

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO

**MINDFULNESS
MEDITATION**

BY

ROGER HYAM

Understanding
Requires
Inner Space
In Which
To Unfold

INTRODUCTION

I have been meditating formally since the mid 1990s and have found it very beneficial.

When non-Buddhist friends ask me about meditation and mindfulness I can either give a long winded explanation or recommend they go and read an entire book. Neither seems an appropriate solution so I thought I'd write something short – an old fashioned pamphlet – that introduces my understanding of mindfulness meditation.

My greatest fear is that you take this as preachy self help guide. I'd rather you thought of it as a recipe for a good meal.

There is nothing radically new here. I am not a master teacher. Everything comes from my teachers and their teachers to whom I am most grateful. Thanks also to Demetra for the sketches and to the friends who have suggested improvements. Errors, omissions and opinions are all my own.

I'd appreciate your comments. Please email me – roger@hyam.net.

HOW AND WHY

This pamphlet is a manual on **how** to start meditating but not much of a justification for why you should meditate. People come to meditation for many reasons, perhaps to relax or to help with a particular stress or even to seek nirvana. Those who establish a regular meditation practice find that their motivation changes through time – so it doesn't really matter what sets you off in the first place. Having an open mind **is** important though. If you have particular

Version 1.2 – February 2012

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expectations or even apprehensions, hold them loosely and be prepared to accept whatever arises. Ultimately meditation generates its own justifications, as you will discover if you do it for a while.

RELIGION

The elephant in the room when we talk of meditation is 'religion' – some people like to say 'spirituality' but others recoil at that word too. The form of meditation I describe here originates within Buddhism but is not, in itself, a religious practice. Similar practices occur in different cultures and religions. Meditation is becoming important in secular, evidence-based medical treatments too.

If you have a faith in **God** then you could think of this form of meditation as an opportunity to pause and listen for God's Word. If you are an **atheist** then think of it as time spent reconciling different regions of your brain – the 'feeling tone' of your limbic system with the rational demands of your prefrontal cortex.

You could think of Mindfulness meditation as about living a good life. It cuts across religion, spirituality and science but talking about it inevitably involves mentioning Buddhism.

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness involves paying attention, on purpose and with kindly acceptance, to our current experience.

This does not mean "*thinking about our current experience*" or "*taking our current experience into account*" - which is often how the word is used in everyday speech. It is closer to "*feeling our current experience*" or even "*experiencing our*

GOING FURTHER

'Mindfulness' has become something of a buzz word recently. There are many courses and products on offer. Some of them are very good and some of them are not. Be wary when specific material benefits are claimed especially with little effort on your part. Developing a meditation practice will change things for the better but you will only discover exactly what constitutes 'better' by doing it. Also be wary of those who skip the ethics and wisdom aspects of the training – they can't truly be separated out.

There are many books on mindfulness and meditation by good authors. Try these authors: Stephen Batchelor, Bodhipaksa, Pema Chödrön, Steve Hagen or Thich Nhat Hanh, Jon Kabat-Zinn or Jack Kornfield.

You can't get it all out of books though. Learning from others is very important so you may consider joining a group. Exercise some common sense. Be aware of political and cultural agendas as well as plain dumb headedness.

Even if you have no interest in Buddhism, Buddhist groups can be good places to learn to meditate. Just be honest about your intentions and respectful of other people's beliefs.

Some websites to try:

<http://interbeing.org.uk>

<http://www.fwbo.org>

<http://www.wildmind.org>

This is easy to take on board from an intellectual perspective as it is entirely in line with modern, rational thought. But it is harder to integrate into our emotional lives. If you feel slighted, overlooked for a promotion or jilted by a lover then it is very easy to fall back on simple causes and effects. It is easy to blame someone rather than take the broader view in which phenomena arise from complex conditions that include our own mind and will cease when those conditions cease. Meditation helps us take that broader view and at the same time taking that broader view helps in our meditation.

You may see that a natural ethics emerges from this world view. Rather than justifying our actions with 'because' or following a set of rules we are encouraged to develop a tranquil mind so that we are more likely to act with the wisdom of equanimity in any situation.

ALTERNATIVES

You may be thinking that we could achieve all this more easily with a few cans of beer and a good movie and you would be right if we were just trying to relax. The problem with the chemicals plus distraction approach is that it doesn't last, the chocolate runs out, we have to go back to work and the things we don't like keep on happening.

The cultivation of mindfulness and loving-kindness is purposeful. It's connecting with life rather than an attempt to block out the world. Even in quite small doses, it can lead to beneficial changes in how we approach the life we are actually living.

current experience."

