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Coming to Our Senses

Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness

Jon Kabat-Zinn • Hyperion © 2005 • 631 pages

Life Advice / Mindfulness

Take-Aways

- It's a common misconception that meditation must be learned.
- Another misconception is that meditation is the same as relaxation. It isn't, though it can be relaxing.
- Meditation enables the practitioner to focus only on the present.
- Mindful meditation is a "non-doing," a deep knowing, a way of hearing, seeing, and loving.
- Mindful meditation brings health and peace.
- There is no "correct way" to meditate. You can meditate reclining, sitting, standing or walking. It just takes practice.
- Human thoughts can create – and soothe – physical, mental and emotional suffering.
- People can help heal the world by healing themselves through meditation.
- The benefits of meditation multiply exponentially throughout society, but they begin one person at a time.
- Traditional medicine largely accepts mindful meditation as legitimate therapy.

Recommendation

At 600-plus pages, this deeply philosophical book may challenge some readers. But Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, an accomplished scientist, thinker and author, imparts his wisdom in short, easily digestible chapters. He says you can have a more peaceful, contented life if you are open to exploring the spiritual realm and the practice of mindful meditation. Kabat-Zinn, who cites studies and personal experiences, presents convincing evidence that meditation reduces everyday stress, and can help treat depression and fear, chronic pain, cancer and other serious illnesses. *getAbstract* believes that everyone can benefit from reading this mindful treatise – even those who are already healthy, wealthy and wise. Highly recommended.

Summary

What Is Mindfulness?

The practice of mindful meditation enables you to live in the present without judging, interpreting or analyzing. Mindfulness is the ability to experience moments without thinking. It exists in that precise instant when you see a bird – right before you start thinking to yourself, “Wow, that bird is beautiful,” or “I wonder where he’s going,” or “Hey, I saw that exact same bird yesterday.” Mindfulness also means not dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. It is a way of slowing down and focusing on the simpler things in life. Mindfulness is probably the healthiest, most stress-free state you can embrace.

What Meditation Is and Isn't

As the pace of daily life accelerates, placing yourself in a state of timelessness is important. You can control the present – at least in your mind. Buddha perfected the practice of meditation and expounded on it. He taught that people should not cling to ideas, expectations, relationships, feelings, possessions or even their bodies. Instead, he said, they should always be open to possibilities and opportunities.

“Meditation is a way of being, not a technique.”

Meditation is the ideal way to deliberately foster mindfulness, and it is available to everyone. Each person has transformative, restorative and healing powers that allow the mind to have an impact on the body. Mindful meditation is a state of “non-doing,” sensory experience, self-compassion, openness and awareness, unmediated by overruling internal dialogue. You can focus on the “here and now” through the practice of mindful meditation.

“[Meditation] is about allowing yourself to be exactly where you are and as you are, and for the world to be exactly as it is in this moment as well.”

Monks, Buddhists and others in isolated cultures have known the benefits of meditation for thousands of years. Today, hospitals, clinics and universities around the world teach mindful meditation. Although doctors saw meditation as an alternative treatment 25 to 30 years ago, now they accept it as a useful therapeutic activity. A study proved that mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) combined with

traditional medical treatment improves the healing time of psoriasis. In another documented study, volunteers who practiced MBSR showed a greater immune response and fewer symptoms of stress.

“Dukkha”

Buddhists believe that meditation is the best way of dealing with “dukkha,” the suffering that is an inherent part of the human experience. Pessimists who acknowledge the inevitability of misery and anguish may choose to accept their fate meekly. However, mindful meditation helps human beings relieve distress. In fact, MBSR came into being as a way to alleviate the suffering of patients who weren’t being helped by traditional medical treatments.

