

A Fulfilling Life via Mindfulness

by Dan Del Negro

Background

Does it sometimes seem that life could be more fulfilling? More joyful? More...*alive*?
Would we like to be more present in life - less distracted by persistent thoughts and emotions?
How would it be to have a clear idea of what life is really all about - the big questions?

The practice of mindfulness - being present in this moment, and the next, and the next - can make all of this possible!

More fulfillment and joy, because we're more present to experience life.

Less distraction from those persistent thoughts and emotions, because, after we perceive them, we come back to the next moment.

A clearer idea of what life is all about, because we're really living it, experiencing it, and open to the intuitive answers that appear when we're really here, right now!

The Problem - Being Lost in Thought

If we step back and take a look at what's going on in our minds, chances are, we'll find that we spend a lot of time thinking, even while we're in the middle of action. Often, this involves mentally being in the past or the future, rather than right here and now. We get stuck reviewing and analyzing something that happened before, or we have an ongoing conversation in our heads about how we're going to proceed in the rest of the day, tomorrow, next week, etc.

I notice my mind doing this, especially when I have a full, busy day, and even more so when I feel tired. Planning how to get to the next appointment on time; wondering how traffic's going to be; reviewing what I need to get done the next few days; should I call that person or text or email? And on and on..

From time to time, I *wake up* and notice that I've missed the experience of driving, of eating, almost completely! And even things I normally do with more presence, like making music, or conversing with people, have been frequently interrupted by this distracted focus on the future!

Stuck in thinking, we miss the present - where life is actually lived! All the richness of life, the interactions with others, the excitement of accomplishing something great, or just the pure joy of being alive...

Really feeling the simple experience of breathing; really seeing the bright, sunny sky and beautiful trees with their leaves blowing in the breeze; really experiencing the aliveness of other people - the sparkle in their eyes, their smiles, the way they express themselves..

Living within our minds, we also get attached to concepts - about ourselves, others, and situations. Although these can be helpful to an extent, if we get too attached to them, we put people and situations into a box, and limit our perspective of them. Again, we miss the present

moment - and since the moment, people (including ourselves), and situations are constantly changing, we miss seeing aspects that are outside those boxes we've created.

I'm sitting in the waiting room of a car service center right now, and I've built up some "in the box" concepts of car repair over the years, from hearing others' comments, and, to an extent, from some of my own experiences. These concepts have led me to approach bringing my car in for service with some trepidation. I've come in with a feeling of distrust, which leads me to question how I'm going to be treated, and has spawned concerned thoughts: "Will I be stuck without my car for a long time?"; "Will I be overcharged?", etc.

Then, an employee comes into the waiting room and tells me my car is ready. A totally pleasant experience, and one that showed me my concepts were way off!

I can see how being locked into concepts about others can result in prejudices and hostilities between people. Many of the world's problems could be solved by letting go of concepts and being present to what's really happening with others, situations, and ourselves! Seeing people as they really are in each moment.

Where we get most lost in thought is when we experience strong emotions, such as fear, anger, and desire. These emotions often start a barrage of thoughts, appearing rapidly and lasting a long time, and reappearing frequently. The thoughts in turn fuel the emotions, which fuel more thoughts, etc., taking us away from the the present moments for a long period of time, and putting us into a disturbed emotional, and, eventually, physical state.

These strong emotions and their resultant thoughts are often related to the possibility of loss, perhaps of a job or a relationship - a threat. I've experienced both of these, along with the strong, persistent thoughts and emotions. So strong and persistent, in fact, that it's been almost impossible to be present for any length of time!

Whether in a relationship or work situation, when others are involved, the proverbial brick wall can be hit! The other person seems to act in ways contrary to what you'd like, and no amount of talking seems to change their mind. Then, fueled by that strong emotional energy, our minds try to figure out just how to convince them to change. When it gets to the point that nothing is working, our minds start to go around in circles, fueling the emotions more, and taking us more and more away from the present moment.

