

What Is Mindfulness?

The question “What is Mindfulness?” is most easily addressed through an analogy.

When you do fitness training, you practice formal procedures (exercises) that alter the fabric of your body in two ways...

- They increase your baseline strength.
- They increase your baseline flexibility.

When you do Mindfulness training, you practice formal procedures (meditations) that alter the fabric of your consciousness in two ways...

- They increase your baseline clarity.
- They increase your baseline equanimity.

The goal of fitness training is not to achieve a temporary state of strength and flexibility that is present when you do the exercises and then vanishes during the rest of the day. The goal of fitness training is to gradually increase your *baseline* of strength and flexibility. In other words, the purpose of fitness training is not to create certain temporary states in your body, but rather to develop certain abiding traits in your body.

The situation with Mindfulness training is similar.

The goal of Mindfulness training is not to achieve a temporary state of clarity and equanimity that is present when you meditate and then vanishes during the rest of the day. The goal of Mindfulness training is to gradually increase your baseline of clarity and equanimity throughout the day. In other words, the purpose of Mindfulness training is not to create certain temporary states in consciousness, but rather to develop certain abiding traits in consciousness.

In order to increase your baseline of physical strength and flexibility, what would you need to do? You would need to learn how to properly perform the exercises. You would need to do the exercises with regularity. And you would need to maintain your exercise program over time.

The same is true with Mindfulness training. You have to learn how to do the formal procedures properly and practice them with regularity and maintain that practice program over time (months, years, and hopefully decades). By practicing with regularity I mean do at least a few half hour sessions per week plus a mini retreat every month or so. Alternatively you could do a couple of longer retreats every year coupled with your weekly self-practice sessions.

It would seem that the analogy between Mindfulness training and fitness training is quite close. However, there are ways in which the two forms of training differ.

- First, no matter how intensely or for how long you maintain a fitness training program, it is unlikely that the strength and flexibility in your body can increase more than two- or three-fold.

On the other hand, the traits of clarity and equanimity in your consciousness can grow without limit.

- Second, no matter how much strength and flexibility you have, old age, sickness, and injury will eventually strip them from you.

On the other hand, when clarity and equanimity become deeply ingrained into the fabric of your consciousness, they are relatively immune to the effects of old age, sickness, and injury.

To summarize, Mindfulness training increases your clarity and equanimity, and this in many ways parallels how fitness training increases your strength and flexibility.

The meaning of strength and flexibility is fairly obvious as is their relevance to the quality of your life.

The meaning of clarity and equanimity and their relevance to the quality your life may not be obvious at all at this point. So let's discuss what clarity and equanimity mean.

I'll put quotes around those two words to point out that they are specifically defined technical terms within the Mindfulness tradition.

"Clarity" can be thought of as the ability to keep track of the components of your sensory experience as they arise in various combinations, moment-by-moment. By "components of sensory experience" I mean the basic building blocks of sensory experience such as physical-type sensations in your body, emotional-type sensations in your body, mental images, internal conversations, and so forth. At a somewhat deeper level of understanding, clarity means a kind of soaking of awareness down into the neuronal circuits that create sensory experience. It's a sort of internally-generated functional MRI of your own nervous system—a deep knowing of yourself at a "cellular" (i.e., neuronal) level.

"Equanimity" can be thought of as an attitude of gentle matter-of-factness with regard to your sensory experience. At a somewhat deeper level of understanding, equanimity becomes a radical non-interference with the sensory circuitry of your own nervous system.

To sum it up in a sound byte: Mindfulness practice trains your nervous system to know itself better and interfere with itself less.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by bringing clarity and equanimity to the sensory components of an experience.

Let's say you're running a long race and at some point a deep part of you is ready to give up. Your original intention was to finish, maybe even win, and objectively speaking your body is still at least somewhat capable of running, but subjectively you want to quit. In this case, what are the specific sensory components responsible for the perception "I give up"?

Well, for one thing, there are uncomfortable physical sensations in your body that will go away if you stop. How many distinct “flavors” of physical discomfort are there? Let’s say there are three.

1. Sharp muscle pain due to lactic acid buildup (this sensation is centered in your legs).
2. The sensation of oxygen hunger due to windedness (this sensation is centered in your chest).
3. The sensation of weakness/exhaustion discomfort due to tiredness (this sensation is uniformly distributed over your whole body).

So that’s three distinct sensory components right there. Are there any other sensory components involved? Well, there’s probably self-talk, i.e., verbal thinking, a kind of internal hearing centered in your head. The talk is saying to you “Enough already..., I can’t do this..., This really hurts..., There’s so far to go and it’s only going to get worse....”

Are there any other sensory components? Well, you may have some mental images, i.e., visual thinking, a kind of internal seeing on your mental screen. Maybe you see pictures of yourself lying down resting, or sitting with a lemonade.

Furthermore, the physical discomfort and the mental talk may each set off emotional-type sensations in your body, and those are also uncomfortable. The negative talk and physical discomfort may cause your body to be “colored” by subtle flavors of fear, “poor me,” or impatience. By way of contrast, the mental pictures of you resting may create a pleasant flavor of joy/smile.

