

CHAPTER 9

Mindful Action

This chapter is not about meditation. It is about our common English language use of the word 'mindful'. In practice, this equates to 'Mindfulness of Action.'

The word 'mindful' goes back to the 14th Century. Most of us will use it occasionally and we certainly understand what it means. As native English speakers, we 'own' this word as part of our lexical heritage. We shouldn't let psychologists and popular writers obscure its original meaning with their new interpretations. Their new usage has only been around for 40 years.

In the English vernacular, 'to be mindful' means 'to pay attention'. It is particularly targeted at one's *actions*. It usually means: 'to focus on what you are doing to avoid mistakes or improve performance.' As an adjective, 'mindful' means 'alert' or 'attentive.' It works just as well as an imperative: 'Be careful! Don't make mistakes!' It is the opposite of being thoughtless or clumsy or mindless or inadvertently offending others. It suggests a fully conscious, discriminating quality of mind.

We are always mindful for a purpose. We only give high quality attention to things that could be significant for our wellbeing. Whatever we consciously notice has already been preselected by the brain as potentially important. We focus on something in order to better evaluate and respond to it. When we do so we usually shift our attitude or behaviour towards it in some way, however slight. Paying attention would be a waste of mental energy otherwise.

We have to be sufficiently mindful to accomplish any kind of task: getting dressed, eating, driving, talking to someone, working, managing children, answering emails, shopping, doing exercise, seeking entertainment and doing 'whatever has to be done.' All of the above will suffer if done thoughtlessly, and each one requires a certain level of self-monitoring attention to be accomplished at all. If we're too careless or distracted, we can't even reliably pick up a spoon. We're just as likely to knock it off the bench instead.

Some activities are so routine and automatic that we can virtually do them in our sleep. Others demand more focus. Situations of novelty, danger, temptation or inner conflict will all prompt us to become more mindful. We also sharpen up in situations that could go wrong, in those with high potential for reward, and in those where clear thought or finesse are essential for success.

We become mindful spontaneously when we need to. Mindfulness is commonly a 'Stop and look before you act' mechanism. This slows us down if only for a nanosecond, so that we can reflect on what we are doing. To be mindful means that we notice when we have eaten enough, so we stop. We notice when an unintended tone of sarcasm enters our voice. While in the supermarket, we recognise the conflict between our desires for pleasure and good health.

To be mindful also means noticing and usually resisting impulses that it is best not to act upon: the tendency to grab that food, to shop, to space out, to quit, to stare, to get self-righteous, to give in, to complain. Mindfulness is a huge part of what we think of as self-control.

Mindfulness helps us to make thousands of small yes/no judgements each day to keep us out of trouble. It can be thought of as the habit of self-observation or self-reflection or self-monitoring. Without it, to be mindless, we would be at the mercy of every temptation and impulse, and we wouldn't even know why things were going so badly wrong. This wouldn't stop us finding plausible reasons: Bad Luck. Upbringing. Karma. Discrimination. Genes. Conspiracy. God's plan.

Because mindfulness of action is built on learnt routines, it can work quite smoothly for hours at a time. We monitor and self-evaluate our behaviour almost without realising it. However under pressure this routine, low-level mindfulness becomes fragile and prone to collapse. The Buddha encouraged us to monitor our states of mind (the third 'Foundation of Mindfulness') to preempt this danger.

Our capacity to pay sufficient attention suffers under sub-optimal states of mind. These occur when we are tired; sick; hungry; emotionally aroused; overloaded with information; obsessing about something; worrying about a chronic problem; or when we have just made too many demanding decisions in the preceding hours (decision-fatigue). All of these will weaken self-control and make us more likely to act thoughtlessly.

There are certain times when we haven't the cognitive capacity to think straight, any more than we can drive safely when we're drunk. We can try hard to perform well, but no amount of effort or worry or need or coffee will bring us up to scratch. When we become mindful that we are a liability to ourselves, we need to restrict our activity to tasks that are simple and routine, or just go to bed. This would not be a failure of will. It would be foolish to do otherwise.

Mindfulness has multiple purposes

Mindfulness is not a free-floating state of mind, a pure awareness or mirror-like consciousness. 'To pay attention' is a transitive verb: it always has an object and it interacts with it. We have to focus on *something* and we always do this for a *purpose*. The flavours of mindfulness differ immensely according to what we focus on and what our purpose is. Let's now look at how different objects and purposes shape our understanding of mindfulness.

To the man in the street, being mindful means paying attention to what he is doing. The *object* is invariably an action and the *purpose* is to avoid mistakes and improve performance. It is also mindfulness directed *outwardly*.

