

Mindfulness Meditation Group

Beginner's Mind Week 4

Approaching situations, people, objects or experiences without preconceptions, preconceived ideas or prior judgments. Make no assumptions, let go of expectations. Cultivate wonder and curiosity in what's present.

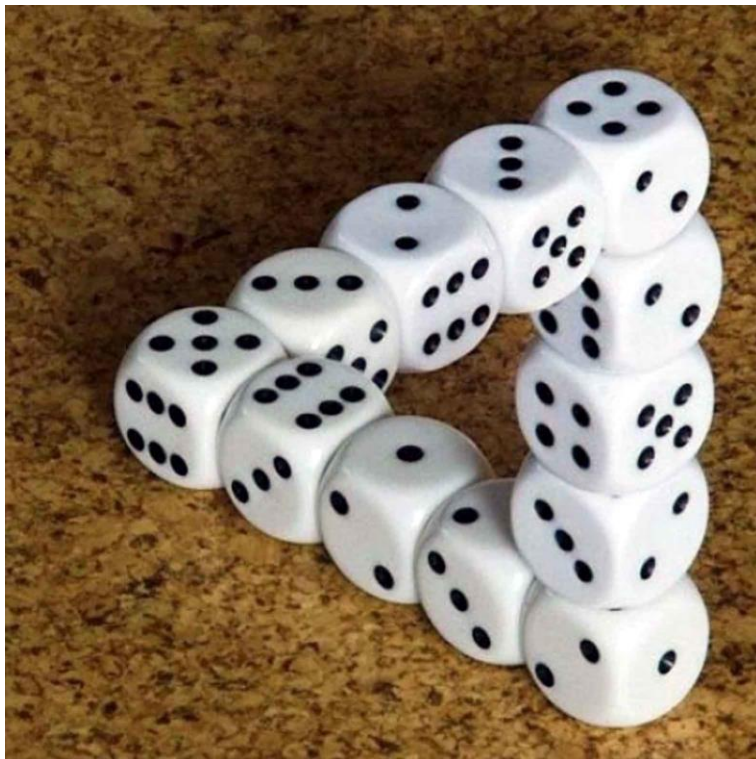
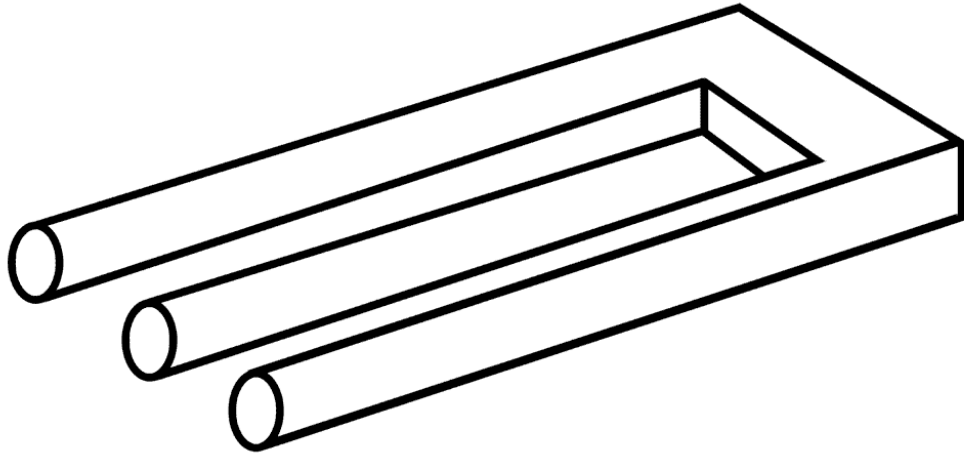
“If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are few.”

-Shunryu Suzuki Roshi
Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind

“We look deeply into each moment, and then we let go into the next moment, not holding on to the last one. Each moment then can be fresh, each breath a new beginning, a new letting go, a new letting be.”

