

The Foundation of Mindfulness Practice: Attitudes & Commitment

John
Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D.

From:

FULL CATASTROPHE LIVING: USING THE WISDOM OF YOUR BODY
AND MIND TO FACE STRESS, PAIN, AND ILLNESS

Mindfulness In Biz

A Contemporary Fable: Up-stream/Downstream

By Donald Ardell

It was many years ago that the villagers of Downstream recall spotting the first body in the river. Some old timers remember how Spartan were the facilities and procedures for managing that sort of thing. Sometimes, they say, it would take hours to pull 10 people from the river, and even then only a few would survive.

Though the number of victims in the river has increased greatly in recent years, the good folks of Downstream have responded admirably to the challenge. Their rescue system is clearly second to none: most people discovered in the swirling waters are reached within 20 minutes – many less than 10. Only a small number drown each day before help arrives – a big improvement from the way it used to be.

Talk to the people of Downstream and they'll speak with pride about the new hospital by the edge of the water, the flotilla of rescue boats ready for service at a moments notice, the comprehensive health plans for coordinating all the manpower involved, and the large numbers of highly trained and dedicated swimmers always ready to risk their lives to save victims from the raging currents. Sure it costs a lot but, say the Downstreamers, what else can decent people do except to provide whatever is necessary when human lives are at stake.

Oh, a few people in Downstream have raised the question now and again, but most folks show little interest in what's happening Upstream. It seems there's so much to do to help those in the river that nobody's got time to check how all those bodies are getting there in the first place. That's the way things are, sometimes.

Meditation - simple but not easy

FIVE STEPS TO MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

Basic meditation, the practice of doing nothing and being tuned in to your own mind at the same time, can be frustrating at first. But research shows it reduces stress and increases focus.



1.

Sit cross-legged on a cushion on the floor or in a chair. Keep your back straight and let your shoulders drop. Take a deep breath and close your eyes if you wish.



2.

Notice your breath. Don't change your breathing, but focus on the sensation of air moving in and out of your lungs.



3.

As thoughts come into your mind and distract you from your breathing, acknowledge those thoughts and then return to focusing on your breathing each time.



4.

Don't judge yourself or try to ignore distractions. Your job is simply to notice that your mind has wandered and to bring your attention back to your breathing.

5.

Start by doing this 10 minutes a day for a week. The more you meditate regularly, the easier it will be to keep your attention where you want it.



Adapted from *Full Catastrophe Living*, 2nd edition, by Jon Kabat-Zinn

The Foundations of Mindfulness Practice: Attitude and Commitment

To cultivate the healing power of mindfulness requires much more than mechanically following a recipe or a set of instructions. No real process of learning is like that. It is only when the mind is open and receptive that learning and seeing and change can occur. In practicing mindfulness you will have to bring your whole being to the process. You can't just assume a meditative posture and think something will happen to you.

The attitude with which you undertake the practice of paying attention and being in the present is crucial. It is the soil in which you will be cultivating your ability to calm your mind and to relax your body, to concentrate and to see more clearly. If the attitudinal soil is depleted, that is, *if your energy and commitment to practice are low, it will be hard to develop calmness and relaxation with any consistency*. If the soil is really polluted, that is, *if you trying to force yourself to feel relaxed and demand of yourself that "something happen,"* nothing will grow at all and you will quickly conclude that "meditation doesn't work."

To cultivate meditative awareness requires an entirely new way of looking at the process of learning. Since thinking that we know what we need and where we want to get are so ingrained in our minds, we can easily get caught up in trying to control things to make them turn out "our way," the way that we want them to. But this attitude is antithetical to the work of awareness and healing. *Awareness requires only that we pay attention and see things as they are. It doesn't require that we change anything.* And *healing requires receptivity and acceptance, a tuning to connectedness and wholeness. None of this can be forced,* just as you cannot force yourself to go to sleep. You have to create the right conditions for falling asleep and then you have to let go. The same is true for relaxation. It cannot be achieved through force of will. That kind of effort will only produce tension and frustration.

