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Mylène Huynh
Medical Doctor at
Walter Reed National
Military Medical Center





TAKE YOUR MIND FOR A WALK





Meditation can seem so meaningful and significant that it becomes a great big chore. In fact, with a slight shift in attitude, it can be as simple as walking the dog.

So you started meditating—perhaps you completed a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course—and you sat there on your shiny new cushion that you just bought, convinced that practicing meditation was going to finally do what nothing else had. It just made sense: letting go of the seeming unending judgmental activity of your mind and dropping down into a more purposeful and balanced life of equanimity and loving-kindness. You were set. You found a

way to carve out time in your crazy schedule to just sit and watch your breath. And off you went.

Watching the in-breath and the out-breath. Seeing thoughts arise and simply noting them arising, dropping back into the breath when you found yourself caught up in thinking. Working mindfully with difficult emotions that periodically oozed in.

Faithfully (and a little bit hopefully), you sat and watched it all unfold, and perhaps you even →

By Steve Hickman
Illustrations by Min Ahwon



noticed a little more patience, or a shift in perspective on a longtime challenge. A few of the little “appetizers” that a fledgling mindfulness practice can offer up to keep you coming back to the cushion, even when it isn’t easy. Like, when you feel the magnetic pull of a warm bed at your early morning meditation time. You begin to waver and doubt creeps in. Or you “hit the wall” and question yourself, mindfulness, and everything that seemed so clear when you started.

Questions arise. Dark clouds of doubt periodically obscure the bright light that mindful clarity promises. You find that other things seem just a bit more important than your regular formal practice. Boredom arises and time on the cushion begins to feel like it will never end. Whatever the form, skepticism, distraction, boredom, or outright disdain will inevitably enter into the practice. Referred to as the “hindrances” of sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt, they are to be considered phenomena like any other. To be seen as leaves on a stream or clouds on the horizon.

And sometimes we can do that. But sometimes we need a little help.

Dealing with distraction

“I sit down to meditate with good intentions, and then I hear music from my neighbor’s apartment, or my cell phone vibrating, or my leg starts hurting, and I can’t meditate because of all these distractions. I need to find a quieter place to practice or somehow shut out all these sounds and thoughts so I can actually focus on my breath.”

Consider the possibility that nothing is a distraction in the practice of

Steve Hickman is founder and director of the University of California at San Diego Center for Mindfulness. He is a Clinical Psychologist and Associate Professor in the Psychiatry and Family & Preventive Medicine Departments.



mindfulness. What I mean is that no thing (no sound, thought, sensation, smell, whatever) is inherently a distraction in and of itself. They are simply phenomena that arise in meditation.

So where does distraction come in? Well, here’s where you feature prominently. When that annoying sound your roommate makes as she butters her toast becomes your own obsession, you have made toast-buttering into a distraction. When you chase the tingling in your right knee with an inner struggle about how to stop it before amputation is necessary, you have left your breath and entered the distraction zone.

The liberation of mindfulness is that we can cultivate a different relationship with these co-dependent attention suckers. We can come to simply note their arising in our awareness and remain steadily aware of the breath. It is only when we invest our energy—attention, thinking, analysis, struggle, etc.—in these phenomena that they become distractions.

But don’t take my word for it. Try it out. The next time you meditate, see if you can take this stance of “No Distractions” and observe what happens when things arise. You know they will. After all, even when we are feeling some degree of success at

keeping our attention on the breath, other stuff is arising right? The hum of traffic outside, the touch of clothing on the skin, the memory of Aunt Peg’s tuna salad. It all flows by and sometimes we aren’t distracted by it. There is an awareness that it’s present, but we can stay on task too.

A little less color, a little more play-by-play

Our minds could be said to be the “sportscasters” of our direct experience. What happens to us and around us and within us just happens. And then our minds try to make something meaningful of those experiences. It’s like the play-by-play guy and the color commentator in a game of football.

For example, you are sitting and breathing, minding your own business and riding the flow of the breath in and out. Woohoo! You just managed to be mindful of one whole breath! “I did it!” you say to yourself. “I usually have more trouble than this! I think I’m getting better at meditating,” you note with no small amount of satisfaction.

And that’s when your trouble began. The play-by-play commentator reported the in-breath, the belly movement, the out-breath, all with an air of authenticity and trustworthi-



We can't change our dog's nature, and the same is true of our minds. They will follow thoughts, especially if they promise an adventure.

ness. And then the color guy jumped in and “BAM! BOOM! You did it! You were RIGHT THERE IN THE FACE OF THAT BREATH!” Pride balloons, you recall a few previous experiences and you can already hear it: “Turn out the lights, the party’s over!”

Most times, we are practicing the art of “intrapersonal play-by-play” when we meditate. But there is a part of us that wants to provide context, story arc, suspense, drama, anticipation. That is our own private color commentator.

Unfortunately we don't get to choose these commentators. They are assigned by history, experience, and random forces beyond our comprehension. They can be internalized voices of critical parents, manifestations of deep fears, or meandering intellectualized monologues. They can't easily be silenced, the more we argue with them the louder they get, and while we are arguing we miss the game—our life. What are we to do?

Perhaps we can drop back into the play-by-play. Notice that while the color commentator yammers on and on, we can simply attend to the game itself. Notice the action, check the score, feel the familiar tension in the pit of our stomach at the critical junctures, and appreciate the beauty and brilliance of the game unfolding.

And when the color commentator does what it does, thank him or her for the observation and return to the fullness of this precious moment that blooms on its own, with or without commentary, analysis, or clever metaphors. It just is what it is.