So in this example, the sensory components that create the perception “I have to quit now” are nine in number:

- Three distinct flavors of gross physical discomfort in your body.
- Three distinct flavors of subtle emotional discomfort in your body.
- One flavor of subtle emotional pleasure in your body.
- Visual thoughts.
- Auditory thoughts.

Now, suppose that your base level of sensory clarity is high so that *without effort* you are able to keep each of those sensory components distinct in awareness. Suppose also that your base level of equanimity is high so that each of those sensory components arises without suppression and passes without fixation—wavelike. In that case you would be able to continue the race even though the countervailing will to quit remains strong and persistent. You would have the freedom to ignore it and stay true to your original intention.

Why Practice Mindfulness?

Now that you have some idea of what Mindfulness is, the next natural question is “Why bother to do it?” The answer is simple: *so you can have what you really want!*

And what, to paraphrase Freud, do people *really* want?

1. We want **to be free from suffering due to physical discomfort**. (Note that this is not necessarily the same as being *without* physical discomfort.)
2. We want **to be free from suffering due to emotional discomfort**. (Analogously this is not necessarily the same as being *without* emotional discomfort.)
3. We want **to derive great fulfillment from physical pleasure**. (Note that your level of sensual fulfillment is a dimension in its own right and is not necessarily dependant on the intensity, variety, or duration of the physical pleasure itself.)
4. We want **to derive great fulfillment from emotional pleasure**. (Analogously one’s level of emotional fulfillment is a dimension in its own right and is not necessarily dependant on the intensity, variety, or duration of the emotional pleasure itself.)
5. We want **to change habitual behaviors** that have negative consequences. (Substance abuse, food behaviors, expressions of emotion that are inappropriate in kind or intensity, procrastination, and so forth.)
6. We want **to understand deeply** who (and eventually what) we really are.
7. We want **to joyously serve** our fellow beings.

Let’s address each of these individually.

ITEMS 1 & 2: Wanting to be free from suffering due to physical and emotional discomfort.

It turns out that...

- When you bring clarity and equanimity to physical discomforts in your body (sensations of pain, tiredness, sleepiness, nausea, and so forth) those discomforts cause you less suffering, i.e., they bother you less.
- When you bring clarity and equanimity to emotional discomforts in your body (sensations of sadness, fear, anger, shame, impatience, and so forth) those sensations cause you less suffering, i.e., they bother you less.

It also turns out that...

- The reduction in suffering due to uncomfortable body sensations described above is proportional to the amount of clarity and equanimity you can bring to those sensations.
- With sufficient practice, your baseline of clarity and equanimity can be increased to any required degree.
- On the other hand, physical or emotional discomfort cannot increase without limit, i.e., it can only grow to reach a certain finite level—the maximum possible activation level of the underlying neuronal circuits.

The above empirical facts lead to an extraordinary logical conclusion: With time and practice, it is possible for you to dramatically reduce or completely eliminate suffering due to physical or emotional discomfort, even when the discomfort itself cannot (or should not!) be eliminated.

ITEMS 3 & 4: Wanting to derive great fulfillment from physical and emotional pleasure.

It also turns out that...

- When you bring clarity and equanimity to physical pleasures in your body (relaxation, eating, making love, and so forth) those pleasures end up giving you greater satisfaction, i.e., they fulfill you more than usual.
- When you bring clarity and equanimity to emotional pleasures in your body (joy, love, enthusiasm, and so forth) those pleasures end up giving you greater satisfaction, i.e., they fulfill you more than usual.

ITEM 5: Wanting to let go of old negative behaviors and acquiring new positive ones.

At any given moment, the force that drives us to do negative behaviors or prevents us from doing positive ones can only come up as...

- Physical discomfort
(For example, the physical withdrawal symptoms during abstinence.)
- Emotional discomfort
(For example, the anxiety, teariness, irritability, impatience, and so forth that are temporarily relieved by a certain behavior.)
- Physical pleasure
(For example, the pleasant physical sensations that arise when you use a substance.)
- Emotional pleasure
(For example, the pleasant emotional sensations that arise when you engage in or even think about engaging in a certain behavior.)
- Mental images (of desired objects, situations).
- Internal talk (that justifies the negative behavior).

When physical and emotional discomfort cause less suffering, (due to increased clarity and equanimity) they no longer goad you into doing undesired behaviors.

When physical and emotional pleasure brings more fulfillment (also due to increased clarity and equanimity) they no longer seduce you into doing undesired behaviors.

Moreover, when you bring clarity and equanimity to the thought part of an urge (the Image Activity and Talk Activity), it becomes possible to just observe that thought without automatically buying into it.

Thus, your ability to let urges arise and pass within the container of clarity and equanimity is closely tied to your ability to resist those urges.

To summarize, clarity and equanimity reduce suffering and increase fulfillment on the inside. And this in turn makes it easier to change behaviors and become the person you want to be on the outside.

Thus, Mindfulness skill represents a powerful tool for achieving external changes as well as internal happiness.

ITEM 6: Wanting a deep understanding of oneself.