Many Benefits

People practice mindful meditation in different ways, including walking, sitting, visualizing, using yoga and “dying” (corpse pose) meditation. This practice results in greater self-awareness and clarity, a more compassionate perspective on life, and a heightened sense of peace, happiness, hope, optimism, strength, well-being and emotional stability. Meditation leads you to greater acceptance of “not knowing,” and provides the freedom to be unconditionally loved and accepted. Its benefits include enhanced sensory perception, a stronger immune system and a healthier response to stress. Meditation can boost your awareness of the mind’s natural tendency to fantasize and daydream, and your ability to embrace silence and stillness. Imagine the experience of drinking everything in – all that your senses can absorb – without thought, judgment or description.

“Just by meditating, by sitting down and being still, you can change yourself and the world.”

Many people create virtual prisons by erecting walls of misperception and delusion. Their thoughts preoccupy and distract them, keeping them in the past or future, focused on needs, desires, plans, memories and worries. Since thoughts are often the source of physical, mental and emotional pain, changing your thinking and paying more attention to the present can lead to having a richer, fuller life. Although looking to the future is human nature, finding meaning in the here and now is even more necessary. Meditation lets practitioners understand themselves more deeply and get in touch with their bodies – mentally and physically, since the inner and outer self are inextricably linked.

How To Meditate

Many people begin meditating with the goal of achieving a mindless state. But meditating is actually about being mindful, the process of paying attention. In meditation, try to bring your attention back to a single focus – the present, to heighten your awareness of life and your role in the universe.

“Awareness itself is the teacher, the student and the lesson.”

Many people wrongly believe that meditation is a technique to be learned. True meditation is effortless, a method of acceptance without interpreting, judging, thinking, feeling or processing. Meditation requires practice because it is so foreign to Western civilization. Many people think of meditation as a strange pursuit

that is not applicable in the modern world. To the contrary, meditation is perfectly suitable in this day and age. The human mind simply is unaccustomed to being still. People often experience moments of awareness while learning to meditate, but then their minds wander, they start to think and get edgy. When that happens, start over and try to just “be.” Since most people are not accustomed to just being, you may need to start over a few times.

Meditating while Lying Down

Reclining is the easiest position for meditating, especially for beginners. Try it right after awakening or before going to sleep. Lying down is comfortable and you can probably remain in that position for long periods. With vigilant practice, you will learn not only to avoid falling asleep, but to “fall awake.” You will overcome a tendency toward drowsiness and develop a heightened sense of awareness. The lying down position makes it easier to monitor your breathing as your stomach and chest rhythmically expand and contract. Note the feelings in your back as you settle in on the floor, bed, mat or rug, and surrender to gravity. When meditating in a prone position, people usually assume the “corpse pose,” as it is known in yoga. Lying on your back, put your arms down by your sides and your legs straight out with your feet relaxed. Take note of what you are experiencing, whether it’s the noise of cars passing or your mind racing with thoughts. Don’t worry if you are thinking about your plans; that’s part of the experience. When you are done, practice bringing yourself back in touch with the sounds around you or the sound of silence.

Note Your Feelings

Focus your meditation on the sensations in different areas of your body or on your body as a whole. For instance, concentrate on the sensations on your skin. Feel the air currents as they tickle the hairs on your arms. Feel the fabric and threads of your T-shirt. Some people meditate with their eyes open; others close their eyes. Either way is correct; it’s a matter of preference. But beginners should choose one way, so they can always return to a comfortable point of reference. Reclining meditation has a way of grounding you, literally and figuratively, as you get in touch with the essence of the earth and life’s rhythms. From a practical standpoint, meditating lying down is very handy for people who are ill in bed or who require sophisticated diagnostic tests such as CAT scans or MRIs which require you to remain very still.

“The knowing of things as they are is called wisdom.”

MBSR uses this kind of meditation extensively and successfully. Typically done lying down, it involves using your mind to slowly, systematically scan your entire body, beginning at the toes and moving upward. As you progress, visualize each body part – your knee, thigh, rib cage – focusing on the sensations you are experiencing. Allow your mind to tune in to the beauty of how each part of your body functions. Note how the air flows into your nostrils and fills your lungs. Think about how your larynx, tongue, teeth, lips and brain all work in concert to enable you to speak. Listen to your heartbeat. Feel your pulse and the blood being pushed through your veins. The “body scan” is not an easy position. It requires practice and the ability to bring yourself back to awareness when your mind drifts or wanders. However, you can also use it to focus on the sensations of your mind rather than feedback from your body; just try not to give up if you get bored, impatient or frustrated.