Meditate like you walk the dog

He's not the brightest flame in the canine candelabra but Cody, my golden retriever, has got charm, personality, and a goofy disposition that suits his goofy human quite well. And Cody taught me a lesson in mindfulness practice.

Have you ever felt that you are at the mercy of your mind when meditating? You're watching your breath when the mind serves up a juicy thought. Perhaps you are contemplating a Hollywood hunk's marital woes and your odds for stepping in as his next love. Maybe it's just the enticing smell of dinner simmering. Cody is bright and cheerful, and can be quite attentive, but let him catch sight of a bushy-tailed rodent and you can almost hear him exclaim “Squirrel!!!!” and he's off on the chase. That is how our minds tend to be, doglike and distractible.

So what to do? We can't change the nature of our dogs, and the

same is true of our minds. They follow thoughts, especially if they are compelling, seductive, and promise an adventure, however illusory or ultimately preposterous (like a dog *actually* catching a squirrel.)

So how about if you cultivate the neural equivalent of a retractable leash? You know those spring-loaded devices that allow your dog to go off on little mini-adventures, investigating fascinating smells and scurrying creatures, while you continue down your chosen path.

How do you do this with your mind?

Notice your mind doing what it does with playful curiosity, tolerance of its tendencies, and a sense of intention to remain where you are. Little by little, when we let go of needing our mind/dog to go anywhere in particular, we find that we stay on our path regardless. Mindfulness cultivates an allowing of the peccadilloes and idiosyncrasies of our mental activity, all the while staying on task, which is to notice. Just notice!

Next time you are sitting and your mind finds its latest squirrel, watch the chase with calm abiding amusement. Trust that it will return eventually, and sooner than if you had chased after it and tried to subdue it.

Give yourself a new leash on life and meditation—just make sure it's retractable. →

Getting our tush on the cush

You know the scenario: The early-morning time that seemed perfect for meditation practice rolls around exceedingly early and you are lying there in your cozy bed in flannel jammies while a virtual tennis match goes on in your head:

“Get up and meditate, it’s 5:30!”

“I don’t want to, I’m too tired today.”

“You committed to this practice. Get up!”

“I’ll meditate tonight after work.”

“You always say that and it never happens. Get your butt in gear!”

“Five more minutes . . .”

“Seriously? You can’t expect me to fall for that one again!”

If (or when) you DO get up and practice, you are glad you did and may feel a bit smug about having overcome the inner dialogue to do what you knew was best.

If (or when) you DON’T get up and practice, you know that guilt-soaked aftermath of recrimination and self-loathing that arises and activates those old judgmental habits of mind about your worth as a human and your ability as a meditator.

So what to do when something (everything) seems more attractive than formal practice?

You can notice the temptation as one of the hindrances of meditation practice and simply allow it to be another arising in your awareness. But sometimes that isn’t so easy. Then again, who said this was going to be easy?

If simply noticing hindrances doesn’t lead to change in your practice, you might consider noticing that you have an inner ping-pong match going on between your deep desire to practice and the agenda that your wandering wild brain has for you. It’s just possible that your brain does not always have your own best interests at heart. Think about it: Can you really trust your brain to take good care of you?

As the comedian Emo Phillips once said, “I used to think my brain was the most important organ in the body. And then I realized which organ was telling me that.”

What if you listened, not to that loudmouthed brain, but to that deep yearning inside that got you to practice in the first place, that has touched you now and then, and fuels a desire for change and ease in your life?

See if you can sit with that inner wellspring of equanimity and health that you have touched inside.

And consider practicing right where you are for a bit! It’s unconventional but if you’re going to be busy watching your mental activity over whether or not to get up and meditate, you’re meditating already, so why move? Nobody said the cushion was magic, and what is a bed but a really big cushion anyway? Drop into your breath, let your thoughts unfold as they will, and log some meditation time, too! It’s not a compromise or an alternative to formal meditation, it actually IS meditation if you choose to treat it as such.

Mindfulness practice happens anytime we open up to it.

Inspiration, expiration, and the illusion of control

I looked over in stop-and-go traffic and saw a little boy firmly intent on the simulated kiddie dashboard hanging from his mom’s headrest in front of him. His pudgy fingers white-knuckled on the steering wheel and shift lever, brow furrowed with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

We are often like this young child, clutching the levers and pressing the buttons of our own lives with all our might, carefully trying to coax a desired course out of the chaos of life, but who are we kidding? How much control do we really have, and how much energy do we invest in trying to control and contrive outcomes that we are convinced are right, or good,

or imperative? And while we can chart our course and connect with an intention to move in desired directions, there are often circumstances beyond our control and all we can do is navigate them like whitewater rapids, clinging tenuously to our intentions and keeping our eyes on the prize.

Take breathing as a great analogy to life. Breathing is a singular activity to which we can tune in whenever we wish, and the opportunity exists to actually control it for awhile. We can make our bodies breathe out of our own intentions for a time. But if we were left to be totally, consciously responsible for breathing for the balance of our lives, we would frequently botch it up and end up gasping for breath and keeling over blue-faced on a regular basis. We just can’t keep up that kind of control while going about our lives. Fortunately we don’t need to.

Life is like that, too. We can exert control over certain aspects, but things tend to turn out best when we don’t cling too tightly. We can hold life lightly, remain clear on our intention, and then see what unfolds. Or we can cling with a death-grip to our idea of what needs to happen and see how well THAT works out!

When it comes to meditation, we can try to breathe in certain ways, but that just gets us tangled up in trying to control an already perfect process that actually works best when we get out of our own way. See if you can simply let the breath breathe itself and see what can come of that soft attitude and gentle kindness of attention.

That’s meditation. Pure and simple. No bells, no whistles, no steering wheels or shift levers. Pretty cool, huh? I highly recommend it. ●