

What is Mindfulness Meditation, and why?

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These days, “mindfulness” is a very trendy term. But it is used so broadly that you may not really know what it means. One way to understand it is this: paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, without making judgements about or reacting to what you are attending to.

“Mindfulness Meditation” (MM), another frequently heard term, refers to a form of mental training (*not* a religious belief or practice). In MM, just as in physical strength training, you do many “reps” of a basic action – but it is a mental action rather than a physical one. You focus on the physical sensations within your torso: how it expands on the inbreath and releases on the outbreath. Your mind will inevitably and frequently let go of that of focus, but as soon as you notice that happening, you gently bring your attention back to your breath without criticizing yourself for having let your mind wander. (This practice is very simple—which actually makes it rather difficult to do.)

Recent neuropsychological research has shown that when people do this practice on a daily basis for even as little as 15 minutes, areas of their brain begin to get thicker and develop more neuronal connections. These are the areas that are associated with attention, sensory processing, and the awareness of inner experience. These physical changes are associated with the formation of new habits of attention, and the fading out of old.

And these changes in the brain are accompanied by many physical and mental benefits. Those who meditate may notice that they feel more generally positive emotions; they recover faster from negative emotions; they are able to let go of destructive patterns of negative thinking, such as excessive worry; they tend to approach difficulties rather than to run away from them; and their immune system may strengthen, so they have improved physical resilience and health.

Many people feel that they can't meditate, or that they would never try to meditate, because their mind won't stop thinking. But a non-thinking mind is definitely not a pre-requisite for MM. In fact, if you had a mind that was so quiet that your thoughts never took over, you probably would not need a practice like this. So if your mind is full of unruly thoughts that you can't settle down, you're a perfect candidate for MM.

Of course, thinking helps us solve the many problems in life. We are very attached to our thoughts, and most of the time we are lost in them. But many of our thoughts actually make our difficulties worse and cause us great suffering. For example, think of the stress you create when you tell yourself: “This shouldn't be like this! Why is this problem happening to *me*?!” “I'm not happy! There must be something *wrong* with me!!!” Or, “My pain is *killing* me and it will ruin my life!!!”

With the practice of MM, we learn that thoughts like these are not facts. Rather, they are often entirely automatic and habitual, and they are not useful reactions to what is happening. By practicing MM, we can break through these automatic patterns of reaction and begin to see life in a very clear, rich, and alive way. And when we let go of ingrained patterns of self-judging and criticizing, we begin to cultivate a warm and compassionate approach to ourselves and to others. This sense of friendliness is a tremendous buffer and support in difficult times.