



meditation 101

Clear your mind, and the rest will follow.

written by Nancy Wozny
photography by Sean Fitzpatrick/The Jung Center

Learning how to meditate has been on my “to do” list for some time. Therein lies the problem. How can I live in the moment when I am already exhausted just by looking at my schedule for the week? Plus, I have to admit, I’ve had some fears. Will I be thinking about all the things I could be doing instead of meditating? Will I get bored? Will my back hurt from sitting still so long? Do I have to become Buddhist? What if I try to empty my mind and find there’s nothing there?

All of my concerns and more were addressed by Micki Fine, a Mindfulness Meditation teacher, during a recent introductory session at the Jung Center. In fact, just entering the center’s arched doorways and taking in the calm atmosphere made me think that mindfulness was already in motion. Fine has a way of letting students know that wherever they find themselves is a good place to start. And that includes incredibly high-strung, anxious, type-A people like myself.

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According to Fine, our “do more, have more, be more” culture exists in opposition to living in the moment. “We miss so much of our lives because we are not paying attention,” Fine says. “In mindfulness, we practice paying attention on purpose.” I’m all for that; living on auto-pilot seems a dicey prospect at best. I am amazed at how many others admit to driving home and not remembering how they got there. I thought I was the only person on earth who multitasks, lives 10 steps ahead of herself and spends too much of her life on cruise control.

Fine likes to give her students a break. “Our minds are designed to default into

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our habits,” she says. “When we are in the shower, the mind can be doing something completely different. That’s part of human nature.” We are born mindful. Just spend some time with a toddler, and you will see each moment unfold one after another with little attachment to the past or future. The trouble with living on automatic is that we are not living our own lives as if they mattered. It doesn’t help that our culture is fixated on the

next big thing. “We’re becoming human doings instead of human beings,” Fine says. “We are not simply in our lives.”

MEETING MINDFULNESS

We live in a world obsessed with busyness. The never-a-dull moment lifestyle has a way of catching up with us through stress and its effects on our health. Fine made her point by handing out two raisins to each participant. She

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asked us to eat each raisin as if we were from Mars and had never seen or tasted a raisin. I began by carefully observing my raisins. If you crinkle your raisin near your ear you can even listen to your raisin. Finally we got to taste the raisin. I felt my whole body meeting this sweet rush, my blood sugar rising and silently wishing I could eat the whole box. That was the mindless eating we all experience when we are not in the “raisin” moment. Each time our mind wandered away from the raisin, Fine suggested we come back. It felt a bit like taming our unruly attention. Fine called this process looking with “bare attention.”

It’s easy living in the moment when we are standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, when we have one of those “I am so here” moments. But what about the billions of other less spectacular moments? How do we inhabit the whole of our lives?

Mindfulness Meditation was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, author of the books *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Wherever You Go There You Are* and his most recent book, *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*. Kabat-Zinn’s Westernization of Buddhist practices made enormous

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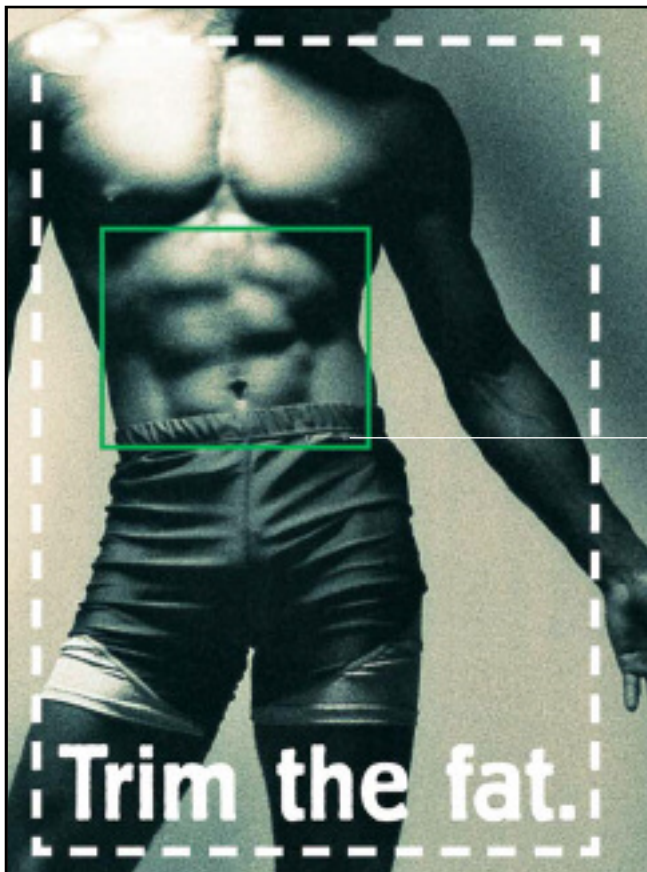
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strides in bringing meditation to the medical community. In 1979, Kabat-Zinn founded The Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. The research in peer-reviewed journals is vast, covering the effect of meditation on everything from blood pressure to heart disease.