-John Kabat Zinn
Wherever You Go, There You Are





“Beginner’s Mind is the mind that is innocent of preconceptions and expectations, judgements and prejudices. Beginner's mind is just present to explore and observe and see "things as-it-is." I think of beginner's mind as the mind that faces life like a small child, full of curiosity and wonder and amazement. "I wonder what this is? I wonder what that is? I wonder what this means?" Without approaching things with a fixed point of view or a prior judgement, just asking "what is it?"

-Zenkei Blanche Hartman

Why assume a beginner’s mindset?

All of us carry some baggage in regards to situations, challenges, problems, and opportunities – think of these things as shortcuts we use to help us make sense of the world. These prior experiences, perceptions, assumptions, misconceptions, and stereotypes can restrict new perceptions and fresh responses. Assume a beginner’s mindset in order to put aside these biases, so that you can cultivate a fresh approach rather than a habitual reaction.

How to assume a beginner’s mindset?

Don’t judge. Just observe without the influence of value judgments upon the actions, circumstances, decisions, or viewpoints of others.

Question everything. Even (and especially) the things you think you already understand. Ask questions to learn about how the user perceives the world. Think about a 5-year-old who asks “Why?” a hundred times.

Be truly curious. Strive to assume a posture of wonder and curiosity, especially in circumstances that seem either familiar or frightening.

Find patterns. Look for interesting threads and themes that emerge across interactions with users.

Listen deeply. Let go of your agenda and let events soak into your psyche. Absorb what others say to you, and how they say it, without thinking about the next thing you’re going to say.

Mindfulness Meditation: Beginner's Mind Exercise

Beginner's mind is an aspect of mindfulness that is difficult to grasp but is very important. Beginner's mind means looking at things as if you are seeing them for the first time. Beginner's mind can help us to see things in a new light, rather than automatically respond to them with the same old patterns of behavior.

1. Find one object that you have had for a long time -- something that is very familiar to you. It may be a wall hanging, book, plant, or even a piece of clothing.
2. Sit down somewhere you can view the object you have chosen, close your eyes (if this feels comfortable), and take a few deep breaths. Set your intention to cultivate beginner's mind.
3. Open your eyes and look at the object you have chosen. Imagine you are from Mars and have never seen anything like it before. Really look at the object without judging it.
4. Notice the unique qualities of the object. What does it look like? What does it feel like? Where does it catch shadows or reflect light?
5. Continue to really examine the object. Do you notice anything about it that you hadn't noticed before?
6. When you are done looking at the object, reflect on this exercise. Did you learn anything new about the object you chose? What would it mean if we were able to approach everything in our lives with beginner's mind? Are there objects, people, or situations that you tend to react to "automatically," as if you already know what they are?

SPACIOUS WALKING

Walking is another common, everyday activity that has a powerful potential to anchor you to your present experience. How often do you find yourself walking from one place to another so caught up in the machinations of big deal mind that you're virtually unaware of your surroundings? By practicing mindful walking and then extending this practice into your day-to-day life, you can move through your life with greater awareness and a deeper sense of patience, openness, and compassion. If you adjust the pace at which you walk, your movement will begin to reflect your response to your life, not a reaction to it. You'll move through your life at your pace and not the pace dictated by external events.

PRACTICE: Walking through the world of distractions

Walking mindfully in a quiet, serene place is usually fairly easy, as there are fewer external distractions to engage big deal mind. Taking mindful walking into busy environments presents a greater challenge. This practice will give you the opportunity to feel how mindfully modifying your pace affects the way you experience moving through the world of distraction. This practice is similar to the practice in chapter 4 where you visited a mall or other busy location and spent some time taking in information from all of your sense. This time, you'll practice mindful walking in a similar environment. This can be challenging, so be sure you're comfortable with mindful walking in a less stimulating environment before you try this.

Go to the mall or any similar busy location, such as a grocery store, train station, or sidewalk. Find a place where you can take a few moments to adopt the attitude of mindfulness, softening your gaze to see whatever is in your field of vision without looking at anything in particular. You can accomplish this by looking at the ground about ten feet ahead of you. Stay with this for a few moments but not too long, or people might start getting nervous.

