



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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Downtime for the Stone-age Brain

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Recently, I found a meditation retreat center in rural Massachusetts. Its super-affordable price included a room of my own, and delicious, organic hippy food. As I was moving to a new city anyway, I let go of my apartment, put my stuff in storage, and went off to the center for three months. Ninety two days of silent (absolutely no talking) meditation in a cabin in the woods. There were about thirty other people there, the size of your basic hunter-gatherer tribe in the Paleolithic. Because I have been meditating for decades, I had no trouble sinking into the groove of long sits for many hours a day, every day.

But that was not all I did. The retreat center was in the woods, surrounded by trees, brush, and wildflowers. There were wild animals everywhere, as well as insects. Each day between hours of meditation, I would go for a walk and encounter birds, rabbits, raccoons, squirrels, turtles, as well as horses, dogs, and cows. Each evening I would hang out with a raft of turkeys as they settled into the branches at sunset. I ran into an otter playing in a swamp, and once even saw a lynx lope across the dirt road.

Several weeks passed in this way, and I slowly became quite happy. Every day was a good day. My brain was emptying out of thought content, and instead was filling up with silence. I noticed that the woods, too, were silent and empty. There was a congruity there—silent



mind, silent world—and I really, really liked it. I would just sit, eyes and ears and nose and skin open to nature and let its silence and openness sort of soak into me. My meditation started to fundamentally change; which after three decades is saying a lot.

That experience made me very sensitive to a condition that I call my “brain being full.” It’s a specific feeling that I have taken in enough stimulation, and now need to just go be quiet for a while. Having felt what it’s like to have all the backlog of experiences cleared out of my head, I’m intolerant of letting it build up a backlog again. It feels too good when it’s all clean and clear. Another way of talking about this is to say that the frantic, amped up feeling of too much seeking clears away. When we are seeking all the time, we are intaking new material constantly without ever actually dealing with it.

And that makes sense in terms of evolution and our ancestral environment. Our brains would have been more than adequate to handle the few exciting things that came up, and been perfectly content to sort of idle along the rest of the time. That idle mode feels really, really good, because it is probably the natural waking rest mode of the brain. Not caught in a seeking feedback loop. No stress, no anxiety or cortisol, and no overload of problems problems that our information overlords shovel into the gaping maw of our need for novelty. It’s like feeding Cap’n Crunch to kids: they can’t stop eating it, even though it’s not doing them any good.

If you were instantly transported back to the Paleolithic, with all your modern faculties intact, what would be the number one thing you would notice? The beauty of nature, the enormous herds of game and flocks of birds, the fresh air, the lack of noise? Sure, those would be wonderful, but your amazement probably wouldn't last all that long. I suspect that, if you were to stay back in the Stone Age any length of time longer than, say, a week, you would be slammed in the face by how incredibly boring it was. Boring and painful.

Those would be your main impressions. Imagine a world with no books, movies, television, music on demand, Internet, texting. Imagine a world where you only had the same thirty people to talk to, every day for your whole life. Nature is beautiful, but it is also placid. Bird calls, rustling leaves, and babbling brooks comprise the soundscape, something so boring that we call it ambient white noise. It all looks great, but after a while it all looks the same. If you want to see something different, there are no pictures, no magic of the world wide web. When the sun goes down, you can't see anything for twelve long hours until it comes up again. Next to a campfire or on the few nights of the bright moon, you can sort of see something, but in general you're just stuck there, staring into the darkness for hours and hours. Boring.

All of this is not to disparage the Paleolithic, but instead to give you a sense of the environment your brain and nervous system were designed for. (Yes, I am anthropomorphizing evolution. Sue me.) There might be one or two exciting events in a whole month, and the rest of the time, it's just the sound of wind in the trees. Hunting involved endless hours or even days of just running, with a couple of minutes of rote struggling with the animal at the end. And gathering—don't even get me started.

