

Mindful Yoga

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Excerpted from *Full Catastrophe Living*, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

[for video guidance, go to [Yoga 1](#) or [Yoga 2](#)]

As you have probably gathered by now, bringing mindfulness to any activity transforms it into a kind of meditation. Mindfulness dramatically amplifies the probability that any activity in which you are engaged will result in an expansion of your perspective and of your understanding of who you are. Much of the practice is simply a remembering, a reminding yourself to be fully awake, not lost in waking sleep or enshrouded in the veils of your thinking mind...

Mindful hatha yoga is the third major formal meditation technique that we practice in the stress clinic, along with the body scan and sitting meditation... *Yoga* is a Sanskrit word that literally means "yoke." The practice of yoga is the practice of yoking together or unifying body and mind, which really means penetrating into the experience of them not being separate in the first place. You can also think of it as experiencing the unity or connectedness between the individual and the universe as a whole...

We have already seen that *posture* is very important in the sitting meditation and that positioning your body in certain ways can have immediate effects on your mental and emotional state. Being aware of your body language and what it reveals about your attitudes and feelings can help you to change your attitudes and feelings just by changing your physical posture...

When you practice the yoga, you should be on the lookout for the many ways, some quite subtle, in which your perspective on your body, your thoughts, and your whole sense of self can change when you adopt different postures on purpose and stay in them for a time, paying full attention from moment to moment. Practicing in this way enriches the inner work enormously and takes it far beyond the physical benefits that come naturally with the stretching and strengthening...

This is a far cry from most exercise and aerobic classes and even many yoga classes, which only focus on what the body is doing. These approaches tend to emphasize progress. They like to push, push, push. Not much attention is paid to the art of non-doing and non-striving in exercise classes, nor to the present moment for that matter, nor to the mind...

Work at or within your body's limits at all times, with the intention of observing and exploring the boundary between what your body can do and where it says, "Stop for now." ***Never stretch beyond this limit to the point of pain.*** Some discomfort is inevitable when you are working at your limits, but you will need to learn how to enter this healthy "stretching zone" slowly and mindfully so that you are nourishing your body, not damaging it as you explore your limits. In the stress clinic, the ground rule is that every individual has to consciously take responsibility for reading his or her own body's signals while doing the yoga. This means listening carefully to what your body is telling you and honoring its messages, erring on the side of being conservative. No one can listen to your body for you.

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NOTE: If you have physical limitations that are so serious that it would be difficult or damaging for you to even begin one or more of the practices, it is sufficient to simply vividly imagine doing the movements and/or postures. Neurologists tell us that vividly imagining physical movement involves the same motor neurons that come into play as when we actually physically move. There are also a number of alternative practices that can substitute for the traditional MBSR yoga (see [Yoga1](#)). If even the simplest of these alternative practices cause significant distress, see [I have strong emotional \(or physical\) reactions](#).

Meditation: It's Not What You Think

by Jon Kabat-Zinn (excerpted from *Coming to Our Senses*)

It might be good to clarify a few common misunderstandings about meditation right off the bat. First, meditation is best thought of as a way of being, rather than a technique or a collection of techniques.

I'll say it again.

Meditation is a way of being, not a technique.

This doesn't mean that there aren't methods and techniques associated with meditation practice.

There are. In fact, there are hundreds of them, and we will be making good use of some of them. But without understanding that all techniques are orienting vehicles pointing at ways of being, ways of being in relationship to the present moment and to one's own mind and one's own experience, we can easily get lost in techniques and in our misguided but entirely understandable attempts to use them to get somewhere else and experience some special result or state that we think is the goal of it all...

Second, meditation is not relaxation spelled differently. Perhaps I should say that again as well: Meditation is not relaxation spelled differently.

That doesn't mean that meditation is not frequently accompanied by profound states of relaxation and by deep feelings of wellbeing. Of course it is, or can be, sometimes. But mindfulness meditation is the embrace of any and all mind states in awareness, without preferring one to another. From the point of view of mindfulness practice, pain or anguish, or for that matter boredom or impatience or frustration or anxiety or tension in the body are all equally valid objects of our attention if we find them arising in the present moment, each a rich opportunity for insight and learning, and potentially, for liberation, rather than signs that our meditation practice is not "succeeding" because we are not feeling relaxed or experiencing bliss in some moment.