When we try to get some answers to the big questions of life - "Who / what am I, really?"; "What is life really about?"; "What is the purpose of my life?", etc. - through thinking, we often find ourselves in a similar endless spiral of thoughts that doesn't really get anywhere. We miss being open to where real answers come from - intuitive *knowing*. And not having these answers, we live with an underlying, often vague feeling of confusion and lack of direction.

The Solution - Mindfulness / Awareness / Being Here Now

The practice of mindfulness is to be aware of whatever's happening in the present moment. When we notice that we've gotten lost in thought, we simply bring our attention back to the present. We do this, again and again! Eventually, it becomes more of a habit, and easier: with practice, we realize we're lost in thought and come back to this moment, more quickly.

This practice gives us the opportunity to live more fully, to enjoy life, to really experience life.

When we're more present, we also do whatever we're doing better, whether it's our work, relating to others in our lives, or being in touch with how our bodies are feeling.

Athletes and artists have described "being in the Zone" while doing their work:

George Mumford, mindfulness coach to the Bulls, Lakers, etc.:

"I was sitting a few rows behind the bench, watching this groundbreaking play unfold, knowing that Michael was in that very special place called the Zone. 'When I got that rebound, my thoughts were very positive,'" Michael recounted later. "The crowd gets quiet, and the moment starts to become the moment for me. That's what we've been trying to do...that's part of that Zen Buddhism stuff. Once you get into the moment, you know when you are there. Things start to move slowly, you start to see the court very well. You start reading what the defense is trying to do. I saw that moment. When I saw that moment and the opportunity to take advantage of it... I never doubted myself. I never doubted the whole game. We were hanging too close.' "

Mumford, George; Phil Jackson. The Mindful Athlete (pp. 26-27). Parallax Press. Kindle Edition.

Barry Green, bassist and author:

"Did your mind interrupt in the middle of your playing to say, 'Wow, this is really wonderful—I'm not making any mistakes?' Or is it possible that you were so involved in what you were doing that your mind wasn't able to comment on it?..."

...They were aware that things were falling into place, and they remember feeling exhilarated and delighted. That effortless fast technical passage, that quick motion to a high note when you hit it right on the button, and most of all, that unique suspended moment when you actually become the emotional or sensory quality of the music—the colors, the water, the love—we have all had times like these. They happen when we are mentally alert and aware, but too absorbed in the moment to be running any mental gossip."

Green, Barry. The Inner Game of Music (p. 25). Kindle Edition.

But any kind of work can be a vehicle for mindfulness. Done mindfully, even what may seem to be totally unglamorous work becomes a source of joy and full aliveness.

Relating to others, whether in work or personal situations, gets transformed when we're really mindful, really present. We really perceive the other person, ourselves, and our relating, as they are, fully, in this moment, which reveals a richness we previously overlooked!

What begins as a mindfulness exercise / practice - being aware of our bodies - may surprise us with its depth. Waking up in the morning, and in various times through the day, we take a moment to be aware of our breathing, then tune in to how our muscles in various parts of our body are feeling.

The depth comes in via our awareness itself. Experiencing this awareness - this really *being here* - is a great feeling of aliveness, and maybe stronger than we've ever felt before! And this is the awareness that opens us up to wonderful realizations (see below)...

When we practice mindfulness, we get free of limiting concepts of ourselves, others, and the situations we are in. This allows us to be open to new ideas and to changes that invariably happen moment-to-moment.

This freedom from concepts can ease our difficulties and make us more productive in situations such as when we feel tired. Practicing mindfulness means we notice the feeling of tiredness in our bodies. We also notice the thought that says something like, "Oh man - I'm tired!" But rather than feeling bad about the thought and making a story out of it, we let it go and come back to the next moment. Via this letting go, we're no longer stalled by feeling tired. Our awareness may reveal ways to take action in our lower-energy state, or just an opportunity to rest some more!