Seeking Behavior

Mammals are wired to look for novelty in the environment, a behavior called "seeking." In his research, neuroscientist and psychologist Jaak Panksepp discovered an interesting feature of the networks in mammal brains, particularly rats. If you place an electrode in the area for sexual stimulation, for example, and provide the rat with a button that will stimulate the electrode, the rat will press it for a while, achieve satisfaction, and then stop pressing the button, until another day. The same thing happens with hunger and sleep. The rat will press the button until satisfied, become euphoric and relaxed, and then rest, or do something else.

Greetings

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If, however, you place the electrode in the area that stimulates seeking behavior (the lateral hypothalamus), something quite different occurs. The rat will press the button, and press the button, and press the button, and never reach satisfaction. Rather than becoming euphoric and relaxed, the rat will become crazed, strung out, frenzied; pushing the button until it collapses. They've done experiments like this on humans, too, with similar results. The neuroscience behind this is fascinating, but the short version is this: your brain is wired to seek, and get a dopamine hit each time it does. ([Non-academic summary of research](#).) Seeking creates dopamine, which is the same neurotransmitter stimulated by drugs like cocaine and speed. It makes you feel focused, energized, and good at first, but after a while you just feel stressed, sketchy, and burnt out.

The complement to the seeking system is the reward system. Finding the object of seeking, such as food, a mate, or a place to sleep, creates opiates—the drugs

that calm you down, make you blissful, and unwilling to seek. The opiates and the dopamine create a natural loop. The opiates counterbalance the seeking, and keep it from getting caught in an endless cycle. The trouble is that evolution did not favor animals that sat around all fat, happy, and satisfied with themselves. While they may have been the happiest creatures ever to live, they were also probably the first to become dinner for other, less satisfied seekers. This means that the system is rigged: there is much more desire to seek than to be rewarded. We would rather look than actually find.

The drive to seek is deeply baked into the brains of mammals, and it is deeply baked into you. It was created for a world in which novelty was a rarity, a strange and wonderful newness in an enormous ocean of old sameness. The world of boring sameness is the world our brain expects, and it's why we get so addicted to the new, the exciting, the strange. Our ancestors needed sugar and so we are saddled with a sweet tooth that is killing us, because we now live in a sugar-saturated world. In the same way, our ancestors evolved in a world where almost nothing interesting ever happened, and so we are stuck with a real hankering

for anything new. The rub is that we now live in an environment with an endless supply of intense novel stimuli. If television is a fire hose of raw emotional intensity and mental novelty delivered into your living room, the Internet is a tsunami.

Our brains have an insatiable urge for seeking new things, but now we have a limitless source of novelty. We are stuffed beyond the limit with unprocessed, undigested, and unhelpful experiences that we cannot convert to energizing, useful,



practical knowledge. We can't stop pressing the seek button, looking for another little hit of dopamine. We are information junkies, and our brains are full. Like rats in a lab, we could just keep hitting the seek button until we collapse.

But maybe there's a way out. It's not to shut off the fire hose, although I gave up television 30 years ago, and it's not a bad idea. Instead, it's to every so often take a break from new information.

I'm not suggesting that everyone take three months off to look at trees (although it wouldn't hurt). What I am suggesting is that our brains require some *real* down time. Down time doesn't mean watching a movie (which is just a bunch of emotional stimulation, and more novelty seeking) or doing something exciting and fun with friends. Down time means deeply quiet, really simple, totally open time in which you are not working, accomplishing anything, or taking in new information. Down time means staring at trees, or strolling aimlessly in a forest. Hanging out at the beach, or sitting on a mountainside. Even in the city, it's not that hard to just kick back and watch the sky or relax at home. Let yourself get really bored.

Meditation

Will sitting in a park looking at clouds really be enough to clear all the detritus out of your neurons? My guess, from experience, is that it probably would be, if you could do enough of it. The trouble is that our complicated, busy lives do not afford us enough down time to actually allow the brain the downtime it needs. With all that happens in just one day of modern life, it would take something like a week of hanging out next to a stream to process. Simplicity is not an efficient enough process; it cleans too slowly. We were not designed by evolution to have that much stuff to clear out. Input is greater than the processing available.



