



Mindfulness: A Place to Begin

Happy summer to all!

I hear so often from clients that they want to learn to meditate, or become more mindful, but they are confused where to start. Mindfulness is becoming so popular in medical literature and treatment, yet many of us are puzzled on how to develop these skills.

I hear reports in my clinical work of people feeling that life is passing them by. It can be a minor dissociation such as not remembering the drive into work, an emotional detachment from others, or memory loss due to a stressful work environment. These feelings can cause grief and panic. A deeper sense of anxiety can develop when one feels helpless about how to manage his/her lack of connectedness to the world.

There are a few reasons that “living in the moment” may be complex for our culture. The first could be that we are a society that values upward mobility and striving to obtain the next level of perceived success. Once we reach a milestone in our personal or professional lives, we rarely savor the moment; but feel compelled to move on to the next goal. We are also a culture that values instant gratification. We can struggle with the idea of waiting on something or processing options. We may feel like we are wasting time if we slow down-or are made to feel guilty if appear to be “unproductive.”

How do we find a way to enjoy the small things in life when we are trained to do the contrary? Everyone has a different cognitive and expressive style. Eastern meditation may suit some people, but can be overwhelming for others. The idea of sitting in silence for hours may create more panic than tranquility for some! I do not have a concrete solution that would suit everyone, however, I would like to offer some pragmatic advice that I just came across in my summer reading. Every summer I enjoy reading Carl Jung’s work because I enjoy taking time to connect to his spiritual enquiries. I came across a brief application that may be helpful from his work in *Man and His Symbols*.

Four important components of human functioning were referenced in Jung's writings referenced in the paragraph above: **sensation** (this tells us something actually exists), **thinking** (this tells you actually what IS), **intuition** (this tells us where something may have come from and where it is going, and **feeling** (this tells us about a judgement or value that we give to something) (Jung, 1964, p. 49).

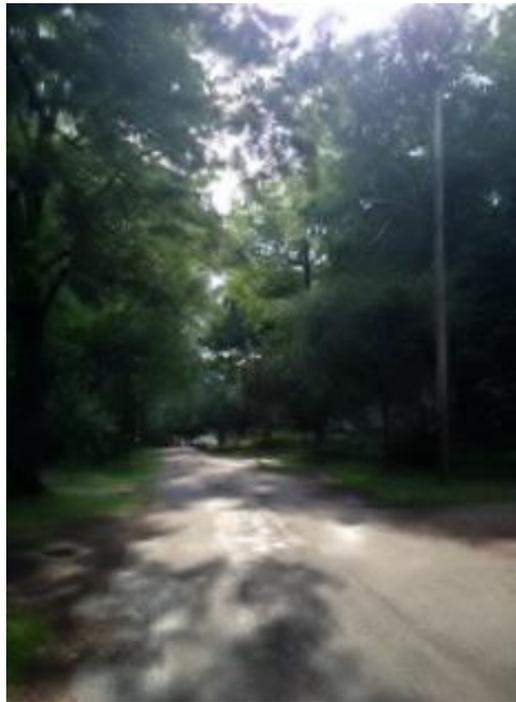
If we cannot commit to yoga or meditation every day, perhaps we can at least take the time to become aware of these four human experiences. Sensation can help us appreciate aesthetic beauty that we may ignore. When we walk by a tree or flower garden, instead of simply thinking it is pretty, we can stop and take note of the **sensations** that are evoked. How does it look? How does it smell? Can we touch it, if so, what does it feel like or remind us of? What does it make our body feel like? When we **think**, we can pay attention to our environment and formulate other questions. We can ask how many trees we walk by every day and ignore, we can think about the ecosystem associated with the tree. Can we learn more about the birds or insects that live in the tree? In regard to **intuition**, can we think about where the tree came from and how that connects us to something larger than ourselves? Why is the "tree of life" a universal symbol of humanity in most cultures of the world? Can we listen to our inner voice about what nature can do for us? Do we have a calling or responsibility that we can gather from our intuition? Lastly, what are your feelings about the experience? Do you feel positively when you are in a certain environment? Do you feel a different kind of joy or peace in different environments?

I suggested a lot of questions to ask about a mere tree or a flower. There is a reason most of us long for vacation (other than the obvious reasons of getting away from work). We associate vacations with symbols and memories. They can be very specific-such as a beach, an island, a mountain region or a running stream. Vacations may also mean re-kindling love or passion or enjoying your family in a more intimate way. Why do people say "vacation sex" is better than normal sex? Why do people say that the only time they can get their kids off of their cell phone is when they are at the beach? It would seem that we love people the same, regardless of where we cohabit with them, but when we are free to experience more of our human senses, we feel revived! We can vividly recall the sensation of sand in between our toes or the smell of fresh pine trees from a vacation, yet we rarely take note of the trees and flora in our own backyard and the beautiful transformations they have every season. We can also forget how deeply our attachments run with loved ones in our day to day lives.

I am hoping these concepts can be a start to becoming more connected to your environment. If we pay attention to how the small things impact us, we can become more mindful of the joys in our natural environment and in our interactions with other humans. If we can appreciate the small gifts of life, we do not have to waste the months away fantasizing about the next vacation-but can embrace the glory of every day. I believe it would be a loss to minimize the days of your life that are not vacation days, as our days are limited and must be cherished.

This summer I am working on a project called the "Ten Mile Radius" where I will be exploring beauty within ten miles of my house that I have ignored. I will be photographing images and posting them when they are complete. Until then-enjoy every aspect of summer and savor each moment! I have also included a photo of the street of my childhood home in Kent, Ohio. A few weeks ago I practiced some of these mindfulness exercises while visiting my parents. I felt a deep connectedness to the street while pointing out one of my hometown marvels to my young son-black squirrels! I realized the trees and squirrels had a much deeper meaning than I had previously been aware of. It was a walk that I will always treasure.

I wish you happiness and good mental health - until the next time!



Jung, C. (1964). *Man and His Symbols*. New York, NY: Dell Publishing.