Being walking at slower pace than you normally would, remaining mindful and continuing to see without looking.

*Notice everything that pulls on your attention: visual stimuli ("Oh, look, a big sale"), sounds *music from a teen clothing store), smells ("Mmm, cinnamon rolls"), thoughts ("Need to pick up some milk on the way home"), and so on.*

Each time your sense of spaciousness begins to close down around something specific (feeling self-conscious, noticing a sale, smelling food or coffee, the chatter of a distracted mind, overhearing a conversation, focusing on an attractive person), slow your pace down for a moment, return to your pause, and soften your gaze, then resume your spacious walking.

Continue walking this way for about ten minutes, then take some time to contemplate and answer the following questions.

Change your pace

Walking mindfully can be as simple as connecting with your senses and deliberately changing the pace at which you move through your world. When you were an infant learning to walk, you were exceptionally aware of your experience of walking. Just trying to get yourself upright required full physical effort and your total visual attention. Once upright, you focused every ounce of concentration on moving each foot out in front of the other. All of your sense were alert and attuned to the activity at hand.

Once you mastered walking, it no longer required that type of attention. You got to where you could walk and push something, walk and talk, walk and look for something, and perhaps you have arrive at a point where you can walk and eat at the same time – maybe while talking on your cell phone! Your attention to the walking process has receded into the background and you may view it as simply something you do in order to get somewhere and accomplish something else. If you're like most people, walking has probably become automatic and mindless.

PRACTICE: Walking Mindfully

This practice involves walking more slowly and deliberately than is normal in our culture, so you may feel self-conscious at first. I recommend that you begin your mindful walking practice in a fairly private place, such as your home or yard or an uncrowded park. Wherever you practice, it's best to ensure there will be minimal distractions so you can focus on your walking experience.

Adopt the attitude of mindfulness, standing with your knees slightly bent and your feet shoulder width apart. Soften your gaze to see whatever is in your field of vision without looking at anything in particular. See without looking. You can accomplish this by looking at the ground about ten feet ahead of you. Rest here for a few minutes, connecting with your pause.

Begin walking at a normal pace.

Start to slow the pace down just a bit – nothing too dramatic or sudden. Slowing down too much too quickly may create a problem with balance and distract you from the experience of walking.

Once you've found a comfortable slower pace, connect with any of your senses. You might say to yourself, "As I walk, I notice everything that comes into my visual awareness" or "As I walk, I become aware of whatever I hear" or "As I walk, I notice everything I feel physically." If physical sensations seem tricky or difficult to focus on, think of the wind on your face, the sun on your neck, your feet in your shoes, and so on. Depending on the environment you're in, you may be able to bring your awareness to smells, as well. Taste would be pretty tricky here, so reserve that sense for mindful eating.

As with all other mindfulness practices, becoming distracted is normal. When this happens, just gently bring your awareness back to your pace and your sense.

Continue walking slowly and mindfully for about fifteen minutes, then take some time to contemplate and answer the following questions.

What did you notice as your slowed your pace?

What sense or senses did you connect to? What did you notice through these senses as your pace slowed?

What did you notice as you walked at a slower than normal pace? Did you become more aware of your environment than you otherwise might have? If so, how?

What sense or senses did you connect to? What did you notice through these senses as you adopted a slower pace? How did your awareness shift? Did colors seem different? Did you hear things you normally might not hear?

What awareness did you have about the pace at which you normally move and the pace you adopted for this practice? How was your body feeling? What changes occurred?

Autogenic Relaxation

Find a comfortable position to sit or lie down. Autogenic relaxation is an effective relaxation technique that will allow you to relax your body and calm your mind.

Begin by breathing deeply, drawing air in... deep into your lungs... and releasing the breath slowly....

Breathe in....2....3....4...hold...2....3....exhale....2....3....4....5...

again....2....3....4....pause....2....3....exhale....2....3....4....5....

Continue taking slow, regular breaths.

Now turn your attention to your right hand. Feel the skin on the palm of your right hand becoming warm and relaxed. Feel the warmth in each finger....and on your palm....spreading to the back of your hand.... to your wrist....