This is where meditation comes in. Meditation was invented during the founding of the Axial religions, around 500 BCE. Before that, I suspect that people had little need for it. Life had been simple enough and still natural enough to allow the brain the down time it needed. But with the construction of massive city states, civilizations, new technologies, and highly interconnected modern societies, people's ability to cope with the novelty overload they were experiencing began to break down. Siddhartha Gautama (the historical

person now known by his title, the Buddha) said that suffering was caused by *tanha* which is usually translated as "desire," but which could easily be alternatively translated as "seeking." Seeking causes suffering. Constantly on the lookout for novelty, you cannot rest. You get caught in a hyperactive feedback loop that eventually rags you out. To combat this affliction of modernity, the Buddha prescribed meditation.

Meditation is a fuzzy word in English. There are many different definitions, and many different techniques, some of which are apparently the opposite of others. For most people, meditation means sitting with your legs crossed and trying not to think. That is actually a very difficult and advanced technique, and not necessarily even the best one. There are

certain forms of meditation (such as Zen *shinkantaza*, Krishanmurti's choiceness awareness, and various advaita non-techniques) that are essentially just sitting there without doing anything on purpose. This is different than trying not to think, or doing a mantra, or trying to concentrate (although all of these are useful meditation techniques). It is essentially getting out of the way, and allowing the brain eventually to revert to its "natural state." Although natural is a loaded word, often used to obscure rather than reveal, in this case I think it's exactly accurate in the sense of the state your brain evolved to be in most of the time. A kind of alert, relaxed openness. Not thinking about anything in particular, but not striving to remove thinking either. Not seeking, in other words.

Meditation is, in a sense, unnatural. It's very unlikely that HGs in the Paleolithic sat around meditating. They didn't need to, because everything was much slower, spacious, and gentle. It was low impact on the brain. But with the rise of modern society (and I'm calling India at 500 BCE a modern society, meaning people living in cities), people couldn't find enough down time to return their minds to a natural state. There was too much novelty, too many new ideas, too much cool stuff to do, talk about, and see. The feedback loop of seeking had too much fuel, and something had to be done. Something that itself was a new technology, an activity that people had not done before, but which would return the brain, and the person, to a relaxed, open state. So we can think of meditation as an unnatural way to return to a natural state. Sort of like weightlifting or special diets—activities which no hunter-gatherer would have engaged in, but which help our bodies return to a more natural state of health and wellbeing.

Our brains need down time. Your quality of life will skyrocket as you flush hours of seeking out of your week. The majority of the interesting, exciting, novel stimuli you're getting in society are composed of empty calories anyway. So give yourself as much downtime as you can. Here are a few simple suggestions to do that:

Number one: schedule some time each day to do nothing. Walk in the park. Sit in the tub. Walk in the park. Chill out and hang out. Doing this with other people, as long as it doesn't become too mental, is great.

Number two: meditate. It doesn't matter which technique you use, although I would suggest one of the more "open" techniques mentioned earlier. You may be surprised how good it feels to let the brain burn through its backlog, getting lean, sleek, and fit in the process.

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Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness

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Excerpted from *Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness: Ancient Path, Present Moment* by Malcolm Huxter (2016).

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Introduction

Mindfulness has become a powerful therapeutic approach for a range of psychological conditions. Nearly 2600 years ago the Buddha provided comprehensive and detailed guidelines for this effective practice, which are still relevant today in our complex modern world. He described mindfulness as being part of a context of wisdom, ethical behaviors, and the cultivation of the heart-mind or meditation. The following excerpt provides a brief overview of the meditational component of the awakening path the Buddha expounded. It will focus for the most part on the Serenity aspect of Buddhist meditation.