Our experience has unity in that we only have one experience but it is also multifaceted. It includes our train of thoughts, our rumbling stomach, itchy nose and our relationships with others.

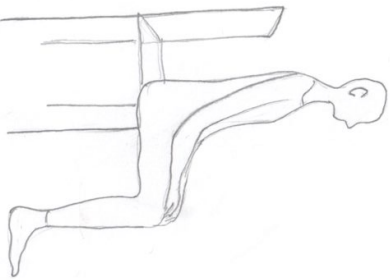
Mindfulness is a translation of the word '*sati*' from an ancient, Indian language called Pali. *Sati* also has connotations of remembering or remembrance. You could think of it as bringing the present moment to mind.

Mindfulness is far more than just a special kind of concentration. At first it involves developing a calm, focussed attention that can be remarkably pleasant but, as you begin to maintain this state, insight begins to unfold. It is this insight that improves our everyday lives.

MEDITATION

The word 'meditation' comes from the Latin 'to think over' and it is usually used in this sense – which is entirely the **wrong** sense in the context of mindfulness! In our sense, 'meditation' is a mistranslation of the Pali word *bhāvanā* which means 'cultivation' or 'development'. When you encounter the word 'meditation' in the context of mindfulness you should think of tending the mind as you might tend, and grow familiar with, a garden.

I am going to describe the most widely used and most accessible meditation technique, the Mindfulness of Breathing (MoB). What I am advocating is a "doing" thing not a "thinking" thing so you need to **do** it to appreciate what follows. Reading and thinking aren't enough. You can't



appreciate a meal just by reading the recipe.

Doing the MOB is the bread and butter of many people's daily practice. You don't need to buy anything. You can just read through the next few sections and then have a go.

Eventually you may put aside a little time each day to stop 'doing' anything in particular, to meditate and just 'be'.

This is what we call mindfulness meditation practice or sometimes 'formal practice' or sometimes just 'sitting'. If you start sitting on a regular basis you may find you make subtle changes in your life to bring it into line with your new experiences. This will feed back into your meditation in a virtuous cycle.

LOCATION

Find somewhere quiet where you won't be disturbed. Turn off the TV, radio, music, your phone and your computer. Ideally you shouldn't be able to hear anybody else's music or television. Background noise is OK so long as it doesn't have a narrative or melody you can follow because your mind will latch on to this rather than your breathing. New age CDs with ambient (elevator) music should be avoided – you might be better off with recorded natural sounds or even white noise if you need to block out distracting voices or music.

POSTURE

Sit in an upright, alert, dignified posture but not stiffly.

mindfulness practice helps us develop that. We can feel loving-kindness for our breathing or even for inanimate objects.

INSIGHT

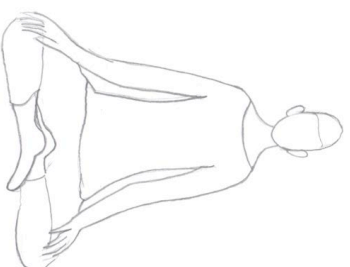
The Buddhist tradition is very ambitious. It proposes a training path that leads to liberation from suffering. There are three aspects to this path: wisdom, ethics and meditation. These are intertwined like the strands in a plait. Although you can tease them apart, individually they are incomplete.

This guide is an introduction to the meditation aspect of the training but meditation is entangled with ethics and wisdom and can never be totally separated from them.

Contemporary Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh coined a term that acts as a great starting point for exploring the other two strands in our plait. That term is **interbeing**. This is not to say everything is one nor is it to say everything is separate. It is a middle way.

Point at any object and you will see that it doesn't exist in isolation from everything else in the universe. The bread on the table is the result of the sun, rain and hard work of the

generations of people who have farmed the land. It doesn't exist separately from the conditions required for its existence. Things change. We eat the bread. It ceases as bread but continues as us. The sun, rain and hard work are part of the conditions that give rise to us. We don't exist separately from them.



triggers for when to come into the present moment.

LOVING KINDNESS

While you are sitting in meditation choose a friend (but not someone you fancy) and bring them into your thoughts – thinking **of** them not **about** them. If you find this difficult, silently and slowly say their name to yourself. Slowly repeat to yourself: May they be well. May they be happy. What sensations arise? Gently move your attention back and forth between yourself and your friend. You may find that a natural sense of caring arises. It is hard to be mindful of another human being without a warm sense of loving-kindness arising and surprisingly this can apply to anyone, not just a specially chosen friend. Try it with someone neutral – the guy at the corner shop or that person in the office you have never spoken to. It may take a little longer for the feeling to arise but it is still there. How about pushing it a bit? We all meet people who we find 'difficult'. Try holding one of them in your mind. Let go of discursive thoughts that arise and just accept their existence. In time you will find the same warmth of feeling arising. If there is someone you have great difficulty with you could warm up on an apparently over zealous official first. This isn't something to hurry.