Getting free of concepts of situations we're in regularly can allow us to see those situations with fresh eyes. I was playing wedding ceremonies at a chapel, and the music was usually the same for every wedding. Even after doing probably thousands of weddings, I practiced mindfulness: let go of concepts such as, "Ok, we're doing another wedding - same stuff!", and brought my awareness back to each moment of playing. New musical ideas appeared, I played better, and the whole experience felt wonderful and new!

When we are experiencing strong emotions, being present allows us to feel them, without getting swept away by them. The awareness we bring to these strong feelings helps us to understand them better, and mindfulness - which includes letting go in order to be present in the next moment - calms us down, which is vital to dealing with strong emotions constructively.

Mindfulness also opens us up to intuitive knowing, and that knowing can reveal more options and help us choose the best one when difficult situations that evoke strong emotions happen.

That same intuitive knowing can give us insights into those big questions of life mentioned above. Rather than trying to fit things into a system of thought like a philosophy, our intuitive knowing can bring us direct insights into the Way Things Are, what life is about, how we fit in, etc. This helps create the feeling that we have a purpose and direction in life, and the former underlying confusion is gone!

At first it may seem that directing our awareness to the present moment takes us away from the big questions. Maybe their importance deserves our concentrated thought and analysis! But what really happens is our presence, our awareness, our clear seeing develops as we practice mindfulness of whatever's happening - no matter how mundane it may seem. As that happens, a heightened consciousness develops, which is our strongest tool to perceive what life is - because we're much more involved in it and aware of it!!

How to Do It - the Practice

Daily Life Practice

Mindfulness is being present in this moment. The practice is to be here, and when we are somewhere else, due to being lost in thought, to bring ourselves back. As we practice, chances are we'll notice - maybe even be surprised to notice - that we get lost in thought a lot. That's ok! When we notice that we've been "away", we're aware of the last thought, and come back to this moment, without judging ourselves. Over and over, moment to moment.

"Important" vs. "Mundane"

We may have classified some activities as “important” and others as “mundane”. We may already be practicing mindfulness quite a lot with the “important” ones: creative efforts, our work, our relationships, sports, etc. (Although *consciously, intentionally* practicing mindfulness will make a big difference in those activities, too). But what we may consider “mundane” activities are a great field for practice, too, and, actually, it’s not so much about what we’re doing as it’s about how mindful, how present we are when doing - anything!

So-called “mundane” activities are great for practice because they normally don’t require a lot of thought or focus - which is why we often do them on autopilot. That simplicity allows us to focus on doing them mindfully - almost like an exercise. And, since we do often perform these “mundane” actions on autopilot, doing them mindfully, more and more, will really increase the time we spend in mindfulness each day.

So we bring ourselves back to the moment while we get up in the morning, clean up, wash dishes, drive - whatever our action is each moment!

Persistent Thoughts, Strong Emotions

When persistent thoughts and strong emotions happen, practicing mindfulness can seem more difficult, but is also very helpful! It requires patience to keep coming back when the thoughts also keep coming back and the emotions keep coming back with lots of strength! But we practice coming back to this moment, and are kind and patient with ourselves when we get swept away - and just come back again.

Practicing with persistent thoughts and strong emotions can bring a realization: these things don’t have the power over us we previously thought they did! When we experience the letting go that happens when we come back to this moment, the power of these thoughts and emotions is diminished - in fact, we can begin to see that it was something we gave to the appearances, and, really, an illusion!

Acceptance / Awareness of Thoughts and Feelings

Although the practice is to come back from being lost in thought, thoughts are not something we push away or fight against. In fact, thoughts are part of our practice - we are aware of them! And practicing this awareness of thoughts - and the letting go that happens when we come back to the next moment - allows us to see our thoughts more clearly. We get a better idea of where they come from (something we heard from a parent or a friend, something from the media, etc.), and we get that moment of choice as to whether to use the thought in a decision or to just let it go. This way, we become much less attached to our thoughts, and less identified with them: we are not our thoughts, but we are just aware; the thoughts just appear and disappear, and we can use them, or not!