If you come to the meditation practice thinking to yourself, "This won't work but I'll do it anyway," the chance are it will not be very helpful. The first time you feel any pain or discomfort, you will be able to say to yourself, "See, I knew my pain wouldn't go away," or "I knew I wouldn't be able to concentrate," and that will confirm your suspicion that it wasn't going to work and you will drop it.

If you come as a "true believer," certain that this is the right path for you, that meditation is "the answer," the chances are you will soon become disappointed too. As soon as you find that you are the same person you always were and that this work requires effort and consistency and not just a romantic belief in the value of meditation or relaxation, you may find yourself with considerably less enthusiasm than before.

In the stress class, we find that those people who come with a skeptical but open attitude do the best. Their attitude is *"I don't know whether this will work*

or not, I have my doubts, but I am going to give it my best shot and see what happens.”

So the attitude that we bring to the practice of mindfulness will to a large extent determine is *long-term value* to us. This is why consciously cultivating certain attitudes can be very helpful in getting the most out of the process of meditation. Your intentions set the stage for what is possible. They remind you from moment to moment of why you are practicing in the first place.

Keeping particular attitudes in mind is actually part of the training itself, a way of directing and channeling your energies so that they can be most effectively brought to bear in the work of growing and healing.

Seven attitudinal factors constitute the major pillars of mindfulness practice as we teach it in the stress class. They are non-judging, patience, a beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go. These attitudes are to be cultivated consciously when you practice. They are not independent of each other. Each one relies on and influences the degree to which you are able to cultivate the others. Working on any one will rapidly lead you to the others. Since together they constitute the foundation upon which you will be able to build a strong meditation practice of your own, we are introducing them before you encounter the techniques themselves so that you can become familiar with these attitudes from the very beginning. Once you are engaged in the ways you might continue to fertilize this attitudinal soil so that your mindfulness practice will flourish.

THE ATTITUDINAL FOUNDATION OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

1. *Non-judging*

Mindfulness is cultivated by assuming the stance of an *impartial witness to your own experience*. To do this requires that you become *aware of the constant stream of judging and reacting to inner and outer experiences that we are all normally caught up in, and learn to step back from it*. When we begin practicing paying attention to the activity of our own mind, it is common to discover and to be surprised by the fact that we are constantly generating judgments about our experience. Almost everything we see is *labeled and categorized by the mind*. We react to everything we experience in terms of what we think its value is to us. Some things, people, and events are judged as “good” because they make us feel good for some reason. Others are equally quickly condemned as “bad” because they make us feel bad. The rest is categorized as “neutral” because we don't think it has much relevance. Neutral things, people, and events are almost completely turned out of our consciousness. We usually find them the most boring to give attention to.

This habit of categorizing and judging our experience locks us into mechanical reactions that we are not even aware of and that often have no objective basis at all. *These judgments tend to dominate our minds, making it difficult for us ever to find any peace within ourselves*. It's as if the mind were a yo-yo, going up and down on the string of our own judging thoughts all day long. If you

doubt this description of your mind, just observe how much you are preoccupied with liking and disliking, say during a ten-minute period as you go about your business.

If we are to find a more effective way of handling the stress in our lives, the first thing we will need to do is to be aware of the automatic judgements so that we can see through our own prejudices and fears and liberate ourselves from their tyranny.



When practicing mindfulness, it is important to recognize this judging quality of mind when it appears and to intentionally assume the stance of an impartial witness by reminding yourself to just observe it. When you find the mind judging, you don't have to stop it from doing that. All that is required is to be aware of it happening. No need to judge the judging and make matters even more complicated for yourself.

As an example, let's say you are practicing watching your breathing. At a certain point you may find your mind saying something like, "This is boring," or "This isn't working," or "I can't do this." These are judgements. When they come up in your mind, it is very important to recognize them as judgemental thinking and remind yourself that the practice involves suspending judgment and just watching whatever comes up, including your own judging thoughts, without pursuing them or acting on them in any way. Then proceed with watching your breathing.

2. *Patience*

Patience is a form of wisdom. It demonstrates that we understand and accept the fact that sometimes things must unfold in their own time. A child may try to

help a butterfly to emerge by breaking open its chrysalis. Usually the butterfly doesn't benefit from this. Any adult knows that the butterfly can only emerge in its own time, that the process cannot be hurried.