Buddhist Meditation

Buddhist meditation is not limited to the stereotyped image of a yogi seated in the lotus position. There are over 40 different forms of formal meditation practice described in classic Theravada Buddhist texts. The Buddha did not teach a fixed and rigid approach to meditation. Rather, he taught a dynamic and flexible approach to individuals or groups dependent upon their personality, temperament, life circumstances, and the situation. Meditation instructions for the different practices were collected from the discourses of the Buddha. The Buddha taught that as long as it was not causing harm it was possible to meditate in all postures and in a variety of different activities. Meditation connects with one's lifestyle, attitudes, and day-to-day decisions and is an integral part of the eight-fold path.

Meditation involves a skillful balance and interplay of effort (energy), mindfulness, and concentrated attention. Effort in meditation is not the same as strain or struggle, and right effort is the balance between having too much or too little energy, such as being either too enthusiastic or too slack. Just as a guitar string cannot be tuned too tight or too loose, the effort for meditation involves a level of energy that is not too much or too little. With right effort we know when there is too much energy or enthusiasm, too much pushing and force, and we can balance this with letting go or just letting be. Sometimes meditation requires courageous effort as we face up to things we would rather avoid.



In Theravada Buddhism, Pali terms that are often used for meditation are: *bhavana*, and *citta bhavana*. *Bhavana* means “bringing into being,” “causing to be,” “developing,” or “cultivating.” *Citta* (pronounced as chitta) is the Pali term for mind. In Western culture the mind is often thought of as the part of us that thinks and uses reason. *Citta*, however is more than this. *Citta* more accurately translates as heart-mind, which implies both reason and intuition. *Citta* is also considered as the aware part of a person or the subjective knower of experience. The heart-mind not only thinks, but also feels and experiences. Moreover, according to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the heart-mind has the qualities of knowing, luminosity, and clarity (Dalai Lama 2009). *Citta bhavana* therefore translates as cultivating the heart-mind where the qualities that are cultivated are wholesome, healthy, and beneficial. Meditation or *bhavana* involves the repeated practice, training, and development

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of energy, mindfulness, and concentration so that the *citta* develops serenity and insight. *Samadhi* and *vipassana* are two other terms used for meditation in Theravada Buddhism. These terms represent, respectively, the qualities of serenity and insight, which are the two sides of Buddhist meditation. For the purposes of this excerpt, the terms heart-mind, mind, and *citta* will be used interchangeably.

The Cultivation of Serenity

The Pali terms *samatha* and *samadhi* are created from the combination of *sam* which means “with,” *a* which means “towards,” and *dha* which means “to put or place” (Kearney 2006). These terms refer to unifying the heart-mind so attention rests in a single place. *Samadhi* is a term that is often used for meditation but its literal meaning is concentration.

Serenity meditation (*samatha*-Pali, *shamatha*-Sanskrit) is based on cultivating *samadhi*. In Tibetan Buddhism the term *shamatha* also refers to a highly refined and transformative state of concentration. *Shamatha* is an entry state to the even more refined states of concentration called *jhanas*. Both the terms *Samatha* and *Samadhi* refer to a collected, calm, centered, unified, quiet, still, and stabilized state of heart-mind. The terms serenity, calm, tranquility, and quiescence are English words all used to describe this aspect of meditation.

You can bring attention to almost anything in order to develop a concentrated, unified heart-mind. It is important however that when on a path of happiness we don’t concentrate in a way that will be harmful. Neutral objects of attention are usually most helpful because there is less craving or aversion and rejection. The breath is an example of a neutral object and bringing attention to the breath is possibly one of the most common serenity

meditation practices. Other commonly used serenity meditation objects include mantras, creative visualizations, muscle relaxation, loving kindness, reflecting on peace, and so on. Things that are emotionally uplifting or interesting or peaceful are also helpful to use as meditation objects, because they grab our attention and can soothe.

