasingly in the here-and-now. Practicing mindfulness can help. Carolin Toskar gives inspiring impulses for more mindfulness in everyday life.

"Mindfulness is the ability to linger in the here-and-now". Sounds simple and concise.

In its effects and scope, however, the principle of mindfulness is extremely extensive and is increasingly the focus of research in the natural sciences and humanities of the Western world. Numerous highly readable books and articles have been published on the topic. In management, coaching and education, the topic of mindfulness has arrived via communication techniques and stress reduction. And medical journals regularly publish studies regarding the link between health and the practice of mindfulness. The contemporary western trend towards "mindfulness" appears unbroken. At the conference "Meditation and Science" in Berlin last year, in which our foundation participated, the western adaptation of the Buddhist practice of mindfulness was presented, for example in the treatment programme of complementary medicine "MBSR" (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), as well as studies in the area of neuroscience. Every month, some 250,000 Internet search queries are made on the topic of "Mindfulness".

Revolution or Trend?

So are we really facing a "mindfulness revolution", as the Buddhist teacher and author Alan Wallace calls it? Are we really going to see a consciousness revolution take place, which will fundamentally change and improve western culture? Or is the topic of mindfulness in fact a trend that will die down as quickly as it appeared? What does practicing mindfulness, the origins of which lie in the early Buddhist tradition, have to do with our everyday lives in a modern world?

I'd like to check this out right now – and ask my friends on Facebook the following questions: "What does mindfulness mean for you? And how do you practice it?" Almost as soon as I'd posted this, I received the first comment. A Thai doctor from Bangkok wrote: "Mindfulness means lingering in your inner world. I practice it by bringing consciousness inside my body, my thoughts, my feelings and to recognise their nature – appearance, dwindling, and dissolving".

Fascinating. A very broad definition. It does not only include the mindful observation of all body-soul-spirit phenomena, but also their transience. But does this insight about the transience of all things not also lead one to conform fatalistically to one's circumstances? Certainly not. Once you have recognised inner states as being a transient experience, it is far easier to let go of states such as constantly desiring pleasant things or avoiding and rejecting unpleasant situations. And through this "non-clinging", freedom, lightness and soothing serenity can develop more easily.

A short time later, I received the next comment. Annemarie from Hong Kong views mindfulness as "a structure comprising observations of thought, actions, emotions and feelings. Everything that occurs around you and inside you. And to practice making experiences without passing judgement." Here also, the classic elements of the practice of mindfulness are reflected. So, mindfulness is perhaps not wholly a theoretic technique that is remote from our everyday lives. Rather, Annemarie is expanding her mindfulness focus to include not only the view to her inner life but also the conscious perception of outer life and not passing judgement.

Not passing judgement – what is the meaning and benefit of that? Passing judgement, one might think, gives us clarity and certainty. We know where we stand. But it is still problematic. Because unconsciously, judgements often follow one and the same pattern. We often classify people in an almost stereotypical and "pigeonholing" manner. And such preconceptions can then serve as a separating filter from what is really happening. But if we remain without judgement and preconception, we are open to the full experience presenting itself to us with its full potential.

Sustaining the Focus

In the meantime, a new day has also begun in the USA. The topic of "mindfulness" also resonates with a friend from Los Angeles. I am thrilled about so much knowledge and resonance, spanning continents and religious views. She sees mindfulness as a way "to set down an intention for the thoughts, words and deeds, and to control the monkey mind in your head, in order to sustain the focus with your intentions."

This fits nicely into our modern day and age. Life is overfull, and possibilities are more numerous than ever. Unfortunately, spirit and thoughts are usually equally restless, erratic, and people are often left facing a surplus without the ability to decide. Sometimes we then rather follow our tried-and-tested routes and routine cycles. Here, mindfulness can be an important, spiritual guide and a genuine support. Every day, we can place a mindful focus by comparing self- and other relevance: what is really relevant with regard to our own talents and abilities, but also for the goals and values we have set ourselves? Little-by-little, this leads to self-awareness and real development opportunities.

"Mindfulness is like the contraction of an inner muscle of decision, and not one of repetition when it comes to our thoughts and actions", writes our friend Michael B. Beckwith in his book "Spiritual Liberation". Where does the challenge actually lie? Why do we have to train mindfulness seemingly like a muscle and are not always in this high state of consciousness? In this connection, the anecdote of the monk is often related, in which he was asked how he could always remain so calm despite his many tasks. He answered: "When I am standing, then I am standing; when I am sitting, then I am sitting; when I am eating, then I am eating; when I am speaking, then I am speaking." To this, the questioners responded: "But this is what we are also doing." And he added: "No, when you are sitting, you are already standing; when you are standing, you are already walking; when you are walking, you have already reached your goal."

An untrained spirit is indeed conditioned to stray frequently and become easily distracted by desires, plans and wants, thus missing out on the present. Behavioural research terms this mode of mindlessness as a "mental autopilot". And if you have ever driven a car and asked yourself after an hour how you got from A to B, you know exactly what this means metaphorically.