Fine has studied extensively with Kabat-Zinn and considers teaching meditation her calling and vocation. Because mindfulness teaches meditation independent of the ideological and religious frameworks out of which

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these meditative practices emerged, it is particularly user-friendly.

LEARNING MORE

Next, Fine had us lie down as she gently led us through an inventory of our sensations she called a body scan. Our breath became the channel that is always on and ready to serve as a focal point. The act of simply stopping and observing felt good in and of itself. I

wasn't even officially meditating, and already I felt better: calm, relaxed and at ease with myself.

Fine was quick to dispel the myths surrounding meditation. "One of the worst is that meditation is some esoteric practice, and if I hold my fingers in a certain position, I will be in nirvana," Fine says. "Meditation can be anything if you pay nonjudgmental, moment-to-moment attention to what's



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going on. Eating, bathing or walking can all be forms of meditation.”

Another myth is that you are clearing your mind and that the goal is to have an empty mind. “Mindfulness is about knowing the mind. It’s OK when the mind wanders,” she says. “We notice that and bring it back.” It’s in these moments that we get to know the mind more intimately and become more forgiving, compassionate and accepting of our own humanity, she adds.

Meditation is all about relaxation, right? Not exactly. Relaxation may very well be a byproduct of the process, but it’s not the goal in and of itself. The harder we try to relax, the more difficult it becomes. Relaxation comes as a result of not trying to get anywhere at all. I must say I did feel relaxed after each session of mindfulness, but it wasn’t a zombie-ish feeling like I had spent an hour in a hot tub. I felt at ease but also alert and attentive to the world around me.

MEDITATION ON THE MOVE

After the body scan, we tried a walking meditation. Fine likes to ease people into the process. For beginners, it’s nice to have something to do because being alone with our minds can be a frightful prospect. A guided meditation with some instruction calms the fears of the “What should I do next?” types. With guided meditation, her soothing voice can ease us into the quiet and wonder of our own perceptions.

“Taking a class is also an excellent way to start,” Fine says. “When people meditate together, people feel it more intensely.” I definitely felt the support of the group. There’s something calming about knowing you are in a room full of like-minded people who all are trying to live more fully.

Fine also works one-on-one with people who require more individualized attention. “It takes some discipline to get your butt on the cushion every day,” Fine says. Coming to a class sets a certain commitment to practice.

Speaking of the cushion, sitting on a chair is also an option. Zoning out is not in the plan, as sitting meditation requires a kind of upright dignity to encourage wakefulness. If we notice our back is hurting, we attend to our

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discomfort without judgment. Bracing against the pain may amplify our aches. You can be present even in the midst of difficulty, and part of meditation is waking up to how we participate in our own suffering.

CONTINUED PRACTICE

Fine suggests starting with short sittings of between five and 15 minutes and working up to longer stretches. After the walking meditation, it almost seemed like a relief to be sitting, doing nothing, paying attention, watching and following my thoughts as they came and went. "Simply allow for things to

>>> Simply allow for things to be as they are...
let go of struggle.

be as they are," Fine says. "Let go of struggle."

Through continued practice, we can hope to be less reactive, relate to our family and each other differently and simply become more adaptable in a changing world.

I've started a modest practice of 10 to 15 minutes a day using a timer. Sometimes I spend the whole time running to catch my mind, reeling myself

back to the home of my body. I'm not good at this yet, and that's fine for now. I do feel different, less ahead of myself, less reactive, more attuned to the moment-to-moment unfolding of life. My life – the one I don't want to miss.

Micki Fine offers classes at the Jung Center, The Institute for Religion & Health and at her office. Learn more about mindfulness at: www.livingmindfully.org and www.umassmed.edu/cfm/index.aspx. ■

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