Feel your right arm becoming warm.....

Your right arm is starting to feel very heavy.... very heavy, and very relaxed.

Your right arm is warm, heavy, and relaxed.

Now focus on your left hand. Picture placing your left hand into soothing, warm water. Feel the warmth relaxing your hand completely. Allow your wrist to enter the warm, calming water..... and relax. Your arm is becoming heavy. Allow your left arm to sink into the warm water. Your left arm feels warm, heavy, and relaxed.

Now turn your attention to your legs. Feel your legs becoming warm. Feel the warmth spreading all the way from your feet.... to your ankles.... lower legs....knees....and hips. Feel your legs becoming heavy.... very heavy, and very relaxed.

Your legs are warm....heavy.....and relaxed....

Imagine a warm breeze blowing across your face.... feel your face and head relaxing.... your eyelids are very heavy....

Picture the sun shining down on you....warming the front of your body..... allow your chest and stomach to relax in this warmth.... feel the sun shining....warming your skin....relaxing your body.... as your body is filled with heavy, warm, pleasant relaxation.

Now imagine sitting with your back to a pleasant campfire. Feel the warmth of the fire on your back. Feel your back warming and relaxing..... the warmth spreads all the way from your neck...to your shoulders.....your upper back....middle and lower back..... feel your body relaxing as it becomes warm and calm....

Feel the heaviness in your entire body.... your body is warm....heavy.... and relaxed...

Enjoy this calm, relaxed feeling.

Notice your smooth, even breathing....relaxed and deep....drawing you even deeper into relaxation....

Your body feels very heavy....warm....and relaxed....

Now slowly begin to bring your attention back to the present.... keeping your eyes closed...notice the room around you....notice the surface that you are lying or sitting on.... hear the sounds in your environment....

Gently start to reawaken your body.... wiggle your fingers and toes....move your arms and legs a little.... stretch if you like....

When you are ready, open your eyes.... and become fully alert.

Appendix C: Walking Meditation

Meditation can be practiced in any posture, including sitting, standing, lying down, and walking. Walking meditation involves mindfully noting sensations in the body while standing and walking. It is an opportunity to intentionally train the mind to pay attention in an open, curious, and nonjudgmental way, through attending to the process of walking.

To begin a period of walking meditation, it is helpful to find a quiet place, 10 to 20 feet in length, in which to walk back and forth. It is important to remember that you are not trying to get somewhere, or to walk for exercise; you are walking to develop mindfulness. It is helpful to first make an intention for walking period, consciously reflecting on why you are practicing in the first place. Once your intention is clear, let it fall to the background of your awareness., and focus your attention on the sensations of standing, aware of your weight, the sensations in the feet, attending to all of the subtle movements and shifting that are in play to maintain balance.

When you are ready, begin to slowly walk to the end of the path, keeping your attention on the experience of walking. You can mentally note “lifting,” “stepping,” “placing” as you actually experience each of these movements. Once you have reached the end of your path, pause, reestablish the body in standing, and reconnect with your breathing.

Not-Knowing

adapted from a talk by Gil Fronsdal, February 10th, 2004

Buddhist practice involves an interplay between knowing and not-knowing. In Vipassana we often emphasize knowing and seeing deeply into our lived experience. However, just as our capacity to know can be developed, so can we cultivate a wise practice of not-knowing.

“Not-knowing” is emphasized in Zen practice, where it is sometimes called “beginner’s mind.” An expert may know a subject deeply, yet be blinded to new possibilities by his or her preconceived ideas. In contrast, a beginner may see with fresh, unbiased eyes. The practice of beginner’s mind is to cultivate an ability to meet life without preconceived ideas, interpretations, or judgments.

I can recall many situations in my life where preconceived ideas obscured my seeing clearly. Once, working as a restaurant cook, I was leaving my shift just as a co-worker started his. When I began joking with him as usual, he quickly interrupted me to say that one of his best friends had just died. If I had practiced beginner’s mind, I would have taken the time to discover who he was at that moment. Instead, I felt regret for being insensitive.

