

Mindfulness Meditation Group

Non Striving Week 7

Letting go of struggle, trying and effort, we realize that the best way to achieve our goals is to see and accept things as they are in the present moment.



“Non-striving is action without striving, without trying. It is more like natural action. Action that fits in the flow of situation, relevant to the objective reality. Stop trying.

When you try, you don't do. (you are not 100%)

When you stop trying, you simply do. (now you can be 100%)

Sound simple? It is. Is it easy? Not really. It requires much practice.”

-Kin

“Fill your bowl to the brim
And it will spill.
Keep sharpening your knife
And it will blunt.
Chase after money and security
And your heart will never unclench.
Care about people's approval
And you will be their prisoner.
Do your work, then step back.
The only path to serenity.”

-Chapter 9

Tao Te Ching, Stephen Mitchell Translation

NON STRIVING

Natural action

Moving with the natural flow of events

Letting things unfold in their own way

Presence.

Wholehearted involvement

Complete engagement

No separation between self and activity

Doing vs. trying

Being vs. performing

When and where in my life do I experience these qualities of activity?

What is the quality of mind and feeling in the body that I associate with non striving?

The academic environment promotes an element of striving. How can I stay present-focused and grounding, yet also accomplish what is needed for school?

Consider these aspects of striving: “trying” “comparing myself with others” “struggling to accomplish” Consider the aspects of non-striving listed at the top of the page. How can I begin to cultivate aspects of non-striving in my daily life?

Mindfulness of Thoughts

1. Find a comfortable position either lying on your back or sitting. If you are sitting down, make sure that you keep your back straight and release the tension in your shoulders. Let them drop.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Begin by focusing your attention on your breathing. Simply pay attention to what it feels like in your body to slowly breathe in and out. Spend a few minutes focusing your attention on the full experience of breathing. Immerse yourself completely in this experience. Imagine you are "riding the waves" of your own breathing.
4. Once you have spent some time focusing on your breathing, shift your attention to your thoughts. Bring awareness to whatever thoughts enter your mind.
5. Try to view your thoughts as simply thoughts -- only objects in or events of your mind. It may be useful to imagine your thoughts as simply clouds passing through the sky or leaves passing down a stream. Notice them enter your consciousness, develop, and then float away. There is no need to seek out, hold onto, or follow your thoughts. Just let them arise and disappear on their own.
6. Anytime that you notice that you are getting immersed in a thought (this is completely normal), notice what took you away from your "observer stance" and bring your attention back to having awareness of your thoughts.
7. After a few minutes, shift your attention back to your breathing, and when you are ready, open your eyes.

Tips:

1. Before you try this exercise, it may be useful to first practice mindful awareness of your breathing.
2. Make this a habit. Practice everyday.
3. At first, it may be important to practice this exercise with thoughts that are not upsetting. Learn how to first be mindful of thoughts in general, and once you feel comfortable, practice this exercise with other thoughts.
4. You are going to get caught up in your thoughts from time to time. Try not to get discouraged -- this is completely normal, and simply noticing this is being mindful. Whenever you do get caught up in your thoughts, remind yourself that this is natural and then bring your attention back to simply observing your thoughts.

Sitting Meditation

What is so special about sitting? Nothing, when we speak of the way we ordinarily sit. It's just one convenient way our bodies take a load off our feet. But sitting is very special when it comes to meditation.

You can know that superficially easily enough from the outside. For instance, you might not know that a person is meditating when you see him standing or lying down, or walking, but you know it immediately when he is sitting, -especially if he is sitting on the floor. From any angle, the posture itself embodies wakefulness, even when the eyes are closed and the face is serene and peaceful. It is mountain-like in its majesty and solidity. There is a stability to it which speaks volumes, broadcasting inwardly and outwardly. The moment the person dozes off, all these qualities evaporate. The mind collapses inwardly, the body visibly.

Sitting meditation involves sitting in an upright, dignified posture, often for extended periods of time. While it is relatively easy to assume an erect posture, that is just the beginning of this challenging process of continual unfolding. You may readily enough "park" your body, but there is still the question of what the mind is up to. Sitting meditation is not a matter of taking on a special body posture, however powerful that may be. It is adopting a particular posture toward the mind. It is mind sitting.

Once you are sitting, there are many ways to approach the present moment. All involve paying attention on purpose, non-judgmentally. What varies is what you attend to and how.

It is best to keep things simple and start with your breathing, feeling it as it moves in and out. Ultimately, you can expand your awareness to observe all the comings and goings, the gyrations and machinations of your own thoughts and feelings, perceptions and impulses, body and mind. But it may take some time for concentration and mindfulness to become strong enough to hold such a wide range of objects in awareness without getting lost in them or attached to particular ones, or simply overwhelmed. For most of us, it takes years and depends a good deal on your motivation and the intensity of your practice. So, at the beginning, you might want to stay with the breath, or use it as an anchor to bring you back when you are carried away. Try it for a few years and see what happens.

