

Getting into the Gap

Today is the third in a series of articles on mindfulness. To review, mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment without judgment. We practice mindfulness with the intention to reduce stress and improve health. It requires us to focus on the only moment in which we are alive, which is right now. The benefit of mindfulness can be illustrated by T.S. Eliot who wrote, “A condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything.”

One of the realizations discovered from mindfulness is that you are not your mind. When I mentioned this concept in the last article several people have asked me to clarify what I meant. When we focus on the present moment, we observe our thinking. The process of watching and witnessing thoughts reveals how the mind operates. We can begin to ask questions such as: how does the mind function? What are its qualities? When you realize that the mind has operational qualities, then its function can be seen as a tool. When viewed as a tool, you no longer have to identify with the mind as who you are. This revelation is empowering because if your mind wanders into thinking fearful thoughts, you can make a correction that resolves the fear.

Let's explore this process in greater detail by considering a quote from *A Course in Miracles*. The quote is, “Thoughts are reliable, but not necessarily valid.” Let me give you an example. When I was ten years old, I insisted on seeing the movie, *Jaws*. The movie poster had a caption at the bottom, “May be too intense for young children.” Well at ten years old I thought that warning would be a good thing. It wasn't. My experience with *Jaws* is best described as post traumatic stress. To this day if I am swimming, and it does not matter where, what do you think is on my mind? Yes, dear reader, a great white shark.

In these moments I will examine these thoughts and quickly understand they are reliable, but not valid. This immediately extinguishes the fear. The stream of reliable thought patterns about sharks is put into question, and seen as untrue. I am thus freed from it. This same type of thought fantasy happens to every one of us. For me it is a shark. What is it for you? A rat, or a snake, or a spider?

I will give you another more practical example. I was at the Department of Motor Vehicles this past Tuesday at 1:30 in the afternoon. There were two people sitting by me vocal about waiting. They were complaining and whining saying things like, “This is ridiculous.” They were festering anger with every passing minute. I could discern that their thinking about waiting was causing their upset.

I became mindful in that moment and I took a step back and examined the situation. What I discovered was obvious. If you're at the DMV in the middle of the afternoon, what do you anticipate? What would meet your natural expectations? Wouldn't it be normal to be waiting? Does it help to argue with waiting? On which planet is there a DMV in which you don't have to wait? All humor aside, wouldn't it be healthier and less stressful to embrace the situation? The mindful way to act is to say, “Here I am at the

DMV, waiting. I think I will take a deep breath and relax.” I don’t have to get upset if I can be mindful.

Another interesting quality of the mind is you can’t make it stop. The mind has a mind of its own. You can’t stop your thinking. If I say to you, “Don’t think about a purple camel.” What happens? Naturally, a purple camel will pop up in your mind. The discovery made here is your mind is uncontrollable and spontaneous. It is not the real you. If you were your mind, and you told it to stop thinking, it would obey you. Try telling your mind to stop thinking. It will not listen. It will go right on thinking. This is an amazing discovery. What it means is you are the witness and observer to your mind, but not the thoughts themselves.

If you want to reduce stress in your life, understand that you are the witness to stressful thinking, but not the thinking. The thinking that causes stress is reliable, but not valid. Put into this context, you need be afraid of nothing. The challenge for people is they think that they are their mind, and so they identify with stressful thoughts. As I have just illustrated, we all have a scary story, but realize it is just a story.

Mindfulness shows us a space or gap just prior to a thought. We can see thoughts as they arise and notice the gap that allows us to question their validity. To become aware of this gap, try this mindfulness exercise. Place your hand below your navel and breathe into your belly. Feel your hand move out as you pull air down past your chest into your belly. Feel the belly expand on the inhale and contract on the exhale. Now repeat the following question to yourself silently, “I wonder what my next thought is going to be?” Repeat this sentence slowly over and over to yourself for five minutes. “I wonder what my next thought is going to be?” As you repeat this question, watch what happens. Chances are your mind will quiet down for the first time in your life. This is the silent space in which creation unfolds. Reliable, but this time, valid.

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