Serenity meditations calm and quell emotional and physical disturbance. They help us to feel at ease, relaxed, happy, peaceful, and serene. Sometimes the focus of serenity meditation is considered to be like a funnel or tunnel that narrows our attention. Other times the attention is broad and wide and just like when a shaken snow dome is stilled and the snowflakes settle, serenity meditation can be experienced as a stilling, stabilizing, centering, and settling of the heart-mind. In this way serenity meditation serves to collect attention and create a sense of composure and integration. Of course other objects may come to mind. However, as interest in the object of attention grows - concerns, worries, hankerings, or desires about other things

lose significance - and attention becomes absorbed into the object of interest. When attention is focused and absorbed in our chosen meditation object some of the normal activities of the mind fall away, and perhaps even stop. This can be experienced as beautiful silence.

Contemporary psychology has utilized the principles evident in the cultivation of Samadhi in many different ways. One of the most common uses is the cultivation of the relaxation

response (e.g. Benson 1975) through the activation of the parasympathetic nervous system to create a natural bodily response that is the opposite of tension or other types of negative arousal. One of the functions of this response is to restore body-mind balance when a demand, crisis, or emergency passes. With a relaxation response, muscular tension decreases, breathing becomes slower and rhythmical, heart rate reduces, and many bodily functions rest and rejuvenate. The healing and therapeutic effect of the relaxation response is well known and has been utilized in contemporary psychology for decades.



Several prominent 20th century psychologists have used concentration and the altered states of consciousness they lead to, in therapeutic ways. Milton Erickson (1979) pioneered hypnotherapy “as a process whereby we help people utilize their own mental associations, memories, and life potentials to achieve their own therapeutic goals.” Erickson had many creative techniques for inducing therapeutic trance; the fixation of attention (concentration) was one of those techniques. Having the client gaze at a swinging pocket watch, a spot, a bright light, a candle flame, a revolving mirror, or the therapist’s eyes are classic objects of attention fixation with hypnosis. Erickson understood the unconscious as an organized system of psychological processes, which work to maintain emotional well-being. He also viewed the unconscious as a process that helped by providing psychological protection. Therapeutic trance allows individuals to access unconscious, intuitive and healing aspects of themselves.

Another prominent contemporary psychologist who described and advocated using focused attention is Csikszentmihalyi (1988). Csikszentmihalyi researched and wrote extensively about the experience of “flow,” which bears many similarities to states of concentration or *samadhi*. When Csikszentmihalyi studied flow, he noticed that artists, musicians, sports people, athletes, and surgeons often develop states of flow. He also noticed that flow would often occur when people were engaged in enjoyable leisure activities. Something as simple as going surfing, watching a sun set, listening to music, or going to an inspiring movie can help to focus and uplift one’s mind. People often get into this state of flow when they do something that requires a lot of concentration and/or they do something that is so enjoyable that their attention becomes completely absorbed.

When people are in flow they are so engaged in what they are doing that there is simply no mental space left for worries and concerns - everything else falls away. It feels pleasant to be in flow and whatever is done is done well. In flow, our sense of time can drop away. Being in flow or “in the zone” is an optimal way of being - not only does it feel uplifting, we also do things in the best possible way. These optimal ways of being are very helpful on the path of happiness.

The traditional Buddhist approach to serenity meditation begins with one’s intention. When it is our intention to put aside worries and concerns and focus attention, then it is easier for our actions to follow. We make the time to practice and ensure that, as much as possible, we will not be disturbed. We find a quiet space and adopt a comfortable posture.



Relaxation is an important starting point for practicing serenity meditation. In contemporary psychology four factors described as important for the relaxation response are:

1. a passive attitude that is not attached to goals
2. an object to focus on
3. a quiet space
4. a comfortable posture (Benson 1975)

Serenity meditation follows a sequence of relaxation, stability, and vividness (Wallace 2006).

Relaxation involves releasing both muscular tension and distracting thoughts. In serenity meditation we don't investigate thoughts and emotions but just let them go. There is a conscious release of struggling and striving to achieve something. Our intention is to let go, settle, and rest in peacefulness. At this stage we may make a conscious choice to not engage in thinking and rather turn our attention toward mental quietude. Although finding a quiet place in our internal babble is easier said than done, with a firm intention and practice, it *is* possible.