Our awareness increases when we include feelings - the pleasant ones we may want to hold onto, and the unpleasant ones we may want to ignore, get rid of, escape from, or try to “fix” by changing the situation involved.

Shining our awareness on feelings - bare attention - again does two things: awareness, and letting go. We feel more alive, because we are fully experiencing life in this moment - in this case, the experience of a feeling. As with thoughts, we see the feeling more clearly. And that very act of being aware prevents us from either holding on to pleasant feelings or getting bogged down, hung up, or tied up by negative feelings.

Say, for example, a feeling appears about a pleasant experience - maybe a wonderful time with a loved one we had recently. If we hold on to this feeling, we might start to feel the negative feelings that come when we're aware that this experience isn't happening right now. We may get into "analysis mode", trying to figure out how we can make the experience happen again, and soon!

But when we bring bare attention to the pleasant feeling, we feel the joy! With a slight smile, we watch the feeling fade, and move on to the next moment, having enjoyed the feeling, realizing it has come and gone, and there are more where that came from!

An unpleasant feeling may appear when listening to a marketing voicemail - a feeling of frustration, of privacy invaded, etc. This feeling could be held onto and contribute to a general feeling of dissatisfaction. Thoughts of "how to fix it", especially when the "press 2 to add to 'do not call' list" doesn't work. Being tied up when energy gets lowered into a lack of motivation.

But when awareness is brought to the feeling, a satisfaction that it has been acknowledged appears. The wider perspective of bare attention shows us that the situation isn't that big of a deal, and the negative feeling need not escalate. We acknowledge the feeling and smoothly move on to the next moment!

When we practice this awareness of feelings, we get free of them! Instead of being aware for a time, but then getting swept away by a feeling that appears and is allowed to escalate and take over our awareness, we dwell in awareness. A feeling appears, we're aware of it, it "has it say", it fades away, and we're aware of whatever appears in the next moment.

After awhile, life becomes a pretty steady stream of awareness. Instead of awareness / interrupted by thought or feeling / back to awareness, we get to awareness of action / awareness of thought or feeling / back to awareness of action. This steady awareness, without sense of interruption or effort, is really living a mindful life!

Reminders Needed!

This practice is very simple, but the challenging part is to remember to do it! Most of us have long-standing habits of spending a lot of time on autopilot and being lost in thought, so it's easy to forget to practice mindfulness, especially if we get really busy, are tired, or those situations that create persistent thoughts and strong emotions come along.

For this reason, it's great to have a variety of reminders available to help us remember to come back to this moment. (NOTE: use affiliate links for as many of these as possible! Later, link to your own content!!)

Music is a great reminder, via that well-known "song stuck in my head" phenomenon. Listening to songs with mindfulness themes can plant those reminders in one's brain. Here are a few:

Waking up in the morning, it's great to get oriented and start the day with a reminder to wake up, to be present. Verbal reminders are good to say at that time, but I've found that a snip of a song goes deeper and has a stronger effect. This morning, I sang to myself the "hook" of my song, "I Vow...To Be Here Now!". A strong feeling of dedication to coming back and being in each moment grew!

Regularly reading books about mindfulness - and there are many, with perspectives from traditional Buddhism to science to business - can be a source of regular reminders.
Suggestions:

I use the Kindle app (affiliate link) on my computers, phone, and iPad, so my library of books is accessible pretty much anywhere I am. I do little readings from multiple books throughout the day - a great reminder and inspiration to practice mindfulness!

The subject is also well-represented in podcasts and websites:

And youtube videos:

We can use our tech devices to help remind us to come back to this moment. Our wallpapers - on our computers, phones, and tablets - can be set to inspiring photos with words such as “be here now” or “come back to this moment”, etc., so that we’re reminded whenever we turn them on. Apps are also available which automatically send us reminders at intervals that work for us. Here are some:

The most wonderful, natural reminders develop as we practice for awhile - actions and thoughts themselves.

