

The power of letting go

Today is the eighth in a series of articles on mindfulness. If you would like to review any of the prior entries, you can find them on my website at www.drmcquaid.com. To review, mindfulness is a form of stress reduction. In the simplest terms, mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment without judgment. It focuses our attention on the only moment in which we are alive, which is right now. Paying attention in this way can reduce stress, depression, anxiety and even potentially bring about healing. Today I will continue to explore the process of meditation which is the heart and soul of mindfulness.

Meditation is simple, but not easy. That is to say the instructions are straightforward, but the process can be a challenge. It is therefore helpful to review the instructions. Repetition is the way we learn, and to learn meditation, it is helpful to undertake repetitive practice. With that being clarified, I would like to review and expand upon the process of meditation.

I sense for those who did the exercise on meditation that your mind likely wondered a lot. This is normal. What can be helpful to incorporate is what is called an anchor. The breath itself is an anchor. An anchor is a grounding mechanism which we use to refocus our attention back to the present moment. Today I will review the process of meditation and add an additional way to maintain our concentration. Anchors can reduce frustration and deepen the experience. We learn to let go of our mental distractions and become non-attached to the mind. In this way, we learn to surrender our fears and anxieties and become free in the moment.

The first element of the mind to let go, or surrender, is the expectation that something needs to happen when we meditate. It is wise to understand that we may not experience an epiphany or a high state. Sometimes this can happen, but most of the time, it does not. I have a cartoon in my office that can help clarify what you can expect in meditation. Two monks in robes are sitting in Lotus posture obviously having just finished a period of meditation. One is a master, the other is a student. The student is looking at the master with an inquisitive look on his face and the caption from the master is, "Nothing happens next, this is it."

The lesson to understand from this cartoon is to let go of any expectations that anything special has to happen when we meditate. We sit with the intention to be here, right now, in the present moment without judging it or wanting to change it. We try as best as we can to let go of the mind's impulse to wander off. The past is over, the future does not exist, so wisdom entails we be present in the only moment in which we can be alive, which is right now. We let go of and surrender everything else.

I will guide you now through your second experience of meditation, but this time, I will add another anchor. The instructions will be repetitive, but not exactly the same as last time. Please commit fifteen minutes to this exercise. Plan for time when you won't be interrupted. To begin, sit upright in a chair with your hand placed below your naval. Allow your feet to rest on the floor. Breathe in through your nose drawing air past your

chest and into your belly. Feel the belly expand on the inhale and contract on the exhale. Follow your breath in and out trying as best as you can to focus only on the process of breathing. This will work for a couple of breath cycles and then a thought will come into your mind. This is normal. Don't get discouraged that the mind wanders off. The instructions are very simple when this happens. When a thought enters your mind, you notice the thought, but you deliberately return your attention back to your breathing. Your breath has now become an anchor, a tool you can use to redirect the focus of your attention back to the present moment.

The second anchor that we can add at this point is the expression, "And this too." When your mind wanders off away from your breathing you direct it back to the present moment by letting go of the thought using the expression, "And this too." Every thought, without exception, is given over to the universe with the silent prayer, "And this too." You can let go of your thinking to the universe, or if you feel comfortable, surrender all thoughts over to God. "And this too" over and over again as you feel your breathing. Each and every thought, good or bad, is surrendered with, "And this too." In Walden, Henry David Thoreau said, "Only that day dawns to which we are awake." Surrendering and letting go of our thinking means to wake up and live our lives to their fullest potential.

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