In the same way we cultivate patience toward our own minds and bodies when practicing mindfulness. We intentionally remind ourselves that there is no need to be impatient with ourselves because we find the mind judging all the time, or because we are tense or agitated or frightened, or because we have been practicing for some time and nothing positive seems to have happened. *We give ourselves room to have these experiences.* Why? Because we are having them anyway! When they come up, they are our reality, they are part of our life unfolding in this moment. So we treat ourselves as well as we would treat the butterfly. Why rush through some moments to get to other, "better" ones? After all, each one is your life in that moment.

When you practice being with yourself in this way, you are bound to find that your mind has "a mind of its own." *One of the mind favourite activities is to wander into the past and into the future and lose itself in thinking.* Some of its thoughts are pleasant. Others are painful and anxiety producing. In either case thinking itself exerts a strong pull on our awareness. *Much of the time our thoughts overwhelm our perception of the present moment. They cause us to lose our connection to the present.*



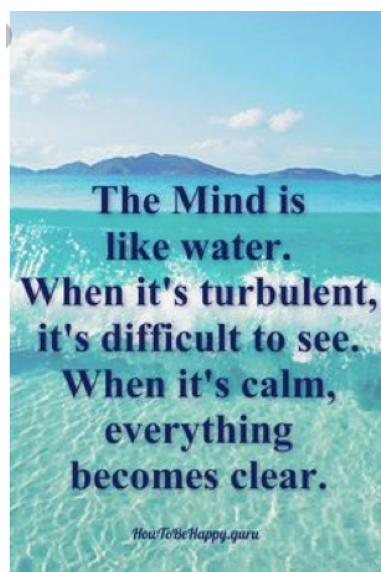
Patience can be a particularly helpful quality to invoke when the mind is agitated. It can help us to accept this wandering tendency of the mind while reminding us that we don't have to get caught up in its travels. *Practicing patience reminds us that we don't have to fill up our moments with activity and with more thinking in order for them to be rich.* In fact it helps us to remember that quite the opposite is true. To be patient is simply to be completely open to each moment, accept it in its fullness, knowing that, like the butterfly, things can only unfold in their own time.

3. *Beginner's Mind*

The richness of present-moment experience is the richness of life itself. Too often we let our thinking and our beliefs about what we "know" prevent us from seeing things as they really are. *We tend to take the ordinary for granted*

and fail to grasp the extraordinariness of the ordinary. To see the richness of the present moment, we need to cultivate what had been called “beginner’s mind,” a mind that is willing to see everything as if for the first time.

This attitude will be particularly important when we practice the formal meditation techniques. Whatever particular technique we might be using whether it is the body scan or the sitting meditation or the yoga, we should *bring our beginner’s mind with us each time we practice so that we can be free of our expectations based on our past experiences. An open, “beginner’s” mind allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in the rut of our own expertise,* which often thinks it knows more than it does. No moment is the same as any other. Each is unique and contains unique possibilities. Beginner’s mind reminds us of the simple truth.



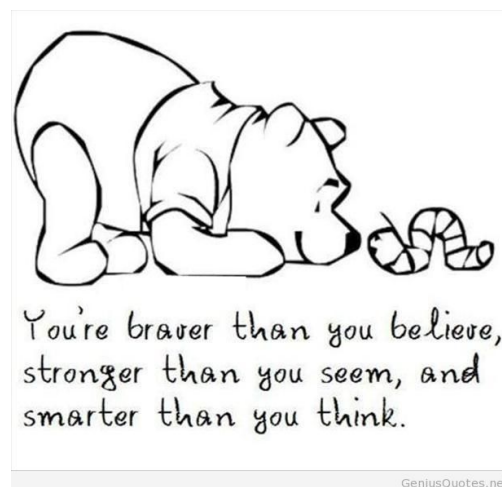
You might try to cultivate your own beginner’s mind in your daily life as an experiment. The next time you see somebody who is familiar to you, ask yourself if you are seeing this person with fresh eyes, as he or she really is, or if you are only seeing the reflection of your own thoughts about this person. Try it with anyone. Try it with problems when they arise. Try it when you are outdoors. Are you able to see the sky, the stars, the trees, and really see them as they are right now with a clear and uncluttered mind? Or are you actually only seeing them through the veil of your own thoughts and opinions?