We have to be very careful (as with acceptance) not to get the wrong end of the stick. We don't want to confuse a kind of self-sacrificing pity so common in western cultures with the arising of a genuine, unconditional warmth. Unconditional means there is no reasoning. It comes out of stillness.

Loving-kindness is integrally linked with mindful awareness. Being mindful helps in its cultivation and bringing it into our

Ideally your back should be unsupported and your pelvis tilted slightly forward. Many women find this comes naturally – don't over-hollow the small of your back by trying to tilt it more. Many men may need to actively tilt the pelvis forward when they start.

Think about having three or more points of contact with the chair or floor. For example, if you are sitting on the floor, the three points are your buttocks and your two knees; if you are sitting on a chair, your buttocks and soles of the feet. See the sketches for some sitting ideas.

Do not sit cross legged with your unsupported knees in the air. This is frequently used in images of meditation but is not a good posture because it is wobbly. If your legs or hips are stiff experiment with sitting on a raise or chair. You should be like a mountain – rooted to the spot.

EYES

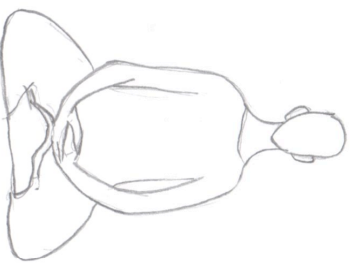
Your gaze should be slightly downwards and your chin tucked in just a little so as to keep the back of your neck straight. If your chin starts to stick out you may find your mind wanders more. Half close your eyes and have a soft focus on the floor a little way in front of you. One of the major hindrances in meditation is falling asleep and you are trying to be “here and now” so it is generally best not to close your eyes completely or sit in total darkness – though many people do successfully meditate like this.

HANDS

Our arms and hands are really quite heavy and need to be supported or our shoulders will get stiff from holding them

up. Place your hands in your lap with the palms up or, if it is more comfortable, place your hands palms down on your thighs or knees. They shouldn't start sliding down when you relax. If they do try propping them on something.

ATTENTION



Once you are sitting stably and comfortably place your attention on your breathing. Don't try to alter the flow of breath. Just sit there and be aware of the air moving in and out of your body. Become aware of your belly moving in and out, your chest going up and down. Feel the cool air entering your nostrils and warm air leaving.

After a while you might notice you are thinking about something else. When you notice this just bring your attention back to your breathing. **Do NOT try to stop thinking.** You can't will yourself to stop thinking any more than you can will yourself to stop breathing. You *can* however choose not to pursue a particular line of thought.

Here is an analogy. Imagine you are sitting on a grass bank in the sun by a quiet road. Every now and then a bus comes along. Your thoughts are like these buses. They are invitations to leave your current experience of the sunny bank and go somewhere else. Your **intention** should be to stay on the sunny bank and not get on one of the buses.

Unfortunately we keep finding ourselves sitting on a bus looking out the window at a different landscape. When we notice this we just smile to ourselves, perhaps chuckle that we

shine all that often.

THE REST OF LIFE

If meditation is the formal practice what is the informal practice? Once you have a taste for being present whilst sitting still you can bring it into other aspects of your life. Try this. Next time you are alone in the kitchen, preparing a snack or cleaning up, turn the radio off and take note of your thoughts. If some train of thought is rattling past just decide to let it go. Dedicate your attention to what you are doing – chopping and spreading and wiping. You can always pick up on those thoughts later if you need to; if you have tried some formal practice you will know there is no shortage of thoughts!

You will find there are many occasions where you can become more present with the sensations of living and this is rewarding even when the sensations are ones you might normally try to avoid. By repeatedly engaging with our experience we can develop an intimacy with life that goes beyond seeking out what we like and pushing away what we don't like.

Mindfulness “triggers” can be very useful in developing this link to every day life. When the phone rings let it ring three times and become aware of your breathing before you pick it up. When you are getting in or out of a car feel the sensation of moving your body. One of my triggers is putting the crockery back in the cupboard. You can pick your own



meditation is **not** like this.

Acceptance in meditation is a practical thing. Because we are trying to see what is occurring right now we are working with things that it is too late to change. If we invest energy in clinging to or pushing away all that comes up we will exhaust ourselves pointlessly.

