

Almost all cultures have practices that help people develop awareness of the moment. Each of the major religions utilize some methods to enable individuals to focus their attention, from meditation to prayer, yoga to tai'chi. Direct experience in the present moment is fundamental in Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, and Taoist teaching. Mindful awareness is a universal goal across human cultures.

The clinical application of secular mindfulness meditation skills can be taught outside religious or group membership though.

So, what is mindful awareness, or mindfulness?

**Jon Kabat-Zinn:** An operational working definition of mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.

What is meditation?

**Jack Kornfield:** Meditation is to resume our true nature and discover an enormous sense of rest and peace, a spaciousness in our heart in the midst of life; to allow ourselves to become transparent to the light that is always shining. As one Zen master says, "It is not far away. It is nearer than near."

We look toward Buddhism to discover more of what mindfulness is. Empirically, science has engaged Buddhism the host. Buddhism encourages people to take nothing on faith alone and does not require a belief in God. It also has a detailed model of the mind that translates well to psychology and neurology.

Buddhism is a non-dualistic way of thinking and being in the world.

**Thich Nhat Hahn:** In the teaching of the Buddha, we learn that our body and mind are not separate. Our body is our mind, and, at time same time, our mind is also our body. He gives the example that scientists have discovered that the nature of an elementary particle is sometimes a wave and sometimes a particle. They are different and cannot be one another, yet they are the same. The same thing is true with mind and body. Our dualistic view tells us that mind cannot be body, and body cannot be mind. But looking deeply, we see that body is mind, mind is body. If we can overcome the duality that sees the mind and body as entirely separate, we come very close to the truth.

We are usually unaware of our bodies, being on automatic pilot. Mindfulness is experiencing the sensations that arise with a focused mind. Mindfulness permits tranquility even in the face of trauma or restricted memory processes that constrain the harmony and coherence of the system of the self. It promotes resilience, which all adoptees have acquired because they have had to adapt and cope with their suffering. Suffering is not abstract or conceptual. It's *embodied*: you feel it in your body, and it proceeds through bodily mechanisms. Understanding the physical machinery of suffering will help you see it increasingly as an impersonal condition.

How do we cultivate mindfulness? One way is turning toward the breath...

Mindful breathing is the practice that can help us take care of our emotions. By becoming aware of breathing in and out we become aware of our body. Thich Nhat Hahn recommends "Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body, breathing out, I am aware of my whole body." Go back to your body. Embrace it with the energy of mindfulness generated by the practice of mindful breathing. Let's try a short mindful awareness practice of focusing on our breath

### **3 minute Breathing Exercise: An example of how our thoughts are so overpowering and carry us away from the present moment**

*Close your eyes, sit so that your back is straight but not stiff, and become aware of your breathing. Don't try to control your breathing. Just let it happen and be aware of it, feeling how it feels, witnessing it as it flows in and out. Try being with your breath in this way for three minutes.*

*If, at some point, you think that it is foolish or boring to just sit here and watch your breath go in and out, not to yourself that this is just a thought, a judgment that your mind is creating. Then simply let go of it and bring your attention back to your breathing.*

*When you have completed three minutes of watching your breath go in and out, reflect on how you felt during this time and how much or how little your mind wandered away from your breathing.*

Notice where your mind is at right now. What is happening to your body? Sense any sensations and thoughts and feelings that may have arose within you. Any one who would like to comment?

As you caught a glimpse of you thinking, meditation is not a passive process, although it brings relaxation. It takes a good deal of energy and effort to regulate your attention and to remain genuinely calm and nonreactive. There is a lot of mental and emotional activity going on beneath the surface in your mind. We are unaware of the tyranny of our own thoughts and the self-destructive behaviors they often result in. Life can be seen clearer through the lens of a clear mind. Mindfulness involves allowing yourself to be where you already are, to become more familiar with your own actual experience moment by moment. The relaxation comes by itself with continued practice.

How is this relevant for adoptees and their adoption story?

**Dan Siegel:** clinical studies of interpersonal relationships: ***Mindful awareness is a form of intrapersonal attunement.*** Being mindful is a way of becoming your own best friend. Attunement may lead the brain to grow in ways that promote balanced self-regulation via the process of *neural integration*, which enables flexibility and self-understanding. It also can create, what we call "mirror neurons" in the brain. It's a way of feeling felt, feeling connected in the world.

As stated before, mindfulness is about waking up from a life on automatic, and being sensitive to novelty in our everyday experiences (something called Beginner's mind but we will get back to that later). It involves being aware of aspects of the mind itself. We are able to make choices and thus change becomes possible. Key: ***How we focus helps directly shape the mind- our metapsychological structures.***

***Reflection on the nature of one's own mental processes is a form of "metacognition," thinking about thinking. Aware of our awareness.*** In this sense then, we can use the mind to change the brain. The prefrontal regions of our brain perform this function. The prefrontal cortex conducts the reasoning, executing functioning and when we practice mindfulness we are strengthening our neural functioning.

**Rick Hanson:** The adult brain remains open to change throughout the lifespan. This is sometimes referred to as the neuroplasticity of the brain. The brain continues to development. It's interesting that virtue, mindfulness, and wisdom are supported by the three fundamental functions of the brain: regulation, learning, and selection.

Mindful awareness is a form of self-relationship, an internal form of attunement. The mind is relational and the brain is the social organ of the body. Our social connections with one another shape our neural connections that form the structure of the brain. One way to see the structures of our mind is by attachment. There is an overlap of mindfulness and secure attachment. Attunement has the qualities of ***coherence. Attunement creates coherence in the mind. Internal attunement promotes neural integration which enables mental coherence.*** Process of creating a coherent narrative is fundamental to a secure adult attachment. This is an aspect of internal attunement that is fundamental to a mindful way of being.

