

The Art of Mindfulness

by Lisa Dunsdon

Have you ever been driving and not remembered how you got to your destination? It's as if there was some sort of blank period where your mind had wandered off somewhere. You were subconsciously still steering, accelerating, braking and navigating but you're darned if you can remember the trip! What exactly were you thinking of? How were you feeling?

Our thoughts and feelings are prevalent throughout the day and carry through to our sleeping hours. Are you totally aware of what your mind does as you are washing the dishes, driving a car, playing sport, or do you let it wonder? Have you ever sat down to eat a meal with others, only to find that you've finished the whole plate when they might have just had a few mouthfuls? The embarrassing feeling as you say to yourself "I must have looked like I was gulping the meal down in some sort of race". The very act of being mindful while you were eating may well have changed how you ate. To be aware of something as you are doing it can dramatically change the way you do it. Negative behaviours can become positive.

I was out and about the other day and totally oblivious to my surroundings for the first part of the day. Dropped my son off at school, came home and did some washing, picked up toys, did my tax return and ate copious amounts of food. I can't tell you what I was thinking about, however by midday I realized that I had to go out and get some groceries.

Up and down the shopping aisles and a full basket of who knows what later I ended up at the checkout. There was an elderly lady before me who seemed to be having a problem with her credit card and the cashier did not look too impressed with her. "Hurry up!" my thoughts screamed out while I stood there silently fuming.

Suddenly I became aware of my thoughts and feelings and really had to ask myself "what am I so angry about?" "Why am I so impatient when I'm not really in a hurry to get anywhere". I had been 'mindlessly' going through my day up until this point and quite obviously somehow, had become quite irritated. It was at this point that I became "Mindful".

"Mindfulness" is a relatively new concept in Western Philosophy. The term has been around for a long time in the East and is an intrinsic part of Buddhism and Yoga practice.

Mindfulness from the Buddhist's perspective.....

So what is "mindfulness" to the Buddhist practitioner? In Buddhism there are what is referred to as the "Four Noble Truths", these are like the concepts Buddhism embraces.

The "Fourth Noble Truth" is the "Noble Eightfold Path" the view is *"to free oneself from suffering by following the Eight Fold Path"*.

The seventh factor of this "Eight Fold Path" is "Right Mindfulness". In the Buddhist beliefs this is the controlled and perfected sense of cognition. The ability to see something as it isclearly.

How then, do you see something as it is clearly?

How we understand, diagnose and solve problems is our cognitive ability. How you see and understand something may be totally different from how someone else sees it. You know the feeling when someone just can't see your point of view! Our individual perception produces an impression of something that may be totally different from the perception of another.

We all have an "original impression" in relation to any experience. We then unknowingly develop concepts by connecting this to past thoughts and experiences. Our wonderful minds then join these concepts and build and weave complex interpretations into them. This naturally goes beyond the facticity of the "original impression" and we have therefore lost it.

The result can be seeing things in quite an obscured sense and all in a matter of seconds! Of course, you're probably thinking now, "oh, now I can see why others can get some things so wrong". Remember, this applies to us all!

A classic example is when people have been through a traumatic experience like an armed hold-up. When the police interview the victims the descriptions given of what the armed bandits looked like can differ dramatically.

Buddha's "four foundations of mindfulness" look at encouraging us to be aware of the process our mind goes through. 1. Contemplation of the body, 2. Contemplation of feeling, 3. Contemplation of the state of mind, and 4. Contemplation of the phenomena.

We therefore need to anchor the mind firstly in clear perception, and then penetrate impressions without being carried away. The idea is to actively observe and control the way our thoughts go.

This is where meditation comes into it in the Buddhist teachings. The practice of "stilling the mind" and returning to our "true nature". To be constantly "aware" of our thoughts, feelings and surroundings without attaching our perceptions is the act of being "Mindful". The Buddhists believe we can therefore be observant, strenuous, alert, contemplative and free of desire and sorrow.

From the Yogi's perspective.....

So what about the Yoga philosophy on "mindfulness". The Upanishads or the Yoga Sutras contains a short text called the "Satipatthana Sutra" - this translates to "The Four Foundations of Awareness". This text teaches how to develop a clear, continuous awareness of your body, your thoughts and your underlying emotions or state of mind as they come and go throughout the day.

The term "mindfulness" in the Yoga Sutras refers to consciously knowing what you are doing, as you are doing it. It also refers to the concept of being able to see your thoughts and feelings objectively and therefore breaking any grip they may have over you at the time. It is the act of being aware as you go about your daily life, creating an inner calm (as can be achieved through meditation) and extending this to the outer world of your life.

By more closely observing our inner reality and being aware of some of the automatic reactions we tend to gravitate toward we can then start mentally changing our attachment to any negative ones.

What does this tells us?

To me it signifies that "mindfulness" is a very useful tool to use in our everyday life towards achieving what to the individual, happiness and fulfillment may be. It can be utilized to help understand the very nature of the mind and help us understand our true selves.

From the day we are born, the way we are nurtured, what we are taught and the environment we live in, all contribute to what our idea of what happiness or fulfillment is. We all have some pleasant and some unpleasant feelings and thoughts. By the practice of being "mindful" it is what we do with these feelings and thoughts that can create the difference towards being "happy" or "unhappy".

As with the shopping centre experience, once you become aware of what you are thinking and feeling as you are doing it you can consciously change your mindset.

The very act of being mindful may therefore change how we treat ourselves and other people. And we all know that it is part of our collective human nature to treat others how we would like to be treated ourselves - don't we?

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