The monk. The Buddha said that we should pay attention to the body, emotions, states of mind and thoughts, but he omits action from this list except when it is unavoidable. A monk is trying to bring all thought and action to a halt, not improve them. This is mindfulness directed *inwardly* for the *purpose* of physical stillness and emotional detachment.

The football player. In the West, attentional training has been most fully developed in sport, the performing arts and the military. A footy player has to focus both *inwardly*, monitoring arousal, muscle tone and energy, and focus *outwardly* as well. He learns to flexibly switch attention from inner to outer, and from point focus to wide-angle focus as the moment requires. This is high quality, high energy attention for the

purpose of winning. We can make a lot of money out of well-trained mindfulness.

The mother. Any good mum learns to focus well on her child's physical and emotional behaviour, and on her own response to that. She's not interested in serene detachment (like the monk) or in winning (like the footy player). Her goal is closer to that of the man in the street: good daily functioning.

The soldier. Learning to self-monitor and pay attention has been integral to military training for millennia. In the East we see it in the close links between the samurai and Zen. A sniper needs very low arousal and muscle activation while also remaining vigilant. His goal is to kill without getting killed. Conversely a soldier in the field needs the ability to pace himself under pressure. Soldiers can pay the supreme price if they are distracted when it matters. Being mindful is not just a baby boomer indulgence.

The surgeon. Many people such as doctors, pilots or operators of machinery have to develop sustained, self-monitoring attention as part of their professions, or catastrophes can occur in an instant. This is another high stakes form of mindfulness.

The psychologist. She will see mindfulness primarily as a therapeutic tool. Her goal will usually be to help another person lower arousal, enhance self-control and better manage thoughts and moods.

The student. Long before the psychological bandwagon took off, mindfulness was promoted as an essential metacognitive skill for students. Attention is critical for any kind of learning from babyhood onwards. We have to be able to 'hold something in mind' for long enough to store it in memory.

The connoisseur. People who deeply enjoy music, art, movies, travel, nature or other pleasures will have given a lot of high quality attention to them over the years. The object of their mindfulness is beauty; their purpose is delight.

The contented person. Sustained, uninterrupted attention is essential for states of deep pleasure and 'flow.' Social scientists now speculate that frequent flow states in one's life are good indicators of subjective well-being, while the absence of flow correlates with depression. Conversely it is almost impossible to feel good if one's mind is constantly scattered, distracted, restless or confused.

Mindfulness is domain-specific

These kinds of mindfulness all involve attention, but this is not readily transferable from one activity to another. You don't want your surgeon to be in a state of serene monastic detachment. Empathy and affection are ideal for a mother, but not for a soldier. The intense point-focus of a sniper will not necessarily help you raise a toddler. Nor can a mindful mother instantly switch to being a mindful soldier or a mindful nun.

Skills are invariably domain specific. Each skill comes embedded with different physiological markers, emotional tones, learnt behaviours and values. A surgeon needs strong sustained point-focus. A mother needs wide-angle trouble-shooting attention. A meditator wants a low arousal, low muscle-tone state with minimal awareness of the environment. A sportsman needs high arousal, constantly modulated muscle-tone and strong environmental awareness.

Learning any skill is time-consuming, so we naturally select what seems most worthwhile to us personally. A mindful person such as a meditator is likely to have specialised in focusing on one kind of object (the body) for one kind of purpose (mental calm). He may not even be aware of other possibilities. Even after reading this book, I am sure that many readers will still think of mindfulness as referring to meditation alone. So which of the above is 'real' mindfulness? I hope this survey shows you that the uses of mindfulness can be much more diverse than you may have expected. We don't have to squeeze it all into one box.

Mindfulness for enhanced performance

Mindfulness keeps us out of trouble, but it is also essential if we want to *improve* what we do. It is often used in sports training. Top sportsmen consciously develop a wide range of attentional skills. A team player needs to be able to switch from a tunnel-vision, spotlight focus when making a shot, to a wide-angle fluid attention when sensing what is happening on the whole field. We also have to switch our attention from narrow to wide when we leave the computer or a book, and attend to our children or our friends.

An athlete needs to be able to mobilise what is called 'preparatory attention.' This is when he stops, clears his mental space and imagines a few seconds ahead to a desired outcome. Likewise, we need to learn how to put aside a previous task, and psychologically prepare for a new one.

A good sportsman is able to turn his level of arousal up or down as required. He can recognise when he needs maximum arousal and when he can mentally cruise (if the ball is far away). High arousal sustained for too long will make him brittle and jumpy. This is when athletes choke. Low arousal on the other hand leads to boredom and distraction. Similarly, we need to recognise the signs of mind-numbing anxiety (high arousal) or a severe lack of interest in what we are doing (low arousal).