TRY: Setting aside a time every day for just being. Five minutes would be fine, or ten or twenty or thirty if you want to venture that far. Sit down and watch the moments unfold, with no agenda other than to be fully present. Use the breath as an anchor to tether your attention to the present moment. Your thinking mind will drift here and there, depending on the currents and winds moving in the mind until, at some point, the anchor line grows taut and brings you back. This may happen a lot. Bring your attention back to the breath, in all its vividness, every time it wanders. Keep the posture erect but not stiff. Think of yourself as a mountain.

Appendix B: Sitting Meditation

Begin by setting an intention for this sitting practice. The intention can be whatever feels most true for you in this moment: for example, “May I bring kindness and curiosity to each moment.” “May I have a beginner’s mind,” or “May this practice be of benefit for all beings.” Once you have set your intention clearly, perhaps speaking it silently to yourself, you can gently let it go as you consciously focus your attention on your body sitting. Get a sense of your feet connected to the earth, contacting both legs, your seat, your spine, and torso. Become aware of your arms, your hands resting in your lap, your shoulders, neck, face. Sense the whole body sitting. Allow the mind to be spacious and the body to relax. You don’t have to make anything happen.

And notice that you are breathing. Not trying to change the breath, but simply experiencing it. Keep your attention clearly focused on the sensations of each breath as it flows in and out of the body on its own. You may notice the breath most distinctly in one part of the body- for example, the rising and falling of the abdomen or the in and out at the nostrils. See how carefully and continuously you can feel the sensations of the entire inhalation and exhalation.

And notice the rising and falling movement of the abdomen or the in and out of the air at the nostrils. Let the awareness be accepting and open, not trying to control the breath but simply letting it come and go in its own rhythm. Feel the sensations of each breath completely, not thinking about them but actually feeling what is here in each moment.

At times the breath will be strong and clear, sometimes it will be soft or indistinct. Simply notice what is. Is the breath long or short, rough or smooth? Be with the breath as it continually changes, feeling it, sensing it.

If while you are attending to the breath, sounds become predominant and call your attention away from the breathing, make a note of hearing. Attend to the experience of the sound, not trying to identify what’s causing the sound, such as a “car” or “air conditioning” but just being with the vibration of hearing. When the hearing is no longer predominant, return to the breath.

If physical sensations in the body, emotions, or thoughts call your attention away from the breath, shift your focus to the sensation, emotion, or thought itself. Carefully and gently explore the nature of the experience. Notice what happens as you attend to it: Does it become stronger? Weaker? Does it dissolve or intensify?

And once you have noted your experience, return to the breath, using the breath as an anchor, helping you return again and again to the present moment. Gently note where your mind is pulled, and then return again to the breath. The continuity of attention and of mental noting strengthens the mindfulness and concentration. When you drift and forget your focus, when the mind wanders, simply make note of “wandering” as soon as you’re aware of it and gently come back to your breathing.

Keep the awareness simple, and remain grounded in the experience of breathing. Notice what calls your attention away from the breath, and then gently return, over and over again.

And when it is time for the sitting meditation to come to a close, notice how your mind, body, and heart feel. Thank yourself for taking this time to cultivate greater awareness, kindness, and insight. Perhaps make an intention to bring this mindfulness with you in your daily life. As you gently allow light to come back in through your eyes, and movement to begin in the body, see whether you can continue your mindful awareness moment by moment.

Doing Non-Doing

Non-doing has nothing to do with being indolent or passive. Quite the contrary. It takes great courage and energy to cultivate non-doing, both in stillness and in activity. Nor is it easy to make a special time for non-doing and to keep at it in the face of everything in our lives which needs to be done.

But non-doing doesn't have to be threatening to people who feel they always have to get things done. They might find they get even more "done," and done better, by practicing non-doing. Non-doing simply means letting things be and allowing them to unfold in their own way. Enormous effort can be involved, but it is a graceful, knowledgeable, effortless effort, a "doerless doing," cultivated over a lifetime.

Effortless activity happens at moments in dance and in sports at the highest levels of performance; when it does, it takes everybody's breath away. But it also happens in every area of human activity, from painting to car repair to parenting. Years of practice and experience combine on some occasions, giving rise to a new capacity to let execution unfold beyond technique, beyond exertion, beyond thinking. Action then becomes a pure expression of art, of being, of letting go of all doing—a merging of mind and body in motion. We thrill in watching a superb performance, whether athletic or artistic, because it allows us to participate in the magic of true mastery, to be uplifted, if only briefly, and perhaps to share in the intention that each of us, in our own way, might touch such moments of grace and harmony in the living of our own lives.

Thoreau said, "To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts." Martha Graham, speaking of the art of dance, put it this way: "All that is important is this one moment in movement. Make the moment vital and worth living. Do not let it slip away unnoticed and unused."

No meditation masters could have spoken truer. We can apprentice ourselves to this work, knowing full well that non-doing is truly the work of a lifetime; and conscious all the while that the doing mode is usually so strong in us that the cultivating of non-doing ironically takes considerable effort.