Stabilizing attention requires centering and maintaining our focus on the object of meditation. This may be very difficult at first because the mind might be scattered and wild. With patience, persistence, and practice, attention becomes more stabilized.

Vividness of perception involves sharpening our perception so that whatever is perceived becomes richer and increasingly more lucid. With enhanced focus details that were not noticed previously, because of a distracted mind, become vividly clear.

In summary, the basic instructions for serenity meditations are:

1. make a determination to practice
2. choose an object of attention
3. relax tension
4. stabilize attention on the object
5. help attention stay focused (for example, be aware of the pleasantness that may arise in the body and mind as a result of focusing)
6. let go of whatever blocks the flow to allow absorption into the object
7. become sensitive to the subtle details of what is being attended to
8. let go of grasping or holding on to ideas, expectations, or experience and allow transformation to occur
9. let go of ego resistance and allow yourself to become completely absorbed

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this *Bulletin*), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

As one develops meditative concentration on the chosen object of attention, such as the breath or a constructed visualization, the object may disappear and be replaced by a vision or other mental event. It is as if, rather than choosing an object to pay attention to, it chooses us. These mental events are created from one's own mind and are unique for the individual. They may often be visual in nature but not necessarily limited to this mode of perception. If these events begin to occur for you on a regular basis it is best to discuss this with an experienced meditation practitioner who can explain how to work with them.

Serenity meditation can lead to well-being and happiness. The calm and joy that arise from unified attention naturally counters any feelings of anxiety and depression, and the development of a concentrated mind is worthwhile in and of itself. However, on top of this, the cultivation of serenity also leads to wisdom. A famous Thai meditation master, Ajahn Chah, once compared a concentrated heart-mind to a still forest pool (Kornfeild and Breiter 1985). When there is no disturbance and a watering pool is still and quiet, all sorts of beautiful animals, that would normally be too shy to, come out to drink. Similarly, when our heart-minds are still and quiet, we notice things about ourselves that we normally would not see. With a quiet, still and tranquil heart-mind, insight and understanding can arise and we can discover many beautiful things.



cartoon © Robin Hall 2014

Introspection with Serenity Meditation

Sampajanya (clear comprehension) is an important factor in all meditation. *Sampajanya* cannot be separated from mindfulness and it ensures that what we do is suitable and timely in accordance with our purpose and goals. When we meditate, *sampajanya* is often referred to as introspection, which is a form of meta-awareness and quality control. When meditating, mindfulness prevents attention from straying from the object and introspection recognizes that attention has strayed. Introspection helps us monitor the process of the continuity of mindfulness and the meditation process in general. Serenity meditation often requires balancing slackness (i.e. spacing out and losing clarity), and excitement. Excitement usually involves getting caught up in an object by either grasping after it or rejecting it with aversion. Introspection helps us to be aware when we have slipped into slackness or excitement so we can then adjust our attention. We can adjust our attention by arousing it when we are slack or spaced out and by stabilizing it when we are caught up in excitement.

The Cultivation of Insight

The aim of insight meditation is, as the name implies, the cultivation of insight. Insight is the realization of the four truths [two cause-effect relationships: *dukkha* or dissatisfaction, the causes of *dukkha* (found in our heart-minds), freedom from *dukkha*, and ways to be free]. When we realize the four truths we understand that certain types of actions lead to unhappiness and misery and other types of actions lead to well-being. We understand what leads to what, and how things arise and pass away. As a component of wisdom, insight

helps us to know how to lead a life free from *dukkha*. In Buddhist psychology insight is the knowing and seeing component of wisdom. It includes understanding three universal characteristics of existence, which according to Buddhism are:

1. *Anicca* (Pali): Impermanence or change.

All things change. All that arises must also pass away. Nothing lasts. Everything has a transitory or impermanent nature. As all things change they are also uncertain.

2. *Dukkha* (Pali): Unreliability, ambiguity, or uncertainty.