All the above attentional skills are essential for the conservation of physical energy. Because of poor self-monitoring, many athletes run out of puff before the end of the game, and so do many parents and office workers. Athletes are frequently taught these attentional skills. Non-specialists like us tend to haphazardly learn them as required over a much greater range of activities, but the process is similar.

This is how it all works. *Sati*, the Buddhist word for 'mindfulness', literally means 'memory.' If we do something on automatic pilot we forget it immediately. If however we pay good attention to a task for just a few seconds, it gets a foothold in what is called 'working memory.' If we do that task particularly well or badly it then gets stored for future reference.

The next time that we do that task, a faint functional trace of that memory returns. It reminds us how to do it better, or how to avoid the same mistake again. This is how the sportsman gradually improves a manoeuvre and how we improve our performance in a vast range of social and practical skills. We learn to do things well by recognising, acknowledging and remembering our *mistakes*. In education this is called 'error-based learning.' Mindfulness as a kind of self-monitoring or metacognition, enhances these positive outcomes.

Because meditation emphasises stillness, 'just watching' and non-reactivity, we can easily forget that it is a skill like any other. It is training in not reacting. In the *Sutta*, the four 'foundations' of mindfulness are more accurately translated as 'training disciplines'. The *Sutta* itself contains 21 exercises, each of which is designed to be practised individually until they are well consolidated in memory.

Learning any skill requires intelligent self-criticism, but we tend to assume that this doesn't apply to meditation. The model of passivity and nonjudgmental acceptance, 'just being, not doing' and 'nothing to achieve', is now far more dominant than in the Buddha's time.

How to be mindful in action

To be mindful means: 'to consciously perceive and evaluate something'. We can train ourselves in mindful action by asking two simple questions: 'What am I doing?' and 'How well am I doing it?' These few seconds of perception and evaluation will probably improve an action or ameliorate any bad outcomes on the spot.

It is good to check what we are doing as we do it ('supervisory attention'). It is even better if we look back over what we've just done ('retrospective attention'). For example, we can ask: 'What did I just do? How well did I answer that question or drive through that intersection or process the emails? Was it adequate?' This meta-cognitive monitoring helps to remember good and bad performances for future reference.

To reliably improve our performance, we need to make these assessments consciously and repeatedly. Top athletes can commonly describe what they have just done with great accuracy, and in the appropriate technical language. As the Buddha said, you are mindful if you know what you are doing *and can describe it to yourself*.

Let's now be more systematic. If we want to, we can become mindful in a flash. We simply have to ask, 'What I am I doing?' and 'name' that action. The next question is, 'Is this worth doing? Yes or no?' When we consider the matter, it is usually perfectly obvious either way. This evaluation leads to the response. If the answer is 'No,' we stop doing it. If the answer is 'Yes', a new question arises, namely 'Can I do this more efficiently?' Let's now streamline all the above into the following exercises.

Name the Action

If you want to improve your behaviour at any time just ask yourself: 'What am I doing?' Now 'name' it: 'Driving, shopping, reading a magazine, eating breakfast, surfing the web' or whatever.

Now ask: 'Is this worth doing at all?'

If it isn't, you drop it. If it is, you ask:

'How well am I doing this? Could I do it better?'

Let's now go a step further. It is useful to regard thinking as a kind of virtual, miniaturised action, a mental play-acting that falls just short of observable behaviour. Fundamentally, there is little difference between the questions 'What am I doing?' and 'What am I thinking about?' except that the latter is more subtle. This leads into the next exercise.

Name the Thought

This time the sequence goes as follows. When you realise you are mentally confused just ask: 'What am I *thinking* about?'

Now 'name' it: 'Work, money, getting fat, Angelina Jolie, the tennis, what the prime minister just said.'

Now ask: 'Is this worth thinking about at all?'

If it is, you ask: 'Could I think about this more productively?'

If it isn't, you drop it and ask:

'What shall I switch my attention to now?'

Mindfulness of action typically happens on the run. We crank up our mindfulness levels as required while doing something. Although this might slow us down a fraction it takes virtually no time at all. I do dozens of these self-monitoring exercises each day.

Of course this doesn't look anything like a Standard Meditation Practice. I'm not sitting down for twenty minutes focusing on my breath. I'm not even particularly calm or relaxed. I'm just more focused and present than usual. So does this mean that mindfulness of action is not 'real' mindfulness? Do you feel that you have to do formal meditations to 'really' get into the perfect mindful state that psychologists and popular writers talk about?