Buddha formulated four principles of mindfulness

Paradoxically, the practice of mindfulness thus includes becoming aware of one's own mindlessness, which is not always pleasant, but always necessary.

So, if we experience more and more clear, conscious moments by practicing, these can become fully integrated as a mentality in our personality. With the help of this mindful presence in the NOW, by immersing ourselves in the moment, we can be in contact with life as it appears right now – and which will guide us safely. Even the mega-trend researcher John Naisbitt evidently relies on this fundamental principle of mindful presence in his analyses of the future, when he recommends: "The most reliable way of predicting the future is an understanding of the present."

So, how is mindfulness achieved? In Buddhism, the four principles of mindfulness are decisive:

1. Mindfulness of the body (Kayanupassana)
2. Mindfulness of emotions (Vedananupassana)
3. Mindfulness of the spirit (Cittanupassana)
4. Mindfulness of mind-objects (Dhammanupassana)



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The practitioner is trained in the classic path of viewing the four principle elements building on one another. Key features of this are: value neutrality, patience, an open spirit, trust, non-identification, acceptance, letting go and compassion. Through regular practice, the field of mindlessness are perceived, step-by-step, and transformed into mindfulness, thereby becoming available as free energy. From this heightened level of awareness, better and consciousness-expanding decisions are made. Thus, mindfulness training affects all areas of life. It influences the way we think, eat, deal with ourselves and others, and experience life. "We cannot extend or expand our life, but only deepen it", according to an old wisdom.

Mindfulness is trained in the practice of meditation, by, for example, focussing attention on the stream of air beneath the nose. Sounds totally monotonous? By no means, as a meditation teacher ensures. This conscious experience of this tiny area beneath the nose takes on the dimension of an entire football field, given sufficient practice.

"Becoming Absorbed in the Moment"

Mindfulness can also be practiced and integrated into your everyday life at any time. In monasteries, housework and gardening have always been part of mindfulness practice and are considered equal to meditation and prayer. At the beginning of your personal mindfulness training in everyday life, slowing down and concentrating can be helpful (even if not strictly necessary, as rapid sequences can take place consciously as well). Thus, for example, you could plan to double the usual time spent on a selected routine and see what happens. Boring? Inefficient? But stop: the seemingly mystic notion of "becoming absorbed in the moment" is perhaps developing right now, while preparing your morning fruit plate. You "suddenly" perceive the smell of the fruits as intensive, feel the different consistencies while cutting through the fruit, and take pleasure in the fruit's diverse colour structures. Things we have done automatically, possibly even reluctantly, are now perceived with keen interest, perhaps even with curiosity.

A conscious walk to work can be just as interesting, during which we see completely "new" buildings and corners, or perhaps hear the birds singing for the first time, rather than already mentally rehearsing the first steps at work. Through mindfulness, even the most familiar actions re-obtain their colour and depth of focus.

"When mindfulness touches something beautiful, the beauty of this reveals itself. If it touches something painful, it transforms and heals it," states Thich Nhat Hanh of its transformational effect. As anyone who practices healing knows, the habitual state of unconsciousness impairs the relationship to one's body, and the body's messages and signals can no longer be understood properly. A mindful treatment, in which the healing impulses are guided accordingly, opens up weakened channels of perception. The client can hear his or her inner voice much more clearly and can feel the connection to a higher, harmonious order. This leads to completely new insights and healing actions, which act in a health-promoting and preventative manner. This spiritual aspect is described by the mindfulness researcher Jon Kabat Zinn as follows: "When we train our mindfulness, (...) we see more and we see deeper. We recognise connections and can perceive the exquisite order underlying all things, of which we were previously ignorant."

The interpretation of the word "mindfulness" in itself suggests this higher, spiritual dimension. It incorporates "mindful" as a "seed". And lived mindfulness indeed triggers gratitude and profound appreciation for life and divinity in all things. It is equal to an awakening (from the "autopilot mode") towards a germination and touching of divine potential, across our entire life span. The number "eight" as a reclining figure, also known as lemniscate, is considered the number of infinity and as the expression of an infinite, vibrating movement. Mindfulness, a permanent high-level consciousness vibration, guiding us into new worlds and thus touching our entire life. My gaze falls onto a Reiki postcard with the life rules of Mikao Usui, a perfect exercise in mindfulness guiding:

At least for today do not be angry.
At least for today let go of your anger.
At least for today be full of joy.

At least for today do not worry.
At least for today let go of your worries.
At least for today believe in the goodness in you and me.

No, mindfulness is not a new-fangled fad or a short-lived western trend. Mindfulness is an all-embracing mentality, a strength and resource built in to every human being at all times. It can be found in all traditions, as a well-established way to give people in all cultures a life full of joy, health and knowledge about goodness. ■



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Further information:
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