Here the term *dukkha* is used in a slightly different way than it is when referred to as the first truth. As a mark of existence it means that transient things are not able to bring ultimate satisfaction, that they cannot be the source of complete happiness. Transitory things are also uncertain and ambiguous because we can never be really sure of the outcome.

3. *Anatta* (Pali): Interdependence, no-thing-ness, no self-ness, insubstantiality, contingency, or emptiness.



A note on *anatta*

Things change because of causes and conditions. Things do not arise and pass away independent of context or circumstances. This means that all situations, events, people, and things are contingent on other things for their existence, and so, according to Buddhism, there are no separate independent situations, “selves,” or events. In Buddhist terminology “emptiness” and “not self” mean that all things, including what we refer to as “self,” are empty of separate existence. Emptiness can also mean that things are empty of our assumptions, unhelpful opinions, complicated stories, and problems.

Being empty of assumptions means that things are just the way they are. In Buddhism, “such-ness” is another term representing emptiness meaning that things are just as they are (Batchelor 1997).

In contemporary psychology emptiness refers to a feeling of being like an empty shell, or a nothing, devoid of any positive feelings. In Buddhism, however, emptiness refers to the interdependent nature of existence rather than a feeling. That is, all things are empty of an independent existence and are interdependent or dependent on other things for their existence. When we realize the nature of emptiness (in the Buddhist sense) rather than being a hopeless nothing we are free to be dynamic, creative, and unique because we are not bound by limiting concepts about the world or ourselves. The processes of the realization of emptiness, interdependence, and such-ness are all the same. This realization brings with it a sense of being fully alive, vital, and present for life as it unfolds.

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Malcolm Huxter is an Australian clinical psychologist. He has been teaching mindfulness and related practices such as loving kindness and compassion to clinical populations, clinicians, and the general public for over 25 years. Mal originally learnt these practices as a Buddhist monk in Thailand in the late 1970's. After being a monk he was a shiatsu therapist for 10 years until he gained psychology qualifications. He has worked as a clinical psychologist, supervisor, coach, and trainer in a variety of settings in rural and remote Australia as well as in the UK. Mal has written several mindfulness-based workbooks,

published in psychology journals and magazines, and has a book called *Healing the heart and mind with mindfulness: Ancient path, present moment*, released in February 2016. He is a loving partner, proud dad of three adult sons, and a doting granddad. He currently lives and practices on the north coast of NSW, Australia, where he likes to meditate, surf, and learn to play guitar.

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Skillful Means

[Your Skillful Means](#), sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Mindfulness of Sounds Meditation

Purpose/Effects

One of the simplest, most direct ways to connect with the present moment and further cultivate our awareness is to become aware of the many sounds that are constantly arising around us. Intentionally paying attention to the sounds filling our ears can not only help us to come back to the present but can also stabilize the mind and further refine our sense of hearing and deep listening.

Method

Summary

Sit and pay close attention to the sounds arising around you.

Long Version

- Settle into a comfortable position and become aware of your breath flowing in and out.
- When you are ready, shift your awareness to the sounds that are present in this moment.
- Without searching for sounds, let them come to you and fill your ears while simply hearing sounds near and far away.
- Notice any judgments or thoughts about the sounds and let them pass away.
- Notice if you find yourself trying to identify or label the sounds and instead focus on hearing the bare sounds themselves.
- Be aware that sounds arise and fade away, and notice if there are any spaces between sounds.

- When your mind wanders or fixates on a particular sound, gently return your attention to the flow of sounds occurring in the present moment.
- When you are finished, shift your attention back to your breathing and gradually open your eyes.

History

Awareness of sounds is one of the areas of focus cultivated when practicing mindfulness meditation and is found in various Buddhist traditions including Zen and Vipassana.

Notes

Some traditions teach a version of mindfulness of sounds by repeatedly ringing a meditation bell and sustaining their attention fully on the sound of each ringing of the bell.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGFog-OuFDM>

See Also

[Breath Awareness Meditation](#)



Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.