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Mindfulness: Meditative Awareness

“The purpose of a meditation practice is not enlightenment; it is to pay attention even at un-extraordinary times, to be of the present, nothing-but-the-present, to bear this mindfulness of now into each event of ordinary life.”

~Peter Matthiessen, The Snow Leopard

Have you ever:

Looked up at the night sky and marveled at the stars and planets?

Tasted a fresh strawberry or red tomato right off the vine?

Become so absorbed in the melody and rhythm of some music that you lose your sense of self?

Sat on the bank of a river, watching the flow of the water...entering into a state of stillness?

If so, you have already experienced a state of mindfulness...of meditative awareness...where attention expands and touches something much vaster than the limits of our own being.

Human beings have experienced such magnificence long before there was language. So mindfulness and deep awareness have truly been around for thousands of years...it's nothing new.

Mindfulness is about being fully awake in our lives and being aware of whatever is happening in the present moment – without judgment. Mindfulness is about cultivating a curiosity about ourselves and about who we are – being curious about how we view our world and our place in it...and about appreciating the fullness of each moment that we are given on this earth. Mindfulness is about paying attention in a particular and very important way: on purpose and in the present moment, with kindness and compassion. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, calm and acceptance of what is happening in this moment – the only moment we have.

Mindfulness itself is a simple concept – its power lies in the practice of mindfulness and its relevance to our daily lives. It is the exact opposite of losing touch with ourselves and falling into an automatic pilot sort of living style – where we lose contact with what is deepest in ourselves – what allows our creativity, learning and growing to flourish. If we're not alert and careful, these “mindless” moments can become our lives. And if we aren't present for these moments – each moment – we may miss not only what is valuable and precious in our lives...but we may fail to realize the richness and depth of our possibility for growth and transformation in our lifetime.

While the first written records of mindfulness originated in ancient Buddhist practice, mindfulness in its purest sense has nothing to do with Buddhism and certainly nothing to do with becoming Buddhist. Mindfulness has everything to do with waking up and living in harmony and connection with oneself and the world. There is nothing religious about mindfulness...it is universal and open to everyone.

Mindfulness offers us a simple yet powerful way for bringing ourselves back in touch with our own wisdom and aliveness. Mindfulness gives us a way, a means, to take charge of the direction and the quality of our lives – including our experience of daily life, our relationships at home and at work, and our



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connection with the larger world and the planet...and of course, our relationship with ourselves as the person we are.

In its simplicity, mindfulness is a practical way to be more in touch with the fullness of life and your own experience of life through a process of self-observation, self-inquiry and mindful action. Mindfulness is gentle, understanding, nurturing, appreciative and loving. Another word for mindfulness might be “heartfulness.”

Mindfulness Meditation is simplicity itself. It is the development of your capacity for the richness of life. It is not about some weird activity that brings a blank mind and or an “out of it” sort of behavior. Rather, meditation is about stopping and being present – bringing awareness and acceptance to the present moment. Meditation is the practice of mindfulness – of being present to “now”, this moment, non-judgmentally. It is simply being yourself, just as you are, and beginning to know something about that person. Meditation is about coming to realize you are on a journey and that journey is your life...as it is unfolding moment by moment.

The practice of meditation – which, by the way, does not mean rehearsal...but rather a systematic way of nurturing presence – strengthens and anchors the skills of mindfulness and of reducing the stress of bombarding and negative thoughts and feelings. We call the effort to cultivate our ability to be in the present moment “practice” or “meditation practice”. There is formal meditation and informal meditation. Formal meditation involves a specific time set aside to devote to sitting meditation, walking meditation, yoga or a mindful type of movement or body scan. Informal meditation is being aware of all the other moments in life – for example, from washing dishes to folding laundry to noticing a sadness or an experience of joy.

Meditation will assist you in returning, again and again, to yourself and to what you truly love and care about. It is your path to becoming present and inhabiting your body – and from this place of awareness, to make wise and informed choices – for example about food and eating.

Who does mindfulness benefit? Anyone who wants a life lived with purpose and deep awareness. In a more specific way, the most current scientific studies inform us that mindfulness benefits people suffering from pain, stress and illness. Mindfulness-based approaches have been effective in decreasing symptoms of anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and chronic pain. Studies also have proven mindfulness to decrease the effects of psoriasis, increase a sense of empathy, compassion and well-being and help prevent relapse in depression and addiction. Mindfulness approaches also increase the quality of life for those struggling with breast cancer or prostate cancer. Studies have also proven mindfulness to reduce headaches, blood pressure and digestive difficulties as well as improve sleep and restfulness. Mindfulness is also being currently studied as a treatment for specific PTSD symptoms.

Studies have also shown mindfulness to increase and strengthen compassion and the ability to accept one’s experiences with kindness and understanding. These studies point to a very positive connection between self-compassion and achieving a healthy weight. Many people use food to ease discomfort, to relieve anxiety and stress and to lessen the impact and power of upsetting emotions. Practicing mindfulness and self-kindness – adopting a non-judgmental attitude in the face of eating behaviors can



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lead to a deeper understanding of why we eat and offer more effective coping tools in dealing with food and eating issues in our lives.

Today there are over 250 mindfulness-based stress reduction programs in major medical centers throughout the United States as well as programs all over the world. Mindfulness is being introduced into patient care as well as the lives of medical professionals and caregivers, education, jails, inner city organizations and many other social settings. Parenting mindfully has been written about, studied and proven to be effective in increasing attunement or connection and closeness between parent and child and teacher and child. In some schools in the United States children are meditating...and loving it. There seems to be no end to the benefits of mindfulness and the practice of mindfulness meditation.

Mindfulness practice means that we commit to leaving behind our loyalty to our suffering and open to committing fully in each moment to being present. We don't meditate to improve ourselves or to get anywhere – or to 'make ourselves' be non-judgmental, calm or relaxed. And we're not running after something that we think we don't have. The truth is we have everything we need, just as we are. Mindfulness is about "being" rather than "doing". We are simply inviting ourselves to immerse ourselves in the present moment with full awareness and to embody, as best we can, a perspective and approach of calmness, compassion and peace.

The spirit of mindfulness is to practice for its own sake, not expecting an outcome and not setting a goal...rather, allowing insights, realizations and changes to happen in their own time and in their own way. With this attitude, life itself can become your practice – your meditation teacher and guide.