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The practice of mindfulness meditation



A pathway to inner peace and well-being, mindfulness meditation has been a known practice for 2,500 years, since a man who became known as the Buddha arrived at a set of precepts and methods of self-exploration leading to inner peace and clarity.

The Buddha never claimed to be a god and his teachings are not a religious practice.

Comparisons to his teachings are best made with Western psychology, which follows a medical model of identifying an illness and prescribing a treatment. Mindfulness offers precepts and tools for self-exploration on the assumption that an individual has the power and the tools within to attain a level of disciplined behavior based upon self-knowledge. This practice leads us to examine our core beliefs about ourselves, who we are and how we can learn different behaviors as an avenue to leading a more responsible and ethical life.



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Mindfulness meditation, through a focus on breathing, leads to clearing the mind of the many random thoughts that flow through without invitation and often without rhyme or reason. This bothersome state is often called “monkey mind.”

The trick is to not attach ourselves to thoughts, and with simple guidelines, this becomes possible. The practice itself asks that you focus on your breathing: the in and the out of breathing, the rhythm and temperature of the breath, where in your body you are most conscious of the breath “landing” and how your body feels in response. To describe the process seems so simple that explanation seems unnecessary. However, after practicing this very simple-sounding technique the real work begins.

The Buddha was great at compiling lists — hundreds of them, actually. But some are more germane to refining his practices. For example, the Eightfold Path addresses key behaviors for perfection, which will lead to clarity of mind, an enhanced perception of what is actually going on around you and a recognition of what you are actually doing at the moment.

Included in the Eightfold Path are behaviors like clear and accurate speech, or responsible and ethical job choices. For example, to honor the life of all sentient beings you might therefore choose not to work in a meat packing business. Other examples include the careful monitoring of your speech, word choice, tone of speech and thoughtful responses.

Another list is that of the Hindrances which prevent us from living a full and responsible life: Hindrances such as unresolved anger, greed and strong feelings of doubt. By addressing these factors we can expect to reach states of compassion, loving kindness, joy and equanimity.

The exploration of the many factors identified by the Buddha are best explored in a small study group called a Sangha. Once you have explored a tool and plumbed its depth, you return to the more solitary meditation, “sit,” and through dedicated concentration the ethical and moral dimensions of a tool become a part of your repertoire of behavior, a lifelong way of being.

Mindfulness meditation is a journey with no end. The journey becomes the goal as you attain ever deeper and changing levels of self-realization and as you discover added clarity and serenity in your days.

Jane Ayer is Professor Emerita of Counseling Psychology and was

an associate dean of the School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research, teaching and clinical work focused on life adjustment of severely handicapped persons. She is active in the Madison Insight Meditation Society as both a practitioner and facilitator of a small study group, Kalyana Mitta. She is a Sunday worship member and volunteer at Holy Wisdom Monastery, 4200 County Road M, Middleton, which offers personal overnight retreats for guests seeking meditation and relaxation, and space for meditation group retreats.

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[back to top](#)

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