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**The Open Heart
Sharon Salzberg**

What Does It Mean to Be Mindful?

By paying attention to the present moment, we can begin to appreciate what we already have—and grasp the key to life.

To understand mindfulness, imagine yourself doing something very simple, something that doesn't arouse a compelling interest—like, say, eating an apple. You probably eat your apple not paying attention to how it smells, how it tastes, or how it feels in your hand. Because of the ways we're conditioned, we don't usually notice the quality of our attention. Done this way, eating the apple is not a fulfilling experience.

So you blame the apple. You might think, if only I had a banana, I'd be happy. So you get a banana, but eat it the same way, and still there's not a lot of fulfillment. And then you think, if only I had a mango—and go to great expense and some difficulty getting a mango. But it's the same thing all over again. We don't pay attention to what we have or what we're doing. As a result, we seek more and more intensity of stimulation to try to rectify what seems unfulfilling.

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Robert Frost wrote that life is an interminable chain of longing. The Buddha said that those who are heedless or mindless are as if dead already. Mindfulness is the quality of fullness of attention, immediacy, non-distraction. In that sense, it is the key to life.

Another component of mindfulness is what we call "spaciousness," the quality that allows us to observe without reacting. Normally, we hear sounds, taste tastes, or experience emotions, and immediately make a decision around them based on a whole complex of conditioning that arises. We like something, we don't like something, and instantly our mind has already jumped ahead, drawing conclusions based on those reactions.

One of my favorite examples of this tendency comes from when we first started the Insight Meditation Society 25 years ago, and some of our friends asked us to teach a course for their parents. One woman, who was dismayed at the prospect of the course, said her mother was the kind of woman who would march into the office the first morning and say, "Those goddamn birds kept me up all night!" And she did exactly that.

Creating Space

But within just a few days of beginning to meditate, the mother was hearing those birds in a different way. She thought the sound and her reaction to the sound were one thing—that chattering birds make her angry. But they're really not the same thing. And when her perception of the sound changed—when she began to loose her grip on her conditioned response—so did her reaction.

Another example of how our conditioning shapes our experience comes from my time studying in Burma. One day at lunch, I bit down on a whole pepper and my mouth just caught fire. Soon after, I had an interview with my teacher, Sayadaw Upanidita. I told him I didn't like

the taste of chilies, and he said, "Well, we Burmese don't like the taste of chilis either, but we believe that the stinging sensation will clear the palate; that it's good for digestion and health."

We went on to talk about what the natural property of the chili is and how it creates a physiological sensation of burning, which is a direct experience. But the next aspect of that reality is what we make of the experience. A cultural belief system can be part of the experience. So a Burmese person might bite down on a chili, feel the burning, and say, "Well, good." Whereas I was saying, "I've got to get out of this country! Maybe I can go to Thailand and get a salad!"

It's not that in meditation we expect to do away with all our interpretations right off the bat. But in the normal course of our days, they come so quickly and so strongly, we're lost in them. Consequently, we're out of touch with our lives. We've jumped two weeks ahead—I'm already in Thailand with my salad—instead of here, in the moment, with the pepper. We can use mindfulness to create the space between direct experience and interpretation.

Another definition of mindfulness is a quality of awareness that does not add to its object, grasp at it, or push it away in aversion or delusion. If we perceive a pleasant sight or sound or sensation in body, we try to prolong it and keep it from ever changing. If a sensation is painful, we shove it away in anger, or strike out against an object we perceive as causing us pain. And if the experience is neutral, like eating that apple, or hearing a breath, we may space out or disconnect. It's in the moment of mindfulness, the moment of awareness, that you can connect to the object without adding to it, grasping it or pushing it away.

Techniques for Cultivating Mindfulness

In the vipassana tradition, we usually start by practicing mindfulness of the body, such as noting body sensations. You can use any activity—like washing dishes or walking down the street—to observe actual sensations, like the feeling of moving through space or of your hands in water. By observing those sensations and staying with them, you connect with the moment, with the direct experience. Of course, it's hard to keep the mind from running ahead. You may feel one thing, such as a pain, and then the mind leaps into the future, saying, "I will always have pain." By observing the sensation and your reaction to it, little by little you begin to discern the space between the direct experience and your conception.

Another technique is mindfulness of the breath. Watching the breath is a good way of training the mind to be in the moment. But it's surprisingly hard to be mindful of each and every breath [not sure we could have just one breath]. You start imagining the perfect breath, and then chastise yourself for not having it. Then you're leaning forward into the future, getting ready for the next five breaths. But by coming back to the breath over and over again, you can begin just to observe it, without bringing opinions, anticipation, and judgment.

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Another way of practicing mindfulness is to make a mental label of sensations. If you feel sleepy, you might say to yourself, "sleepy." If you have a thought, you say "thinking." When I was first practicing in India, I was given the instruction to try to make a mental note all the time. Whether I was sitting or doing walking meditation, I was trying to make a mental note. I began to notice that the single most common note I made was "waiting!" I was waiting for something more exciting, important, or spiritually significant to happen. I realized I was living like a tape recorder with the pause button on.

When I paid attention to that note, to the "waiting," I could begin to let the waiting go and be connected with what was. I could feel the breeze and taste the mango—because in India, there's no shortage of mangos, as it were. As one of my teachers, a Bengali meditation master named Munindra, once said, "I practice mindfulness so I can see the little purple flowers that are growing along the roadside."