Meditation is synonymous with the practice of non-doing. We aren't practicing to make things perfect or to do things perfectly. Rather, we practice to grasp and realize (make real for ourselves) the fact that things already are perfect, perfectly what they are. This has everything to do with holding the present moment in its fullness without imposing anything extra on it, perceiving its purity and the freshness of its potential to give rise to the next moment. Then, knowing what is what, seeing as clearly as possible, and conscious of not knowing more than we actually do, we act, make a move, take a stand, take a chance.

Standing Meditation

Standing meditation is best learned from trees. Stand close to one, or, better still, in a stand of trees and just peer out in one direction. Feel your feet developing roots into the ground. Feel your body sway gently, as it always will, just as trees do in a breeze. Staying put, in touch with your breathing, drink in what is in front of you, or keep your eyes closed and sense your surroundings. Sense the tree closest to you. Listen to it, feel its presence, touch it with your mind and body.

Use your breath to help you to stay in the moment ... feeling your own body standing, breathing, being, moment by moment.

When mind or body first signals that perhaps it is time to move on, stay with the standing a while longer, remembering that trees stand still for years, occasionally lifetimes if they are fortunate. See if they do not have something to teach you about stillness and about being in touch. After all, they are touching the ground with roots and trunk, the air with trunk and branches, sunlight and the wind with their leaves; everything about a standing tree speaks of being in touch. Experiment with standing this way yourself, even for short periods of time. Work at being in touch with the air on your skin, the feel of the feet in contact with the ground, the sounds of the world, the dance of light and color and shadow, the dance of the mind.

TRY: Standing like this wherever you find yourself, in the woods, in the mountains, by a river, in your living room, or just waiting for the bus. When you are alone, you might try opening your palms to the sky and holding your arms out in various positions, like branches and leaves, accessible, open, receptive, patient.

How Meditation May Change the Brain

By SINDYA N. BHANOO JANUARY 28, 2011 10:29 AM January 28, 2011 10:29 am

Over the December holidays, my husband went on a 10-day silent meditation retreat. Not my idea of fun, but he came back rejuvenated and energetic.

He said the experience was so transformational that he has committed to meditating for two hours daily, one hour in the morning and one in the evening, until the end of March. He's running an experiment to determine whether and how meditation actually improves the quality of his life.

I'll admit I'm a skeptic.

But now, scientists say that meditators like my husband may be benefiting from changes in their brains. The researchers report that those who meditated for about 30 minutes a day for eight weeks had measurable changes in gray-matter density in parts of the brain associated with memory, sense of self, empathy and stress. The findings will appear in the Jan. 30 issue of *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*.

M.R.I. brain scans taken before and after the participants' meditation regimen found increased gray matter in the hippocampus, an area important for learning and memory. The images also showed a reduction of gray matter in the amygdala, a region connected to anxiety and stress. A control group that did not practice meditation showed no such changes.

But how exactly did these study volunteers, all seeking stress reduction in their lives but new to the practice, meditate? So many people talk about meditating these days. Within four miles of our Bay Area home, there are at least six centers that offer some type of meditation class, and I often hear phrases like, "So how was your sit today?"

Britta Hölzel, a psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School and the study's lead author, said the participants practiced mindfulness meditation, a form of meditation that was introduced in the United States in the late 1970s. It traces its roots to the same ancient Buddhist techniques that my husband follows.

"The main idea is to use different objects to focus one's attention, and it could be a focus on sensations of breathing, or emotions or thoughts, or observing any type of body sensations," she said. "But it's about bringing the mind back to the here and now, as opposed to letting the mind drift."

Generally the meditators are seated upright on a chair or the floor and in silence, although sometimes there might be a guide leading a session, Dr. Hölzel said.

Of course, it's important to remember that the human brain is complicated. Understanding what the increased density of gray matter really means is still, well, a gray area.

"The field is very, very young, and we don't really know enough about it yet," Dr. Hölzel said. "I would say these are still quite preliminary findings. We see that there is something there, but we have to replicate these findings and find out what they really mean."

It has been hard to pinpoint the benefits of meditation, but a 2009 study suggests that meditation may reduce blood pressure in patients with coronary heart disease. And a 2007 study found that meditators have longer attention spans.

Previous studies have also shown that there are structural differences between the brains of meditators and those who don't meditate, although this new study is the first to document changes in gray matter over time through meditation.

Ultimately, Dr. Hölzel said she and her colleagues would like to demonstrate how meditation results in definitive improvements in people's lives.

"A lot of studies find that it increases well-being, improves quality of life, but it's always hard to determine how you can objectively test that," she said. "Relatively little is known about the brain and the psychological mechanisms about how this is being done."

In a 2008 study published in the journal PloS One, researchers found that when meditators heard the sounds of people suffering, they had stronger activation levels in their temporal parietal junctures, a part of the brain tied to empathy, than people who did not meditate.

"They may be more willing to help when someone suffers, and act more compassionately," Dr. Hölzel said.

Further study is needed, but that bodes well for me.

For now, I'm more than happy to support my husband's little experiment, despite the fact that he now rises at 5 a.m. and is exhausted by 10 at night.

An empathetic husband who takes out the trash and puts gas in the car because he knows I don't like to — I'll take that.