

# AGAINST THE STREAM



## MEDITATION CENTER NASHVILLE TN

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### MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

Over the past three decades, mindfulness-based interventions have spread rapidly through the fields of medicine, mental health, and education as a way to reduce toxic stress and impulsivity and increase emotion regulation, executive function, empathy and overall well being. Mindfulness as a psychological concept is the focusing of attention and awareness. Mindfulness is fundamentally a science of attention training. It is the practice of bringing attention to the direct experience of what is happening "right now". Sustained practice cultivates the ability to "drop beneath" compulsive thinking and emotional reactivity into a more direct experience of feeling and sensation. The fruition of practice is a sense of being less "scattered", less caught up in 'doing' and in 'fixing', and less likely to get locked into fixed afflictive patterns. It is based on the concept of mindfulness within Buddhist meditation and has been popularized in the West by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Clinical psychology and psychiatry since the 1970s have developed a number of therapeutic applications based on mindfulness for helping people suffering from a variety of psychological conditions, and research has found therapy based on mindfulness to be effective, particularly for reducing anxiety, depression, and stress.

#### **What is Mindfulness Meditation?**

Mindfulness meditation is a focused awareness of what is happening in the present moment experience. With mindfulness we look at the whole range of experiences, the pleasant, the unpleasant and the neutral, we are attempting to create and sustain a non-reactive, investigative attention. Mindfulness, also known as Insight meditation is the simple and direct practice of moment-to-moment, present-time awareness. Mindfulness is the practice of becoming fully aware of "right now" without dwelling on the past or

forecasting into the future. It involves a heightened awareness of direct sensory experience (really noticing your breathing, feeling the sensations of your body, noticing sounds arise and pass, etc.)

Through this careful and sustained attention, we experience the ever-changing flow of the mind/body process. This awareness can lead us to accept more fully the ups and downs that life has to offer; and will always offer. As practice and insight deepen, we develop greater emotional balance in the face of change, difficulties, pressures, anxieties and stress.

### **Two important aspects to know are:**

1. Mindfulness meditation doesn't require any belief system. It is not religious in any way. It is a scientific approach to facing the human experience.
2. Mindfulness meditation works: The evidence-based data as to the positive effects of mindfulness are immeasurable.

### **Mindfulness terminology: Awareness and Attention.**

Two key terms that are used when discussing mindfulness are “awareness and attention”. The proper understanding and use of these words is of key importance when outlining the mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness practice instructions will often use the words attention and awareness interchangeably, which colloquially speaking does work, but is not entirely true. For example, imagine that you are overlooking a field from a hilltop; all of what you are taking in can be experienced within the container of awareness. Awareness is panoramic. Now, if you pick up a pair of binoculars and focus in on a tree, a flower or a deer that can be understood as attention. Awareness is wide, attention is narrow. Awareness is open, attention is focus.

**1- Awareness:** Awareness can be described as the container that holds our experience. Inside the container of awareness we have the full range of moment-to-moment experience. We have body sensations and the breath; we have pleasant and unpleasant sensation/feeling tones, mind states, emotions, perceptions and a wide range of mental activities and constructs. So if we look and see, there is a lot of stuff going on in each moment of our lives. Awareness is just described as the container that holds all of these different and constantly changing experiences. Mindfulness is what is able to see the entire container for what it is; an ever changing flow of causes and conditions.

**2- Attention:** Attention refers to what it is inside of the container that we focus on in any given moment. There is often an element of choice involved with attention. In some cases our attention is constantly moving around and wandering about. The mind pulls our attention in all types of directions and we usually just follow it unconsciously; this activity is called “discursive thought”. One of the root skills we establish within mindfulness is placing the attention on a specific location. In most cases we focus on the

body and breathe because there is no planning, remembering, judging, assessing or any stories involved with the body and breathe; they are bland and simple. There is also no notion of past or future with the physical experience of the breathing body, and this is quite helpful to establish contact with the present moment. Practicing with body/breath awareness over the course of even 10-15 minutes will give rise to relaxation, concentration and mental calm.

**Mindfulness meditation is two-fold: Two key aspects of Mindfulness are concentration and investigation.**

**1. Concentration-** Concentration is the ability to remain focused for a sustained period of time on a single object. By placing our attention on a simple meditation object such as the body or breath the mind will settle and relax. Concentration leads to calmness and stillness of body and mind. This sets up the stage for investigative attention.