For example, by accepting that you have hurt a loved one you are not saying that you don't care about what you did but you are opening to the real sensations you are having about it. This is not about expressing or suppressing feelings but allowing ourselves to see what is actually going on. You can only do this if you accept what is occurring within your experience now – without resorting to narrative explanations of 'why' it is like it is or 'how' it could be different. These are ways we duck the issues. "I hurt them because I am a bad person" or "I hurt them because they hurt me" neatly place the associated sensations in a box we can avoid looking in. Acceptance is gently holding our feelings with equanimity without searching for a "because".

Acceptance is not apathy. It is not morally neutral. Its purpose is to help you see things clearly so that you can act wisely in the future by being fully present.

This implies adopting a level of honesty with ourselves that can sometimes be uncomfortable, so we must approach the process with kindness or we will just clam up and be unable to feel anything. The result is a softening of our approach to life. We find that things don't have to be a certain way for us to be happy. We can enjoy ourselves every day rather than just when the sun is shining and, let's face it, the sun doesn't

have been silly enough to get on a bus we didn't mean to catch, and go back to sitting on the sunny bank and watching our breathing. We can never stop the buses turning up; though at some times the road will be quieter than others. Our thoughts are part of our experience of life. With practice this process of coming back and staying present whilst the thoughts pass by becomes easier and more pleasurable.

Our **attitude** to ourselves when we realise we have been distracted is extremely important. Torture doesn't work even if it self inflicted. Be kind to yourself and accepting of the thoughts that come up. Treat it as a gentle game if you like. Cut yourself some slack. And if you find yourself getting angry about it just laugh like you would over a misunderstanding with an old friend then come back to your breathing.

DURATION

You could try sitting for just five minutes at first. Put a watch somewhere in the corner of your vision or set a timer. It is best if it doesn't tick too loudly. Or you could try sitting for what you think is five minutes, then look at your watch. You may be surprised.

There is no perfect duration to sit but if you want to make solid progress you should think of sitting for at least twenty minutes and ideally forty. Even experienced meditators don't normally sit for more than an hour at one go because the body seizes up. They get up and do a period of walking meditation then return to sitting.

As with learning any skill regular practice is more beneficial than doing a lot on one day and then nothing for weeks.

Highly committed meditators may go on intensive retreats where they meditate for ten hours a day but the important part of their practice is probably the daily forty minutes they do as part of their normal lives.

Give it a go! Try it now if you like. See how it feels.

COUNTING

Sometimes there are a lot of buses going to compelling locations and we just can't stay on the sunny bank at all. This is where counting our breaths can come in handy. This practice has two stages. After you have been sitting for a couple of minutes bring your attention to your breathing and particularly note that moment at the **end** of your **out-breath** – just when you finish exhaling. At that point say silently to yourself 'one'. When you get to that point again say 'two' and so on up to 'ten'. Then start back at one again. You may find you don't get to ten because you are off on one of those buses again. You may find you get to seventeen because you weren't paying attention. Don't worry. Be happy that you are doing it at all. That is the whole point. Just come back and start at one again.

You don't have to spend hours doing this but it may be useful to do it for five minutes at the start of a sit. Then follow it with five minutes of the second stage of breath counting.

In the second stage you look for that moment just **before** you start the **in-breath** and silently say 'one', 'two' etc just as you did in the first stage.

The important thing with counting is to focus not on the numbers but on the breathing. The numbers are like tags that

you are hanging on the beginning or end of a cycle. The relationship between the numbers and your breathing is a little like the relationship between your distracting thoughts and your breathing. You are giving your wander-prone, fidgety mind something to do so it is less inclined to drag you away. If you find you are concentrating more on the numbers than your breathing then drop the numbers – you have been tricked!

LETTING GO OF THE BREATH

When you have been following your breathing for a while you may like to broaden your attention to take in your whole body and then your surroundings. Just sit. Be aware of your breathing but be more aware of it happening in the context of your body and your body happening in the context of the room. By now you may be relaxed and one-pointed (concentrated) but with a broad focus (mindfully noticing). This state can feel exceedingly pleasant but different people will experience it differently at different times of their lives.

And that's it. That is your basic meditation process. Learning to be wholeheartedly present. Witnessing the process that is occurring now, which you label 'me'.

ACCEPTANCE

It is important to meditate with an attitude of acceptance.

A popular view of acceptance is that “*anything goes*.” It doesn't matter what happens because we don't care. The acceptance we develop in mindfulness