Other Positions

You can meditate in just about any position. Sitting on the floor cross-legged is very popular and offers a stable base. You are less likely to fall asleep than you are lying down. You also can sit tall and dignified in a straight-back chair. What matters is finding the position that gives you maximum access to awareness of your body and mind.

“It is life itself that becomes the teacher and the curriculum.”

You can practice standing meditation waiting for an elevator, a bus or an appointment. Go outside and stand next to a tree. Try to "be" a tree. Feel what it's like to be strong, tall and graceful. Is the soil beneath your feet soft and moist, or hard and unforgiving? Listen to the birds and the rustling of the leaves. Allow yourself to be cooled by the soft breeze. Standing meditation is a position of dignity.

“In a very real sense you are not who or what you think you are. And neither is anybody else.”

Walking meditation enables you to get in touch with the motions you take for granted. Walk without going toward a destination. Notice the length of your strides, how your heels strike the ground and how your arms swing gently at your sides. Do your hands dangle straight down or move along with your body? Is your breathing pattern different than when you meditate in other positions?

Making Progress

Meditation requires practice. As you make progress, you will be able to meditate for longer periods of time, and you will experience an increasing sense of calm and well-being. You may feel kinder, and more patient and loving. Being more aware of your feelings indicates you are meditating “correctly.” You are more accepting and less tempted to try to change things. You accept life on its own terms. Meditation offers an interesting paradox. You must practice to gain greater clarity and insight, and yet it's the art of doing nothing. Meditation means thinking of nothing, observing what already is and accepting who you are.

“For any of us, perhaps our greatest potential regret may be that of not seizing the moment and honoring it for what it is when it is here, especially in regard to our relationships with people and with nature.”

Meditation is a way of loving yourself and others completely and unconditionally. It is acceptance without pretense. Mindfulness helps people to avoid being caught up in situations that cause them anxiety, stress, fear, sorrow, anger and other emotions that act as prison bars. By meditating, you'll discover that your awareness of a feeling exists separately from the actual feeling. In identifying the feeling, you realize you can transform it if you wish. You can choose to embrace pain, for instance, and work through it, or to distance yourself. If you are feeling sorry for yourself, you can choose to stop feeding into that negative emotion. If you are feeling grief, you can embrace it. Awareness enables practitioners of meditation to cope.

Overcoming Obstacles

You will undoubtedly experience many stumbling blocks in your pursuit of mindful meditation. Your body may get fidgety and restless, your mind may wander and struggle with staying in the present moment, or you may become frustrated because meditation is not meeting your preconceived notions. You will overcome these obstacles and develop the discipline necessary to meditate regularly only when you determine that you really need to meditate to improve the quality of your life. Associating with other people who also practice meditation and mindfulness is helpful, as is working with a teacher. But, ultimately, you must want to achieve mindfulness and commit yourself wholeheartedly.

Changing Our World

The same concepts that apply to individuals also relate to society and its institutions. Society suffers when people see themselves as separate from what is going on around them. Only when individuals see themselves as whole and as a part of the universe will true compassion and healing emerge. People are inextricably linked – regardless of whether they are next-door neighbors or separated by 6,000 miles.

“Our ‘I’ will always get in the way of our eyes, our ears, our nose, our tongue, our skin, our hearts and minds, and our moments.”

The inability to recognize the interconnectedness of human beings can have devastating effects. In fact, history is full of examples of murderous dictators and governments that were allowed to practice evil because no one interfered. But mindfulness and greater awareness can result in significant societal changes. Lack of awareness and a willingness to follow old behavioral patterns will ensure the perpetuation of mediocrity, but people who are in touch with the “innate goodness” of the world and who understand its potential have the power to alter events as they unfold.

About the Author

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. is a best-selling author and expert on stress reduction and mindfulness in medicine and health care. He founded the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.



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