We might say that meditation is really a way of being appropriate to the circumstances one finds oneself in, in any and every moment. If we are caught up in the preoccupations of our own mind, in that moment we cannot be present in an appropriate way or perhaps at all. We will bring an agenda of some kind to whatever we say or do or think, even if we don't know it...

For meditation, and especially mindfulness meditation, is not the throwing of a switch and catapulting yourself anywhere, nor is it entertaining certain thoughts and getting rid of others. Nor is it making your mind blank or willing yourself to be peaceful or relaxed. It is really an inward gesture that inclines the heart and mind (seen as one seamless whole) toward a full-spectrum awareness of the present moment just as it is, accepting whatever is happening simply because it is already happening...

Meditation is not about trying to get anywhere else. It is about allowing yourself to be exactly where you are and as you are, and for the world to be exactly as it is in this moment as well. This is not so easy, since there is always something that we can rightly find fault with if we stay inside our thinking. And so there tends to be great resistance on the part of the mind and body to settle into things just as they are, even for a moment. That resistance to what is may be even more compounded if we are meditating because we hope that by doing so, we can effect change, make things different, improve our own lives, and contribute to improving the lot of the world...

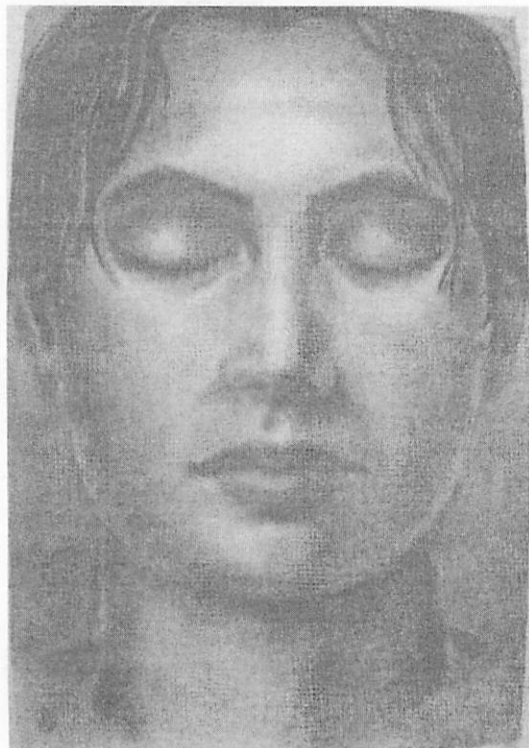
So, from the point of view of awareness, any state of mind is a meditative state. Anger or sadness is just as interesting and useful and valid to look into as enthusiasm or delight, and far more valuable than a blank mind, a mind that is insensate, out of touch. Anger, fear, terror, sadness, resentment, impatience, enthusiasm, delight, confusion, disgust, contempt, envy, rage, lust, even dullness, doubt, and torpor, in fact all mind states and body states are occasions to know ourselves better if we can stop, look, and listen, in other words, if we can come to our senses and be intimate with what presents itself in awareness in any and every moment. The astonishing thing, so counterintuitive, is that nothing else needs to happen. We can give up trying to make something special occur. In letting go of wanting something special to occur, maybe we can realize that something very special is already occurring, and is always occurring, namely life emerging in each moment *as awareness itself*.

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I Hadn't Thought of That

by Wes Niskier



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After years of meditation practice, one of the most significant changes in my life has been my relationship to my mind. We're still living together, of course, and we remain friends. But my mind and I are no longer codependent. I am taking back control of myself.

The change in our relationship started when I finally admitted that my mind had a thinking problem. I was a heavy thinker, often starting with two or three thoughts the minute I got up in the morning and then continuing to think throughout the day until bedtime. My mind produced thought after thought, about love and work, of course, along with existential thoughts and trashy ones, thoughts about clothing, food, music, politics. One subject after another, on and on, and all of it centered around me, which became embarrassing as well as oppressive. The thinking would not let me "be" – either at ease, without worry or in the moment. I

began to see my mind as an insecure, selfish, nagging inner bitch who was stealing my happiness and destroying my life. For our mutual survival, I decided to seek an intervention.