4. *Trust*

Developing a basic trust in yourself and your feelings is an integral part of meditation training. *It is far better to trust in your intuition and you own authority, even if you make some “mistakes” along the way,* than always to look outside of yourself for guidance. If at any time something doesn’t feel right to you, why not honor your feelings? Why should you discount them or write them off as invalid because some authority or some group of people think or say differently. This attitude of *trusting yourself and your own basic*

wisdom and goodness is very important in all aspects of the meditation practice.

Some people who get involved in meditation get so caught up in the reputation and authority of their teachers that they don't honor their own feelings and intuition. They believe that their teacher must be a much wiser and more advanced person, so they think they should imitate him and do what he says without question and venerate him as a model of perfect wisdom. This attitude is completely contrary to the spirit of meditation, which emphasizes being your own person and understanding what it means to be yourself. *Anybody who is imitating somebody else, no matter who it is, is heading in the wrong direction.*



It is impossible to become like somebody else. *Your only hope is to become more fully yourself.* That is the reason for practicing meditation in the first place. Teachers and books can only be guides, signposts. *It is important to be open and receptive what you can learn from other sources, but ultimately you still have to live your own life, every moment of it.* In practicing mindfulness, you are practicing taking responsibility for being yourself and learning to listen and trust your own being. *The more you cultivate this trust in your own being, the easier you will find it will be to trust other people more and to see their basic goodness as well.*

5. *Non-striving*

Almost everything we do we do for a purpose, to get something or somewhere. But in meditation this attitude can be a real obstacle. That is because meditation is different from all other human activities. Although it takes a lot of work and energy of a certain kind, *ultimately meditation is non-doing. It has no goal other than for you to be yourself.* The irony is that you already are. This sounds paradoxical and a little crazy. Yet this paradox and craziness may be pointing you toward a new way of seeing yourself, one in which you are trying less and being more. This comes from intentionally cultivating the attitude of non-striving.

For example, if you sit down and meditate and you think, “I am going to get relaxed, or get enlightened, or control my pain, or become a better person,” then you have introduced an idea into your mind of where you should be, and along with *it comes the notion that you are not okay right now*. “If I were only more calm, or more intelligent, or a harder worker, or more this or more that, if only my heart were healthier or my knee were better, then I would be okay. But right now, I am not okay.”

This attitude undermines the cultivation of mindfulness, which involves simply paying attention to whatever is happening. If you are tense, then just pay attention to the tension. If you are in pain, then be with the pain as best you can. If you are criticizing yourself, then observe the activity of the judging mind. Just watch. Remember, we are simply allowing anything and everything that we experience from moment to moment to be here, because it already is. In the meditative domain, *the best way to achieve your own goals is to back off from striving for results and instead to start focusing carefully on seeing and accepting things as they are, moment by moment*. With patience and regular practice, movement toward your goals will take place by itself. This movement becomes an unfolding that you are inviting to happen within you.

6. *Acceptance*

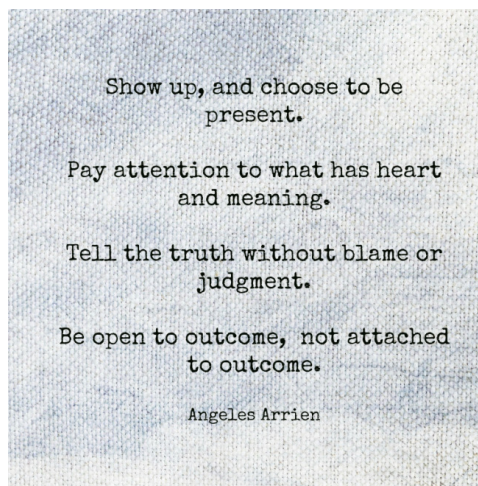
Acceptance means seeing things as they actually are in the present. If you have a headache, accept that you have a headache. If you are overweight, why not accept it as a description of your body at this time? Sooner or later we have to come to terms with things as they are and accept them, whether it is a diagnosis of cancer or learning of someone’s death. Often acceptance is only reached after we have gone through very emotion-filled periods of denial and then anger. These stages are a natural progression in the process of coming to terms with what is. They are all part of the healing process.