One example of intrapersonal attunement is with the practice you just did of breath awareness. Instead of 3 minutes though, a longer meditation of 30 minutes every day strengthens this attunement. As with Listening through your breathing is a reference point of what's happening in the mind. A grounding point for being in the present moment. Thinking is powerful and we don't even know it. We are like the fish swimming in water. We are concerned with the content. We don't study the process of thinking itself. Look at the phenomena of thinking itself by stepping back. Like conceptual art-see the process of it.

So, the creation of a **coherent narrative** of our own life involves a "witnessing self" that is also able to observe and comment, paralleling the facts of mindful awareness. As we work through our own attachment histories, we sense the feeling of the story, observe it as our narrative and not the totality of who we are.

How does this relate to the adoption story? Not knowing who are birth parents are, where we came from, who we were born to? Not knowing the story and being prevented by knowing from denial of our birth records creates a confusion and lack of coherence within us. Does anyone have any comments about this?

**Jon Kabat-Zinn:** Learning how to stop all your doing and shift over to a “being” mode, learning how to make time for yourself, how to slow down and nurture calmness and self-acceptance in yourself, learning to observe what your own mind is up to from moment to moment, how to watch your thoughts and how to let go of them without getting so caught up and driven by them, how to make room for new ways of seeing old problems and for perceiving the interconnectedness of things, these are some of the lessons of mindfulness. This kind of learning involves settling into moments of being and cultivating awareness.

Your relationship with things starts to change. You may start seeing a connectedness between things that were not apparent before. By paying attention, you literally become more awake.

Knowing what you are doing while you are doing it is the essence of mindfulness practice. We practice mindfulness by remembering to be present in all our waking moments. In the meditative context, practice means “being in the present on purpose.” We are not trying to get somewhere else, only working at being where we already are and being here fully.

Let’s now do another form of meditation. I like this one. It’s so simple, yet so effective to cultivate mindful awareness.

### **“Eating meditation”**

*Give each person three raisins and eat them one at a time, paying attention to what we are actually doing and experiencing from moment to moment. First bring your attention to seeing the raisin, observing it carefully as if we had never seen one before. We feel its texture between our fingers and notice its colors and surfaces. We are also aware of any thoughts we might be having about raisins or food in general. We note any thoughts and feelings of liking or disliking raisins if they come up while we are looking at it. We then smell it for awhile and finally, with awareness, we bring it to our lips, being aware of the arm moving the hand to position it correctly and of salivating as the mind and body anticipate eating. The process continues as we take it into our mouth and chew it slowly, experiencing the actual taste of one raisin. And when we feel ready to swallow, we watch the impulse to swallow as it comes up, so that even that is experienced consciously. We even imagine, or “sense,” that now our bodies are one raisin heavier.*

Group question: What was your experience of this like? Please take a few minutes to share this with a person near you.

So, let’s switch gears a bit and talk about the attitudinal foundation of mindfulness practice and how this is important if an adoptee/an individual is to embrace it in every day life. It can be a path of awakening.

1. Non-judging- impartial witness, we are judging our experience, almost everything we experience we label and categorize, locks us into mechanical reactions that we are not aware of, they dominate our minds, making it

difficult for us to ever find any peace within ourselves. Adoptees are merciless at judging our situation. It isn't normal and not like the experiences of other people. Makes us unique and different. This thinking though makes us feel separate and not connected. When we feel this, it creates more disconnection and unhappiness. Once you say, "I am *this* body apart from the world," the body's frailties become your own. The world is always changing. *Everything* changes.

2. Patience-a form of wisdom. Find that your mind has a mind of it's own. Can see it as a form of compassion also. The path of awakening itself contains difficult experiences which also call for compassion. To become happier, wiser, and more loving, sometimes you have to swim against ancient currents within your nervous system.

*The root of compassion is compassion for oneself.* –Pema Chodron

3. Beginner's mind-we let our thinking and beliefs about what we "know" prevent us from seeing things as they really are. We take things in our ordinary lives for granted and fail to grasp the richness of our lives. Cultivate beginner's mind, seeing things anew and fresh. Try this: 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.
4. Trust-Trust in yourself-an integral part of this practice. Your own basic goodness and wisdom (Western culture and religion doesn't allow for this)
5. Non-striving-Meditation is different from all other human activities. Ultimately meditation is a non-doing. It is paradoxical because its goal is to be yourself and the irony is that you already are.
6. Acceptance-seeing things as they actually are in the present. We waste a lot of time in our daily lives resisting and denying what is already fact. We try to force a situation to be the way we would like it to be. You have to accept yourself as you are before you can really change. Doesn't mean you have to have a passive attitude or like everything. Acceptance simply means that you have come around to a willingness to see things as they are. This sets the stage for acting appropriately and more skillfully in your life. In 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 attend to the moment, we can be sure that this moment will change. To remind us again, the Buddha said that the only thing that is constant is change.
7. Letting Go-there are certain thoughts and feelings and situations that the mind seems to want to hold on to. If they are pleasant, we try to prolong

them or if they are negative, we try to get rid of or to prevent and protect ourselves. We can even be aware of what holding feels like and experience this with a non-judgmental and accepting mind.

**Rick Hanson:** As the saying goes, pain is inevitable but suffering is optional. If you can simply stay present with whatever is arising in awareness-whatever it is-without reacting further, then you will break the chain of suffering right there. Over time, through training and shaping your mind and brain, you can even change what arises, increasing what's positive and decreasing what's negative. In the meantime, you can rest in and be nourished by a growing sense of the peace and clarity in your true nature.

*You didn't come into this world. You came out of it, like  
a wave from the ocean. You are not a stranger here.*

- Alan Watts

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