At first I tried analysis, with hopes of uncovering the psychological origin of my mind's need to think; later I got into some Gestalt screaming, flailing and crying, which only temporarily stopped the flow of thinking; and intermittently I used drugs, trying to "blow my mind" by short-circuiting the neural wiring. Finally, I tried meditation.

It turned out that the goal of meditation was not to stop thinking, as I had assumed, but rather to expose my mind to itself. Before meditation I was completely focused on the content of thoughts, how to manipulate them and extract meaning from them. That is what I was graded on in school and what our culture considers important. But nobody had taught me how to look at the process of thinking itself or at the intrinsic nature of thought. As the Tibetan sage Tulku Urgen said:

The stream of thoughts surges through the mind of an ordinary person, who will have no knowledge whatsoever about who is thinking, where the thought comes from, and where the thought disappears. The person will be totally and mindlessly carried away by one thought after another!

Let's be clear: thinking is not bad, or some kind of roadblock to enlightenment. In fact, thinking is an essential tool of our well-being and even our survival. (Perhaps a warning sign should be put up at meditation centers advising all who enter on the path: "Give up thinking at your own risk.")

Indeed, thinking is fabulous. Our genius as a species is the ability to create complex symbols, agree on their meaning, and use them to encode our knowledge and describe our plans. The thinking function allows us to compute, reason and imagine, and perhaps most important of all, to share our understanding with each other in the form of speech or writing. We can even record our

thinking and pass it on to future generations. (“Hold that thought!”)

Unfortunately, as a species we have grown to value thinking to the exclusion of other aspects of our being. The more we become identified with our thoughts, the more we are lost in our individual narrative, disconnected from what we have in common with other humans and other forms of life. We have turned our sense of self over to our thinking mind, leaving us lost in thought, disembodied. Especially in Western culture, heads are us.

Although we remain convinced that our ability to think somehow makes us “the chosen species,” existentially superior to the rest of creation, in the modern era this belief is being challenged. In his secret notebooks, Charles Darwin wondered, “Why is thought – which is a secretion of the brain – deemed to be so much more wonderful than, say, gravity, which is a property of matter? It is only our arrogance, our admiration of ourselves.” Making the same point, Stephen Jay Gould wondered if an intelligent octopus would go around being so proud of its eight arms.

Meanwhile, the new cognitive sciences are putting thought in its proper place in the scheme of things. Research into our brain and nervous system reveals that most of our interpretation of the world as well as our decision making takes place on what Daniel Dennett calls the “sub-personal” level, without a rational, conscious, thinking self directing or guiding the process. In fact, brain science reveals that thinking comes about quite late in the cognitive sequence, apparently in order to weave our experience into the ongoing story we tell about ourselves. As one neuroscientist put it, “We don’t have a rational mind so much as we have a rationalizing mind.” Our thinking is, for the most part, an afterthought.

Do we overvalue our thinking? The scientists seem to “think” so. Those who study cognition say

it is a way of organizing experience, while the evolutionary scientists see it as an adaptation, something that evolved like the eye or the opposable thumb. Great tool, folks, but not the be-all and end-all of creation.

The Buddha would appear to agree with Darwin and the scientists. He regarded the mind as a sixth sense, and did not seem to give thinking any more or less importance than sight or hearing. Like the other five senses, our thinking is simply another way of reading and interpreting the world. And as is true with other senses, the main job of the thinking mind is survival.

Just try to imagine what humans were thinking 20,000 years ago. I would guess it was something along the lines of “I wonder who is going on the hunt tomorrow” or “The gods want me to put red clay on my face to make the enemy run away” or “Honey, who is watching the fire tonight?” Now our thoughts are about our medical insurance, or the news from around the world, or our love like (aka, passing on our genes), and as the song says, “It’s still the same old story.” On most of our interior human screens, in any given era, is another episode of *Survivor*.

When I regard thinking as a survival tool, it helps to demystify and depersonalize the process. I see my thoughts as somewhat generic, as endemic to my species, not as “I,” “me” or “mine.”

So after years of meditation, and with the help of modern science, I now have some understanding of both the source and nature of thought – and have gained a degree of freedom. I no longer have to believe in or get carried away by every thought that comes along...

Wes Nisker is coeditor of *Inquiring Mind* and an author and meditation teacher. This piece first appeared in *Inquiring Mind*, but also appears as a chapter in his book, *Crazy Wisdom Saves the World Again*. His website is www.wesnisker.com.