I once attended a weekend “Death and Dying” workshop with Stephen Levine. When the workshop started I was stunned by the amount of suffering in the room. Some were dying. Others had recently lost a child, a partner, or a parent. Some had witnessed tragic deaths. One had nearly died herself. The weekend taught me to not to assume I know people from my first impressions. Now I try to remember that they have depths that I might not know about.

This experience points out another kind of not-knowing as well. How would you live your life if you had a clear sense of the uncertainty of the time and place of death-your own and others’? Most people don’t know when death will come. We often live as if we were certain about things that are inherently uncertain. How would we live if we acknowledged our uncertainty?

What is it like to be aware that we don’t know the answers to some of the life’s big questions? People often ask Buddhist teachers about what happens when we die, or the meaning of life. I have been inspired by those who answer that they don’t know, and seem very comfortable with not-knowing. Perhaps these questions are irrelevant to their spiritual life.

Often people are anxious to find the ultimate meaning of life or understand what happens in death because they are afraid of the unknown. They may look to religion for answers. Buddhism, at its heart, is not about answering these questions but about resolving the fear that motivates the questions. Rather than providing security through religious knowing, Buddhist practice calls on us to become free from attachment to security, free from the need to know.

A simple but profound way to practice not-knowing is to add “I don’t know” to every thought. This is most effective in meditation when the mind has quieted down. So, for example, if the judgment arises, “This is a good meditation session” or “this is a bad meditation session,” respond with “I don’t know.” Follow the thought “I can’t manage this,” “I need...,” or “I am...” with “I don’t know.” Like the bumper sticker that says “Question authority,” the phrase “I don’t know” questions the authority of everything we think.

Repeating the words “I don’t know” allows us to question tightly-held ideas. Done thoroughly, “I don’t know” can pull the rug out from under our most cherished beliefs. All too often we don’t question our beliefs. And, since virtually every train of thought has some implicit belief, when we question our thoughts, we question these beliefs.

“Don’t know” can also be directed at motivations that lead us to act. Before adjusting your posture in meditation or quitting walking meditation early, notice what belief is operating in the motivation. Then direct “don’t know” to that belief and see what happens.

When I was kitchen manager in a monastery, I saw how much I was driven by the need to be liked. The way I talked and behaved with the crew was often influenced by this desire. To ensure that what I did or said did not trigger their reactivity and dislike, I felt I had to tiptoe around their (and my) egos. But during that year I began to question my need to be liked. Upon what authority was I basing this need? Did I really know if it was important to have people like me? Don’t know.

Don’t know. Don’t know. Repeated regularly, it almost becomes a mantra in response to what we think or believe. This phrase can open up a space in the mind, helping it to relax and rest. The little phrase, “I don’t know,” is very, very powerful.

One Zen story proclaims, “Not knowing is most intimate.” I understand this to mean that what is most essential is not understood through the filter of our judgments, past knowledge, or memories. When not-knowing helps these to drop away, the result can be a greater immediacy-what some might call being intimate.

The practice of not-knowing needs to be distinguished from confusion and debilitating doubt. Confusion is not a virtue: the confused person is somewhat lost and removed from life. With doubt, the mind is agitated or contracted with hesitation and indecision. These mind states tend to obscure rather than clarify. Furthermore, confusion and doubt are generally involuntary. Not-knowing, as a practice, is a choice meant to bring greater peace.

But lest we take the not-knowing practice too far, Suzuki Roshi said, “Not-knowing does not mean you don’t know.” It doesn’t require us to forget everything we have known or to suspend all interpretations of a situation. Not-knowing means not being limited by what we know, holding what we know lightly so that we are ready for it to be different. Maybe things are this way. But maybe they are not.

As a Buddhist practice, not-knowing leads to more than an intimacy and open mind. It can be used as a sword to cut through all the ways that the mind clings. If we can wield this sword until the mind lets go of itself and finally knows ultimate freedom, then-not knowing has served its ultimate purpose.