

MINDFULNESS FOR BEGINNERS ©
Breathing for Healthy Body and Mind
WITH BERYL BENDER BIRCH

Class 1-5
Mindfulness – Questions and Answers

Transcript

Welcome back. Here we are again. And how is it going? How have you been doing? We want to know how it has been going for you. Have you been doing this for a few weeks now? For some time? What has happened? Have you been really regular in your practice? Been able to easily do this every morning for 10-15 minutes before you head off to work? Or that you manage to do a couple days and then get busy with life and family? Did you start and stop? Have you become completely discouraged or completely excited about this practice?

The important thing to realize is that whatever has happened to you is fine. It's okay. It's very commonplace. People start and then get busy with life and will drop off. We are here to support you, and this program is here to support you in continuing to develop a meditation practice. However this goes for you. You know, sometimes it doesn't get easier. You know, sometimes you sit and you sit and you wonder when you are going to get off the plateau. When is it going to become easy? The important thing is, I think, that to remember is that in your mind, you need to make this something that's enjoyable. Tell yourself this is something you deserve, something you are looking forward to. "Oh, I've got my 10 minutes to just sit and breathe and watch whatever happens." You know, we received a lot of questions from people, maybe even from you, that people have sent in, and they may be some of the same questions that you are asking yourself. You know, like "How come I'm so bad at this?"

There is no such thing as bad at this. You know, what we're training ourselves to do here is to become observant of whatever is coming up. What is taking our attention? What's distracting us? If you're getting the same thought coming up all the time, then you can look at that and you can say, "Well, this is something that I'm really plugged into. This was really upsetting for me. I'm still thinking about that fight I had with my sister. I'm still thinking about the time my

boss yelled at me and I felt stupid." That's perfectly normal and natural. All of us get locked into a pattern of thinking. So this practice is like retraining your brain. It's like, "Do I need to develop a new habit?" And the habit we are trying to develop is simply to become aware of watching. To become aware of watching whatever it is, is going on with us. We are trying to learn how to know what we are doing with our energy.

In yoga we say, "Where your attention goes, energy follows." So if something is taking your attention, then a good bit of energy is going into that direction. We're trying to learn to conserve energy and be mindful of what we do with our energy and how we portion it out. So there is no bad at this. That's why it is so important to get in touch with that, "Oh well, thinking, there I am thinking again, okay, well lets go back to my word." What is my word today? My word might be space. "Ahh, space, space, space. Why do I keep hearing my dog barking in the next room?" Or, "Thinking. Back to my word. Space, space." So it's just practice. Whatever you do, don't waste time telling yourself that you can't do this or you're not good at it. It's like running a marathon or losing weight. You know, you really need to do a little bit every day to become more mindful and more mindful and more mindful.

Are you ever able to turn off your mind? That's a great question. I don't think anybody is ever able to turn off their mind completely. You know, we all have thoughts that come up. Some days, you're going to feel really relaxed and this is going to feel great. Other days, you're going to have a big project ending and you're going to be thinking about it. You know, it's going to keep coming up for you. That's okay. The important thing is to just develop the discipline of showing up. If you can do it the same time every day, you're working on a discipline. Yoga is the discipline. Focusing on the word is distracting for me. So we've just been distracted. What do we do? Well I come back to focusing on delivering this segment of your course. Focusing on the word is distracting for me. Well, my question is it's distracting from what? You know, your first goal is to keep your attention on your word or on your prayer -- whatever you have selected. And notice when you get distracted and come back again.

This is so similar to anything else your trying to master. What ultimately we're trying to do, is learn to turn on the relaxation response, and then use that to develop greater wellness, health, deal with health issues, maybe high blood pressure, maybe insomnia. All the research is

showing us that this stuff works now, that this active, conscious turning on of the relaxation response can help our physical and mental health.

So, if you feel like that word is distracting, just switch that around. That's what your focus is. Whatever else is going on is the distraction. "My back hurts", somebody says. "What can I do?" Do the best you can to find something that's comfortable. If you need to sit in a chair, if you need to lie down, that's OK. Maybe you might want to do some exercises. You might want to go for a little walk first if you're doing exercises for back pain. If you're taking yoga asana class, perhaps doing a little stretching before you sit. But in order... you know, as you become stronger in your ability to focus on the word, the pain is going to dissipate. This is a technique for dealing with pain as well. And it's just about bringing your attention off the pain and onto whatever it is you're focusing on.

How do I know if this is working? I can tell you about some of the things that are in Benson's book, *The Relaxation Revolution*, that he talks about from a medical standpoint. He states that when you're able to turn on the relaxation response, it's characterized by the following things: your heart rate, your blood pressure, your metabolism, your rate of breathing -- are all decreased. Now, you might not be able to know if your metabolism is slower but certainly you can tell if your heart rate slows down or if your breathing is slower. A decrease or calming in brain activity -- you can feel that. It's not thinking that this is agitated constant mind chatter. There is an alertness of quieting. We have awareness of that. You will have awareness of that. An increase in attention and decision-making functions of the brain -- now that's something you can certainly be aware of. One of the things I notice, that students that I teach and work with comment on all the time is, the degree of clarity. I just feel more clear. I feel better able to determine what action to take in any given situation.

And then there are the changes in gene activity -- these are opposite of those associated with stress. And that's probably the most exciting area of research -- that our genes are actually able to change the way they express themselves. And the particular genes they're talking about are those associated with inflammation -- the inflammation, aging, and the antioxidant response. So, that's the medical answer to "How do I know if this is working?"

But how do you know if this is working for you? Learning to pay attention creates change. It creates transformation. Ask anyone you know who is taking yoga (whether its meditation or breathing exercises or asana) if they feel that this practice has changed their life, and every single person you ask will tell you, "Yes." And what happens is that as you practice, the changes come about. "What do I do after 30 days?" You've made it all the way through 30 days and now you're going "Okay, I did the month. You asked me to do a month. Now what?"

Probably the most important thing to stay motivated is to develop what we call in yoga the sangha or the community. You need a support group. You need friends that you can go to who are also doing this. You can certainly stay in touch with us online. We have lots of courses to support your ongoing studies and work. You might want to attend classes at a local yoga studio in meditation or the asana practice (the practice of the yoga postures). I think it's just really important that you check in from time to time and not feel like you're alone on an island somewhere so that you continue to stay motivated and excited about doing this practice. And really, there is no end to this. This goes on forever. You know, it's not like you can just acquire something, dust it off, put it up on a shelf, and now you've got it. Learning yoga, learning meditation, learning mindfulness, is something you're going to practice 24/7 for the rest of your life. Hope to see you out there on the road.

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