

Misunderstandings About Mindfulness

By Kevin Berrill, LCSW

There are many notions about mindfulness that lead to confusion and ultimately discourage people from practicing it. The following points address a few of those misunderstandings and will, I hope, encourage you to explore the practice.

- 1. If we're doing mindfulness meditation right, our minds are emptied of all thoughts.** In rare instances during meditation, our minds quiet and thought ceases. Most of the time, however, our brains churn out thoughts incessantly. Thoughts are not a problem, and in meditation practice we are not trying to rid ourselves of them. Rather, we observe them without chasing them or getting caught up in the stories our minds create. We hold them in spacious awareness, noticing how they arise and pass away. Thoughts, like sounds, sights, sensations, and emotions, are transient, just like life itself. When we understand the impermanent nature of thinking processes--and of all phenomena--we grow in wisdom and understanding.
- 2. Mindfulness is just about meditation.** Mindfulness is something we can practice anywhere and anytime. The point of training in mindfulness is to bring awareness and compassion into the whole of our lives, not just those times when we are meditating. We can be mindful driving a race car, taking a test, getting out of bed in the morning, going to the bathroom, or writing an email. While we are waiting at a stop light or at the doctor's office we can rest in spacious awareness and observe our experience. We can feel the sensations in our bodies, observe our surroundings, and tune into our emotions--including impatience, judgment, or wanting something to be different.
- 3. Mindfulness is a means of avoiding or transcending unpleasant realities; a way to "bliss out."** People who meditate sometimes experience pleasant and beautiful states, even rapture. But these highly pleasant states are transitory, just as difficult mental states are transitory. The reality is that we live in a conditioned world that contains pain as well as joy. Mindfulness is about how to be with both.
- 4. Mindfulness is all about relaxing.** Meditation can be relaxing, which is good news if you have stress in your life. But mindfulness is much more than just releasing stress. The fruits of mindfulness include insight, compassion, presence, clear seeing. It's about turning towards what's happening, including difficult moments, such as fear or regret; or neutral moments, when not much is happening. Since life has pleasant and

difficult and neutral experiences, we learn how to find a place of rest in the midst of it all.

5. **Mindfulness is beyond me and my messy life.** If you search in Google for pictures or images of mindfulness, what often comes up are photographs of young beautiful people in leotards, often seated in full lotus on a cliff overlooking a canyon or the ocean. Or you'll find images of serene Buddhist monks. Or images of elegant Japanese gardens or columns of perfectly balanced stones.

The reality of our lives often a quite different picture--one that can be messy, to say the least. Mindfulness is available to us no matter how tidy or chaotic our lives are at any given moment. Even when we don't have time to do formal meditation practice, we can take what meditation teacher Tara Brach calls a "sacred pause." Simply pausing for a few breaths and paying attention to our experience; perhaps even putting our hand on our hearts to offer ourselves kindness. We can hit the "pause button" and take a breath before picking up the phone or answering a text. We can bring awareness to moments that we often ignore, such as when we are brushing our teeth or peeling a carrot.

We can also pay attention to when we're not when we're not present. You might notice, for example, that you are in a meeting but not paying attention. The moment you become aware that your attention has drifted off is a moment of mindfulness. Mindfulness is about seeing when we're lost--and then coming back. Over and over again when necessary.

- **Mindfulness isn't practical for a life in which we have to think about the future or make judgments.** You might ask, aren't there circumstances when we need to evaluate or judge or plan for the future or reflect on the past? The answer is yes, absolutely, but we can bring mindfulness to our critical thinking processes, to planning, and to doing. That said, there is something to be said for shifting out of "doing mode" and into the mode of just being, which is softer and more receptive, more yin than yang.

When we are solely focused on doing, we are cut off from a source of our wisdom--including our intuition and our being. This brings to mind a meditator I know who had a revelation while meditating. She was quietly watching her breath, when quite spontaneously she came upon an answer to a question she had been pondering for days. She was trying to solve her problem by thinking ("doing mode") but the answer arrived only after she shifted into "being mode," a way of being that is attentive and receptive rather than analytical. When we practice mindfulness we cultivate the garden of our being or "non-doing." That garden has the potential to bear fruit in the "doing" realm of our lives.