**2. Investigation/Inquiry-** Once the mind begins to settle we can start to investigate “what” is actually happening within our experience. We quickly see that most of the time we are thinking about the past or the future, we worry and plan, we remember and regret and we indulge in nostalgia. We calculate, analyze, criticize, compare and judge. This simple quality of mindful investigation brings our attention into the direct experience of what “is”, instead of the intellectual experience that is wrapped up in thoughts and stories. Meditative inquiry enables us to look deeply into what is happening in each moment and see its changing and conditional nature without having to get involved with the contents. We can start to look at our experience objectively rather than subjectively. My thoughts become just thoughts; my worries become just worries; my mind becomes just mind and so on. As we become familiar with the actual mechanics of the working mind we begin to take our experience less “personally”.

**JUST THE FACTS:**

Studies show that mindfulness can be helpful in stopping ruminations over things that cause distress; it helps people to keep from dwelling on negative patterns of thought. Mindfulness can also be used to decrease anxiety over the future and depression about the past. It can provide a “pause” from stressful thoughts and allow you to take a mental break and gain perspective. It provides the ability to “pull out” of discursive thinking and re-adjust your attention on the here and now by attuning to something as simple as breath awareness.

The practice of mindfulness means learning to trust direct experience. It is cultivating confidence and trust; gradually one moment at a time; over a period of time. It is genuine participation without being self-conscious or self-critical. It is throwing oneself into the moment and gaining wisdom through the trial-and error of learning by direct experience.

The regular practice of mindfulness is a simple and realistic way to develop the power of open awareness, a power that can eventually become stronger than the strength of your own negative habits. The power of mindfulness gives you the strength to do things differently and the courage to go beyond your habitual limitations. Cultivating concentration and

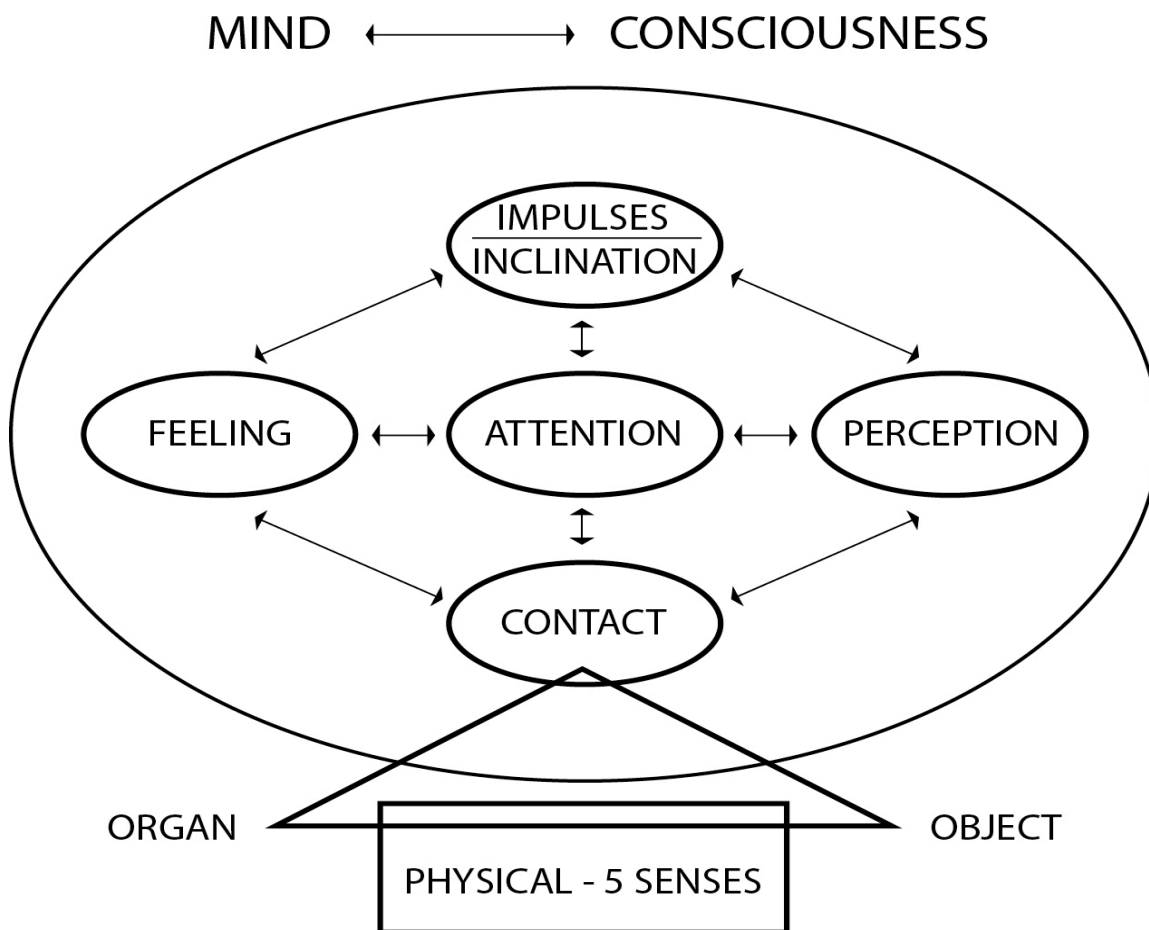
investigation enables you to see your habits much more clearly. It helps recognize the words, feelings, perceptions and conditions that trigger our reactive habits. Finally, we can see these patterns before they arise and find the freedom to choose another course of action. When our awareness opens and the mind clears we face the world and ourselves in a whole new way. We see for ourselves that our inner experience conditions our external circumstances much of the time. We see we have the ability to transform our own lives and this leads to confidence, inner-peace and understanding.