Your Mind: Friend or Foe?

by Jack Kornfield



Who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy. No one can harm you more than your own mind untamed. And who is your friend? Mind is your friend. No one can help you more than your own mind, wisely trained—not even your own mother and father. — Buddha

How can we be mindful of the mind in the mind? Just as there's a river of bodily sensations passing through consciousness, just as there's a river of 500 emotions passing through us, there's also a river of thoughts. If you try to sit silently for a minute, what happens? Does your mind become quiet and stay quiet? The mind will not become quiet upon command. Instead, what most people experience is the inner waterfall, a cascading stream of thoughts. It's like a cartoon I saw once of a car crossing a vast desert landscape, where a roadside sign says, "Your own tedious thoughts the next 200 miles."

One scientist declared that we have an average of about 67,000 thoughts a day. I think it's probably closer to 37,000, but whatever the number is, the river of thoughts is not under your control. And these thoughts have very little honesty. They will tell you any kind of story, and be dedicated to many beliefs that are absurd. Much of the river is composed of reruns. It's like not being able to sleep in a hotel room and you pick up the remote control and turn on the TV but all you can get are the cable shopping stations selling cheap jewelry and gimmicky kitchen gadgets with a breathless sense of urgency that just goes on and on. But in your case, it's reruns of your last love affair or of a conversation you had at work, or anxiety and shame about some problem, or anger at being treated poorly by someone in your distant past. And no matter what you wish, you have trouble changing the channel. The whole parade just keeps repeating and repeating without resolution. It can be really crazy in there—have you noticed?

What can you do with your thoughts, especially the stories of anxiety and fear? With mindfulness of the mind, you come to realize that much of what you believe is the product of your imagination. Thoughts can be misleading in many ways. Your thoughts are filled with praise and blame, hope and fear. You will hear the voices of your parents, internalized like monologues, sometimes appearing as the inner judge and the inner tyrant. Then are the voices of the unloved child or the ambitious achiever, voices who are always trying to fix or deceive us. There are healthy voices, wise voices, and loving voices, too. But most of the time your thoughts are like a bureaucracy that continues to perpetuate itself even when the need for it has been outgrown, even when it's actually become unpleasant and restrictive and possibly dangerous to you. Marcus Aurelius wrote, "The soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts." So what can you do?

With mindfulness, you can stop taking them so seriously. You can come to know that your thoughts make a good servant but not a good master. You can step back and listen to your thoughts mindfully and then decide whether they're useful or not. It's true that you still need some thoughts to plan for the future and to problem-solve, but you could eliminate 90 percent of your thoughts and still have plenty to do the job.

So the first thing you can do is to listen to your thoughts with mindful awareness. You will see the evanescent nature of thoughts, that they are fleeting ideas, all impermanent. And then you can begin to realize that just because you have a thought doesn't mean you have to believe it—much less act on it—and certainly not get caught up in the whole stream of them. You can release the mind of some of its more dangerous patterns. Observing the mind with mindfulness brings liberation.

After you learn to see what's in your mind and learn to release or dis-identify with the unhealthy patterns, you discover a deeper level of liberation. My teacher Sri Nisargadatta explained it like this: "The mind creates the abyss and the heart crosses it." When you rest in the present moment with mindfulness, you open to a presence which is timeless and beyond the understanding of thought. It's by returning to the awareness beyond thoughts

that you experience real healing. When your mind and heart open, you realize who you are, the timeless, limitless awareness behind all thought.

Remembering who you really are, you see with the heart. You see the face of someone you love, you see the plum tree that's blooming in front of you. You may be sitting with someone who's grieving or angry, or maybe you're just walking back to your car, but now you're doing it while being fully awake. It's so beautiful to come back to this Earth. Even in great difficulty you can become aware that you are in the presence of mystery, and this experience alone is breathtaking in its power.

For Nisargadatta, the mind creates the abyss of right and wrong, of worries and fears that lead us away from this timeless presence. The only power that can cross this abyss is the awakened heart. Even in difficulty, the awakened heart rests in love.