It should be obvious that in order to deeply understand who you are, you must experience yourself as you are. Clarity could be looked upon as the *ability* to experience something just as it is. Equanimity could be looked upon as the *willingness* to experience something just as it is.

The clarity component in Mindfulness is a kind of awareness extending tool that allows us to better understand our inner world, just as a microscope is an awareness extending tool that allows us to better understand our outer world.

The metaphor can be carried further. On a good microscope, you can turn the nosepiece to get greater powers of magnification. This allows you to study the fabric of the outer world at finer and finer scales (tissues, cells, sub-cellular organelles, and so forth). In the same way, as your Mindfulness skill grows, you will be able to study the fabric of your inner world at finer and finer levels.

- At the psychological level...
Large scale personality structures, dominant life patterns, why you are the way you are.
- At the system theory level...
How sensory elements (i.e., physical sensations, emotional sensations, mental imagery, and internal talk) act and interact to produce complex subjective states such as will, memory, judgment, suffering, fulfillment, separateness, oneness, “I am-ness,” and so forth.
- At the energetic level...
The sensory elements which comprise the mind-body system are themselves made up of vibratory atoms, wave packets of energy. (The word energy here is used in its original Christian sense of “spirit” not in its modern scientific sense of “capacity to exert force over distance.”)

- At the deep spiritual level...
Those “vibratory atoms” continuously arise from and return to the Ground State of Consciousness, the Creator, your Source.

ITEM 7: Wanting to joyously serve others.

This may have struck you as a bit strange. Does everyone really want to serve their fellow beings? Explicitly, perhaps no; but implicitly, yes. This comes about as a (perhaps unintended) consequence of fathoming what you are: To know yourself at the *deepest* level is to directly experience your Source.

But to directly experience *your* Source is to directly experience *everyone’s* Source, and therefore, to experience everyone as a sibling.

An abiding sense of connectedness to all of creation and a call to serve in some way follow automatically, as a corollary.

Mindfulness and Concentration

In order to get a complete conceptual picture of what Mindfulness is, we need to address one final issue: What is the precise relationship between Mindfulness skill and concentration power? By concentration power, I mean your ability to stay focused on what is relevant.

We can look at this question from two points of view. On one hand, Mindfulness could be looked upon as a particular way of applying one’s concentration power. In other words, concentration power is a generic skill and Mindfulness is a specific application of that skill.

The first person in recorded history to formalize a theory of Mindfulness was Prince Siddhattha Gotama, known as the Buddha, or Awakened One. Indeed, it was the discovery of the method of Mindfulness that gave him the key he needed to achieve awakening.

As a young boy, Siddhattha would sometimes spontaneously enter states of deep concentration by focusing on simple objects such as freshly plowed earth. Later on, his innate concentration skills were honed to extraordinary depth under his first two teachers, Arada Kalama and Uttara Ramaputta. These masters taught that deep withdrawn concentration states were the ultimate goal of spiritual practice.

Siddhattha came to see things differently. His great innovation, the great discovery that led to the Awakening, was that one could use concentration as an investigative tool to understand the underlying mechanics of suffering and selfhood. Specifically, one could use concentration to dissect the perception of “self as thing” into its basic sensory building blocks and then use concentration as a microscope to see into the vibrating vacuous nature of those building blocks. Concentration when used this way is called Mindfulness.

So from this perspective, Mindfulness skill is a specific way of using a more generic skill – concentration power. For this reason, some people spend a lot of time concentrating on simple objects before undertaking Mindfulness practice.

But the converse point of view can also be taken. Even if one has little concentration power to begin with, the attempt to practice Mindfulness techniques will in and of itself teach you how to concentrate. From this point of view, Mindfulness training delivers yet another benefit in addition to the ones mentioned previously.

Mindfulness training dramatically increases your general concentration ability.

Why is that important? Simply stated, **concentration power is the single most universally applicable and most deeply empowering skill that a human being can cultivate.**

Any other skill you wish to attain depends on your ability to focus. Likewise, the success of any endeavor you undertake depends at least somewhat on your ability to focus. Yet concentration skill, which logically speaking, should be the leitmotiv in all education from grade school onward, is seldom even mentioned, let alone systematically taught. No wonder things get so screwed up!

Even people who are interested in cultivating concentration often have an erroneous concept of its nature. There is a tendency to think of concentration as always involving a narrowing of attention. But narrowing one's scope is not the defining characteristic of the concentrated state.

Here's how I like to define concentration power.

Concentration is the ability to attend to what is deemed relevant at a given time and to let go of what is deemed irrelevant, any time you want, for as long as you want. What is deemed relevant could be quite narrow, but it could also be quite broad.

For example, when you drive your car, what are relevant are the sights and sounds of the road plus the touch sensations that link you physically to the car. What are irrelevant (most of the time) are mental images, internal talk, and emotional feeling in your body that constitute memory, planning, fantasy and judgment.

Conclusion

Scientists sometimes speak of the "unreasonable effectiveness" of mathematics. By that they mean that when simple mathematical methods are used to model the natural world, they often confer power and insight beyond what one would have expected. The payoff seems to be disproportionately large relative to the investment.

Hopefully it is now clear that the method of Mindfulness is an unreasonably effective way to increase human happiness.