

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

Class 1-1
Introduction to Mindfulness

Transcript

Hi everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today for "Mindfulness for Beginners". My name is Beryl Bender Birch, and I am a yoga practitioner and teacher. I have been practicing and teaching mindfulness for a long time, about 40 years. It is important for you to take a moment, I think, to stop and think about why you signed up for this course -- why you want to learn about mindfulness. What is it that makes you curious to learn to be more mindful?

Today, we are going to talk about what is mindfulness: why do we want to do it and why is it good for us. But perhaps your goal is to simply be happier or more content with things the way they are. Or perhaps you are looking to reduce stress in your life, or to learn how to manage stress, actually. It is probably a better way to say that because we cannot really reduce the stress in our life; all we can do is control how we respond to stress. Everyone experiences trauma, I think. Only some people have more catastrophic experiences than others, and this can create tension and anxiety, and we can live in a situation or an environment where it is very stressful for us -- whether it is at work or with family members -- and it is important for our health and for our well-being that we learn how to manage this stress.

Let's talk for a minute about what is mindfulness and how does it relate to yoga. It is, I think, a good thing to start with this -- for us to remember that the word "yoga" is not necessarily synonymous with the word "exercise"; that yoga is about a lot more than just exercising; that the word "yoga" (and especially if we are talking about classical yoga), follows the whole gamut from doing yoga postures (which many of you may have experienced already through learning

breathing techniques) all the way through to meditation. Mindfulness means just learning to pay attention, and yoga is about learning to pay attention. If we had to distill everything -- all the teachings that yoga has to offer -- down to one thing, it would be yoga is about learning to pay attention. It is not just a stretch class, it is not just an exercise class, but all of the tools that we have in yoga are helping us begin to bring our attention into the present moment. So, learning to pay attention is mindfulness. It is just another way of expressing your attention in present time.

Now, why does that help us learn to deal with stress? Why do we want to be in the present moment? You might think about that for a moment. Why do we want to? I am talking to all my friends and students and people who have tuned in, who are here to, perhaps, ask some of the questions that you might have, but why do we want to be present? If you think about it, there really is not another option. If we are not present, where are we? We are absent. We are not here, although there are times when our life is a little stressful, when the present moment is not all that comfortable. If we check out of the present moment by worrying about what is going to happen tomorrow or focusing on what happened yesterday – maybe we had an upsetting day yesterday or we had an argument with our sister or our boss yelled at us -- we are sort of plugged into that and it takes our attention away from now. Well, “now” usually has a pretty good teaching to offer us, and especially when we are going through difficult times. I know many of you have expressed to me over the years that the difficult times in your life are really the times when you felt like you have made the most progress and made the most growth. So the difficult times are just as important as the happy good times.

So, we have talked about what is mindfulness. It is about learning to pay attention. Why do we want to do it? Well, we want to be present and being present, the more we can learn to get our attention in present time, and notice when we are not here, the more we are able to reduce all the mind chatter. All the noise in our mind - that is the primary reason that we create stress. Think about moments in your life when you are anxious. What is creating that anxiety? You are thinking about something that is past that was unpleasant, scary, frightening, or traumatic. Or you are thinking about something that might happen tomorrow, or something you have to do tomorrow that you are not particularly looking forward to. And so we start to ruminate and get stressed out about it, and our physical body starts experiencing the effects of that stress. So,

we are going to take a moment when we notice that these yoga techniques that we are going to work on in the rest of this course are going to show us how we can learn to develop what we call the observer or the witness.

Let's say you are on your way to yoga class or you are on your way to an important appointment and you get stuck in traffic and you start to sweat, start to breathe shallowly, start to get anxious, and think, "Oh my God. I have got to get there". There are things that we can do to just go "Okay. There is nothing I can do to fix this in the moment, so let me see if I can relax with what is. Can I learn to be comfortable with what is?" Learning to accept whatever is going on is a very important part of being mindful. It does not mean we accept it forever. It means that in this moment, if I am stuck in the mud, first I have to acknowledge that I am stuck in the mud. Once I take a breath and say, "Okay, here I am," now I am more clear-headed. I am more centered, I am more grounded, and I can begin to deal with a way that I can get myself out of the mud.

So, I am trying to think if I have talked enough here about why we want to do this, why we want to be present. Does anybody have any questions here? Any of you guys have questions about this? Being present means noticing when you are not here and as we start to practice the techniques that we are going to do in the remaining segments of this course, you will become more aware, more conscious, and you will tune in more quickly to when you are not here. You will notice when you go off, when you will start to get stressed about something that is going to happen tomorrow, and we pull ourselves back into the present moment and learn how to relax in this moment.

The next segment of this course we are going to talk about is sort of the scientific basis of mindfulness -- how this works, and what we are going to do, and what are the tools we are going to use. We are going to use breathing (watching our natural breath), learning how to tune in to our breath (pay attention to that), how to deal with thoughts that come up that interrupt our focus on our breath (which will happen hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of times to everyone), and we will learn a practice that we can do and I hope will do -- very short practices, 12-15 minutes -- that I hope you will do every day for the next month. That will help you learn how to manage stress in your life and minimize some of the unhealthy effects that

come about from chronic stress, whether it is an anxiety disorder like insomnia or depression, whether you are dealing with PTSD or any kind of trauma that you are trying to recover from, whether you simply want to be more mindful, more patient, more happy, and particularly more healthy. A lot of these techniques (and I will talk about this in the next segment) are being shown through research that is coming out and how it has very positive effects on our health and on our wellbeing.

Thank you for tuning into this segment. For more information on these and other programs, please visit:

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