Jack Kornfield has taught meditation internationally since 1974 and is one of the key teachers to introduce mindfulness practice to the West. He holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and is a father, husband and activist. His books have been translated into 20 languages and sold more than a million copies. (see jackkornfield.com)

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The Reality Below Thoughts

by Jack Kornfield (excerpted from *The Wise Heart*)



As we observe our thoughts and question our beliefs, we come to understand that while thinking, planning and remembering are vital to our lives, they are more tentative than we believe. Our thoughts are always more provisional and one sided than we admit. Ordinarily we believe them. But questioning our thoughts is at the heart of [mindfulness] practice. Is what we believe real, solid, certain? As writer Richard Haight observed, “Chief Roman Nose of the Cheyenne and his people believed he was immortal and he, and they, were right every day of his life except one.”

When we believe our own thoughts and opinions we become fundamentalists. There can be fundamentalist Buddhists, fundamentalist scientists, fundamentalist psychologists. But no matter how strongly we believe our perspective, there are always other points of view. In our personal relationships this is really obvious. A relationship matures when each partner grants the possibility that the other may be right (though we may not always believe it).

Most of our mental suffering comes from how tightly we hold our beliefs, thoughts and perspectives. In the monastery Ajahn Chah used to smile and ask “Is it true?” He wanted us to learn to hold our thoughts lightly. In Buddhist training... thoughts are deconstructed, the entire structure dismantled plank by plank.

The Sufis illustrate the one sidedness of our thought with a story from the holy fool, Mullah Nasrudin. A king, disenchanted with his subjects’ dishonesty, decided to force them to tell the truth. When the city gates were opened one morning, gallows had been erected in front of them. A royal guard announced, “Whoever will enter the city must first answer a question which will be put to them by the captain of the guard.” Mullah Nasrudin stepped forward first. The captain spoke, “Where are you going? Tell the truth...the alternative is death by

hanging.” “I am going,” said Nasrudin, “to be hanged on those gallows.” “I don’t believe you!” replied the guard. Nasrudin calmly replied, “Very well then. If I have told a lie, hang me!” “But that would make it the truth!” said the confused guard. “Exactly,” said Nasrudin, “your truth.”

When we are bothered by our thinking... psychology tells us to ask, is it really true? If we listen from the heart, we will see how much trouble comes from believing stories that may not even be true. Ajahn Chah said, “You have so many view and opinions, what’s good and bad, right and wrong, about how things should be. You cling to your views and suffer so much. They are only views, you know.”

Within the stillness of meditation we see the unreality of thought. We learn to observe how words and images arise and then vanish, leaving no trace. The succession of images and associations – often called mental proliferations – builds thought castles. But these castles, ideas, and plans float for a time and then they disappear, like bubbles in a glass of soda. We can become so silent that we actually feel the subtle thought energy appear and vanish again.

But, if thoughts are empty, what can we rely upon? Where is our refuge? Here is how the Indian sage Nisargadatta answered this question: “The mind creates the abyss, the heart crosses it.” The thinking mind constructs views of right and wrong, good and bad, self and other. These are the abyss. When we let thoughts come and go without clinging, we can use thought, but we rest in the heart. We become more trusting and courageous. There is an innocence to the heart. We are the child of the spirit. And there is an innate wisdom. We are the ancient one. Resting in the heart we live in harmony with our breath, our body. Resting in the heart our patience grows. We do not have to think it all through. Life is unfolding around us. As the Indian Master Charon Singh put it, “In time, even grass becomes milk.”

Of course, stories have value. As a teacher and storyteller, I have come to respect their evocative power. But even these stories are like fingers pointing to the moon. At best, they replace a deluded cultural narrative or a misleading tale with a tale of compassion. They touch us and lead us back to the mystery here and now.

In my individual meditation interviews, I try to help people drop below the level of their story and see the beauty that shines all around them. Psychologist Len Bergantino writes about frustrating therapy sessions with a patient who was disconnected, detached and aiming to please. “The feeling I had on one particular day was, I just didn’t want to say one more word to him about anything. So, to his surprise, I took out my mandolin and in the most loving, mellow, beautiful way I could, I played, “Come Back to Sorrento.” He broke down in tears and cried for the last forty minutes of the session,

saying only, “Dr. Bergantino, you sure earned your money today!” I thought, “And to think, I wasted all these years talking to people.” When we drop below the stories, our heart shines.



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