Dr. Siegel’s definition of the word mind:

**Mind:** An embodied and relational emergent process; that regulates the flow of energy and information. The mind is a regulatory process that can be monitored, measured and modified. There are also a number of terms, concepts and ideas that can be used as synonyms for the word mind: consciousness, awareness, experience, cognition, etc.

**Defining the Mind (present-time psychology)**

1. Contact
2. Feeling
3. Perceptions
4. Intentions/inclinations
5. Attention



**1. Contact-** we make contact with each moment thru a wide range of experiences. To keep it simple we use the 6 senses. (See, taste, hear, smell, touch and mind)

We can bring our attention to all or any of these experiences at any given time. Although we see that most of the time our attention is pulled in a particular direction (usually the mind!) and we habitually follow whatever experience is the most prominent or whatever seems to be the most interesting; or important and so on. Tuning into sensory awareness is always a good place to start.

**2. Feeling:** Once contact is made a feeling “tone” will arise. We have only 3.

1.Pleasant+ 2.Unpleasant- 3.Neutral 0

This may seem fairly obvious, but with further investigation we see that we almost always reach for what is pleasant and push away what is unpleasant. This is known as the pleasure/pain dichotomy or the law of attraction vs. resistance. When things are neutral we often become bored or uninterested and try to distract ourselves in a various ways.

(Repeatedly picking up your smart phone as you await you next scheduled event).

Neutral feelings can also be experienced as contentment or ease if mindfulness is present.

Due to the arising and passing of physical and mental conditions we will have more than one feeling tone present at any particular time. We find that we are being bombarded with thoughts, emotions and sensations all of which can be registered as + - 0. But if we look closely, there is usually a prominent feeling arising in each moment that draws us in.

Placing the attention on the feeling tone of the breathing body is very helpful because it is almost always pleasant or neutral. It is also always available and “only” available in the here and now. Remember, feeling tone can and should be applied to all aspects of the experience: thoughts, sensations and emotions.

**3. Perceptions-** this is where usually start to get ourselves into trouble. We have so many perceptions about so many things and they come and go very quickly. We often don't really know what to do with them. Perceptions will often give rise to negative emotions or mind states. Based on our moment-to-moment perception we may begin to experience anger, fear, jealousy, doubt and some degree of craving. In mindfulness we are encouraged to begin to question and investigate our perceptions. Are they causing us peace or restlessness? Are they even true? Letting go of the perceptual tendencies of the mind and simply returning to the breath is an important and useful action to take while practicing mindfulness meditation.

**4. Inclinations/intentions-** based on our perceptions we are “inclined” to do something about what we perceive to be happening. For us, this can go either way. So if we take the time to pause and check out our intentions we can actually intervene and take a different action. This is where mindfulness can really begin to make a difference in our lives. We see that we don't actually have to follow our initial intention, we can learn to re-train, and we can let go of harmful intentions and work towards cultivating a better way to go about things. This is really the root of developing mindful awareness, the ability to try different things and to take another approach.

**5. Attention-** we bring our attention to this every changing process as a way to bring the qualities of concentration and investigation to our lives. In essence this is the entire mindfulness practice. It can be hard to keep up because things are changing so quickly, but it is possible and it becomes another way of bridging our inner and outer worlds in way that causes us less stress and provides more happiness and ease. Returning to the “bare” attention of the body and breathe (contact) is the foundation “root skill” to be developed in early stages of mindfulness practice and will always prove to be beneficial in all aspects of our lives.

## MINDFULNESS & COGNITIVE PATTERNS

Now we will look at some of the most common patterns that the mind will engage in and some tools for working with them.

**1. Non-Judging:** The tendency of the mind is to be constantly assessing our experience, others and ourselves. We see that we judge, A LOT. When we practice mindfulness meditation we often put a label of “good” or “bad” on everything that happens. Simply by noticing that judgment is arising we can reduce our attachment to our perceptions, opinions, views and beliefs and our habitual identifications with the mind. We get to take a break. We can try something different. This helps us to begin to take a more objective and easeful attitude towards our experience.