However, putting aside for the moment the major calamities that usually take a great deal of time to heal from, *in the course of our daily lives we often waste a lot of energy denying and resisting what is already fact. When we do that, we are basically trying to force situations to be the way we would like them to be, which only makes for more tension. This actually prevents positive change from occurring*. We may be so busy denying and forcing and struggling that we have little energy left for *healing and growing*, and what little we have may be dissipated by our lack of awareness and intentionality.

If you are overweight and feel bad about your body, it’s no good to wait until you are the weight you think you should be before you start liking your body and yourself. At a certain point, if you don’t want to remain stuck in a frustrating vicious cycle, you might realize that it is all right to love yourself at the weight that you are now because this is the only time you can love yourself. Remember, now is the only time you have for anything. You have to accept yourself as you are before you can really change.

When you start thinking this way, losing weight become less important. It also becomes a lot easier. *By intentionally cultivating acceptance, you are creating the preconditions for healing.*

Acceptance does not mean that you have to like everything or that you have to take a passive attitude toward everything and abandon your principles and values. It does not mean that you are satisfied with things as they are or that you are resigned to tolerating things as they “have to be.” It does not mean that you should stop trying to break free of your own self-destructive habits or to give up on your desire to change and grow, or that you should tolerate injustice, for instance, or avoid getting involved in changing world around you because it is the way it is and therefore hopeless. *Acceptance as we are speaking of it simply means that you have come around to a willingness to see things as they are. This attitude sets the stage for acting appropriately in your life, no matter what is happening.* You are much more likely to know what to do and have the inner conviction to act when you have a clear picture of what is actually happening than when your vision is clouded by your mind’s self-serving judgements and desires or its fears and prejudices.



In the meditation practice, we cultivate acceptance by taking each moment as it comes and being with it fully, as it is. We try not to impose our ideas about what we should be feeling or thinking or seeing on our experience but just remind ourselves to be receptive and open to whatever we are feeling, thinking, or seeing, and to accept it because it is here right now. If we are attending to in this moment will change, giving us the opportunity to practice accepting whatever it is that will emerge in the next moment. Clearly there is wisdom in cultivating acceptance.

7. *Letting Go*

They say that in India there is a particularly clever way of catching monkeys. As the story goes, hunters will cut a hole in a coconut that is just big enough for a monkey to put its hand through. Then they will drill two smaller holes in the other end, pass a wire through, and secure the coconut to the base of a

tree. Then they put a banana inside the coconut and hide. The monkey comes down, puts his hand in and takes hold of the banana. The hole is crafted so that the open hand can go in but the fist cannot get out. All the monkey has to do to be free is to let go of the banana. But it seems most monkeys don't let go.

Often our minds get us caught in very much the same way in spite of all our intelligence. For this reason, cultivating the attitude of letting go, or non-attachment, is fundamental to the practice of mindfulness. *When we start paying attention to our inner experiences, we rapidly discover that there are certain thoughts and feeling and situations that the mind seems to want to hold on to.* If they are pleasant, we try to prolong these thoughts or feelings or situations, stretch them out, and conjure them up again and again.

Similary there are many thoughts and feelings and experiences that we try to get rid of or to prevent and protect ourselves from having because that are unpleasant and painful and frightening in one way or another.

In the meditation practice we intentionally put aside the tendency to elevate some aspects of our experience and to reject others. Instead we just let our experience be what it is and practice observing it from moment to moment. *Letting go is a way of letting things be, of accepting things as they are. When we observe our own mind grasping and pushing away, we remind ourselves to let go of those impulses on purpose,* just to see what will happen if we do. When we find ourselves judging our own experience, we *let go of those judging thoughts.* We recognize them and we just don't pursue them any further. We let them be, and in doing so we let them go. Similarly when thoughts of the past or of the future come up, we let go of them. We just watch.