**2. Non-comparing:** With this very common tendency of judging we see very quickly that there is a strong mental habit to compare. We compare others to ourselves, we compare the past against what we perceive the future to hold, we compare what we used to be like to how we are like now...and on and on it goes. It can be endless if we aren’t careful. If we can become mindful and creative in our awareness we can find others ways to view things. Simply by noticing that comparing is happening we get a chance to investigate the intentions behind it and try something else...or at least let go of it.

**3. Non-identification:** We have a strong tendency to take all of our experience very personally, “my thoughts, my feelings, my worries and so on.” Mindfulness is encouraging us to take another view: just thoughts, just feelings, just worries-not mine, not me. This can be hard to do but it’s very possible and is actually quite a radical shift in our perspective. There is a lot of freedom in taking this view. This radical shift in perspective helps us to maintain an objective viewpoint, at least some of the time. It takes some patience and humility to do this; but when practiced for some time its really not so difficult. Acknowledging that thoughts are arising objects of experience rather than a subjective narrative of life drastically changes our relationship to the thinking mind.

## ANTIDOTES

**1. Investigation/Inquiry:** When it comes right down to it mindfulness meditation is an engaged exploration of life, leaving nothing out. We are looking closely at things that we usually take for granted, body sensations, our breath, sounds, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and emotions and so on. We are looking into the internal world and finding new

and creative ways of engaging it in a meaningful way, rather than trying to find peace and happiness in external factors. In this way happiness is more dependent on the quality of our own awareness rather than external “things”. Of course, this is not the status quo by any means. When we first start to meditate we immediately realize that there is a world of experience that we have been missing out on. That can really motivate us to look more closely. Mindfulness is a practice of trial and error, we make mistakes and we move on. We don’t always get it right but we can recovery from our mistakes when we don’t take them so personally and become willing to do things differently the next time. Think about what you will discover if you pay closer attention to ALL areas of your life.

**2. Letting go:** This may be the hardest thing of all for most of us! Letting go is the antidote to our attachments. Letting go isn’t always so easy, sometimes it is more of a process than an event, but it is possible and that is what’s important. We see that we can let go of views, opinions, fears, resentments, stories, thoughts and the like. We can change. When it come right down to it, change is not only possible; it’s inevitable. We begin to find freedom when we can see for ourselves that we have the capacity to let go. It’s that simple. The very spirit of creative awareness is to examine our lives, inside and out, and to see what is really working for us and what is not. Sometimes this is hard work; it requires honesty, openness and the willingness to do things differently. Letting go will become the most immediate way to peace and happiness; as the Thai Forest Master Ajhan Chah would say: “Let go a little and have a little freedom, let go a lot and have a lot of freedom, let go completely and have complete freedom.” Sit down and see for yourself!

### **Mindfulness Exercise:**

- 1) Find a comfortable way to sit. Adjust your posture so that your back is straight without being rigid or stiff. Allow your body to be relaxed, let your eyes close gently. Bring your full attention to the physical experience of sitting.
- 2) There is nowhere to go, nothing needs to be done right now. Just sitting and knowing that you are sitting. Letting go of the mind.
- 3) Allow your breathing to be natural. Place your attention on the rise and fall of the chest. Soften your belly with each in and out breath.
- 4) Breathing in, know that you are breathing in. Breathing out, know that you are breathing out. Feeling the breath throughout the whole body.
- 5) See if you can bring a quality of interest and curiosity to your present-time experience. How does it feel to be breathing, to be sitting, to come into contact with your own present moment experience?
- 6) Continue to connect your attention with the felt sense of the breath and body. Allow your mind to pour into your body, like your filling an empty glass full of water. Allow the breath come and go, letting it find its own natural rhythm.

- 7) See if you can meet yourself in each moment with an attitude and a quality of friendliness and kindness; allowing your awareness to soft and wide.
- 8) Simply returning to the breath when you notice your mind wander. Re-adjusting your attention on the breathing body and letting go of the thinking mind.
- 9) Returning to the present moment over and over again, as many times as it takes. Back to the body, back to the breath, opening to sounds and reconnecting to this moment.
- 10) Remember, you can start over at any time, and you can start over as many times as you need to. Just breathe in and know that you are breathing

For more info on Emotional Intelligence and Mindfulness: [www.morethansound.net](http://www.morethansound.net)

For more info on Daniel Siegel: [www.mindsightinstitute.com](http://www.mindsightinstitute.com)

Dave Smith: Against the Stream/Buddhist meditation teacher

Against the Stream- Nashville Center  
3816 Charlotte Ave  
Nashville TN 37209

[therebelsaint@gmail.com](mailto:therebelsaint@gmail.com)  
615 856 1292

[www.againstthestreamnashville.com](http://www.againstthestreamnashville.com)

[www.againstthestream.org](http://www.againstthestream.org)