**Tranquility is a Choice.
So is Anxiety.
The entire world around us
may be in Turmoil.
But if we want to be
Peaceful within,
WE CAN.**



If we find it particularly difficult to let go of something because it has such a strong hold over our mind, we can direct our attention to what "holding on"

feels like. Holding on is the opposite of letting go. We can become an expert on our own attachments, whatever they may be and their consequences in our lives, as well as how it feels in those moments when we finally do let go and what the consequences of that are. Being willing to look at the ways we hold on ultimately shows us a lot about the experience of its opposite. So whether we “successful” at letting go or not, mindfulness continues to teach us if we are willing look.

Letting go is not such a foreign experience. We do it every night when we go to sleep. We lie down on a padded surface, with the lights out, in a quiet place, and we let go of our mind and body. If you can’t let go, you can’t go to sleep.

Most of us have experienced times when the mind would just not shut down when we got into bed. This is one of the first signs of elevated stress. At these times we may be unable to free ourselves to sleep, it just makes things worse. So if you can go to sleep, you are already an expert in letting go. Now you just need to practice applying this skill in waking situations as well.

Themes of the Program

Session 1

No matter what challenges you are facing, challenges and difficulties are workable. Mindful awareness, defined as paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally, is fundamental to this work since the present moment is the only time anyone ever has to perceive, learn, grow or change.

Session 2

Perception and creative responding: how you see things (or don't see them) will determine in large measure how you will respond to them. This ties in with how people see their participation in the program; how they see their pain, their illness; the stress and pressures in their lives; the level of commitment they will bring to the program and to the personal discipline it requires. Make the connection to stress reactivity and recovery from acute stressors, and the principle that "It's not the stressors per se, but how you handle them" which influences the short and long-term health effects they may have on your mind and your body.

Session 3

There is pleasure and power in being present. Attending to and investigating the way things are in the body and mind in the present moment through the practices of meditation. Noticing the tendency of the mind to label events as pleasant or unpleasant, the way we push away what is unpleasant and grasp what we perceive to be pleasant, and the role of conditioning. Questioning of our relationship to self-narratives and fixed ideas and opinions about the nature of reality as personally experienced. Recognition that we can have pleasant moments in spite of being in a crisis or in pain, and unpleasant moments in situations that would normally be perceived as pleasurable.

Session 4

How conditioning and perception shape our experience. By practicing mindfulness, we cultivate curiosity and openness to the full range of experience and through this process cultivate a more flexible attentional capacity. We learn new ways to relate to stressful moments and events, whether external or internal. Exploration of mindfulness as a means of reducing the negative effects of stress reactivity as well as the development of more effective ways of responding positively and pro-actively to stressful situations and experiences. The physiological and psychological bases of stress reactivity are reviewed and in-depth discussion is directed toward the use of mindfulness as a way of working with, reducing, and recovering more quickly from stressful situations and experiences. Daily practice aimed at recognizing and experientially inquiring into reactive patterns.

Session 5

Awareness of being stuck in one's life, highlighting the conditioned patterns of escape from difficulty (i.e. fight and flight – stress reactivity/automaticity/mindlessness.) Investigation of the ways people often

cope by escape or denial – naming the shadow side of our conditioned coping patterns: substance dependency, numbing and suppression of feelings. Honoring that these coping methods may have been protective and supported survival, and are now counter-evolutionary and limiting, if not destructive.

Connect mindfulness with perception/appraisal in the critical moment, and with the arising of reactive physical sensations, emotions, cognitions and behaviors. Emphasis on attentiveness to the capacity to respond than to react to stressful situations. Explore the effect of emotional reactivity in health and illness. Learning to honor the full range of emotions and when called for, to express them with clarity and respect for self and other.

Session 6

Stressful communication; knowing your feelings; expressing your feelings accurately; developing a greater awareness of interpersonal communication patterns; and barriers to doing so. Interpersonal mindfulness: staying aware and balanced in relationships, especially under conditions of acute or chronic stress, the strong expectations of others, past habits of emotional expression/suppression and the presentation of self in everyday life. Based on the skills that we have been developing through the entire program, emphasize cultivating the capacity to be more flexible and to recover more rapidly during challenging interpersonal situations.



THE GUEST HOUSE

BY RUMI

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.