The habit of naturally waking up to mindfulness when we begin a new action becomes a reminder: “Oh, yeah, I’m starting to do (this) now: time to be aware!”

And, when we get lost in thought, or are just in a state of hazy unawareness, a new thought appearing on our mental horizon becomes a reminder to be aware. In fact, just being naturally aware of that thought already puts us in a state of mindfulness.

In fact, any happening can become a reminder to wake up. Being in a quiet place, perhaps lost in thought, then hearing a sound - no matter what the sound is, it can be a call to come back to this moment!

Formal Practice: Supercharge It! Deepen It!

We can practice mindfulness away from the arena of action, away from our daily lives. Just sitting and being mindful of whatever comes up in the present moment.

Like a golfer practicing swings or a musician practicing scales, this formal practice “supercharges” a vital skill - our ability to come back from being lost in thought and be open to what’s happening, here and now. Being away from other action and just practicing pure mindfulness also deepens the experience: the clarity of our perception and openness to that intuitive knowing we spoke of earlier. That intuitive knowing can give us answers, to questions about situations we’re in and to the big questions of life.

The practice we’re describing is sometimes called “just sitting” in the Zen tradition. It’s often called “meditation”, or, more accurately, “mindfulness meditation”. There are many forms of meditation, and many ideas of what it is. In this case, though, we’re talking about the same practice we do in daily life: being aware of whatever happens in this moment, and, when we get lost in thought, simply coming back.

How-to

We take a relaxed, yet alert posture. To start with, we can use an anchor, a home base, such as our natural breathing. Be aware of the breath, in and out, wherever it's most noticeable.

As other perceptions, thoughts, and feelings come into awareness, notice them, then return to the breath. If the mind gets lost in thought, when you notice it, come back to the breath without judgment.

When you relax and "get into the groove" with this practice, the breath anchor can be let go of, and just "choice-less awareness" of whatever's happening in the moment can be the practice. Again, if the mind gets lost in thought, simply come back.

Times of Persistent Thoughts / Strong Emotions

This sitting practice can be very helpful when a situation brings up persistent thoughts and strong emotions. As we touched on above, the awareness and letting go / coming back process helps calm us down and enable us to see the situation more clearly and be open to intuitive answers. Sitting practice during these times, away from the arena of action, gives us the extra focus that we may very well need to work with the situation in this way.

How the Practice Develops Over Time

Freedom From Thoughts, Feelings, the Brain

As we get in the habit of being aware of our thoughts and feelings and letting go of them, they have less of a hold on us. As a result, we are calmer and have much less stress. Especially, strong thoughts and emotions don't buffet us around and take us over like they used to.

We *use* our brains as tools - making decisions and plans, even enjoying our thoughts at the right time. But our brains no longer use us - we are in control of our wider awareness, our mindfulness!

Kinder to Others

We find that many of the thoughts we're aware of and let go of aren't particularly kind. Often, we realize that these thoughts aren't "us" or "ours" - we picked them up from people around us, especially during our childhood; or they came from the media.

In the past, we didn't see these thoughts with clear awareness, and, even if we didn't totally buy into them, they remained as an underlying feeling - maybe a subtle anger or impatience - which colored our dealings with others.

With awareness and letting go of these thoughts (and the attached feelings), we return to an innate awareness of the situation and people around us. In fact, this awareness and letting go reveals an innate kindness that was formerly obscured by these thoughts.

Kinder to Ourselves

Similarly, practicing mindfulness with thoughts that appear about ourselves helps us see them more clearly, let them go, and avoid putting ourselves in a “box” of concepts. Experiencing that even negative, unconstructive, even mean thoughts are phenomena that come and go, and not our true identity, helps us accept ourselves, and even the thoughts, more. This acceptance makes us kinder to ourselves, too.

Kinder to Situations

The same awareness, letting go, and freedom from concepts about situations helps us accept them more, too - even those we don't like much. And the resultant openness can help us find new ways of acting in situations.

Becoming More Convinced That It Works

As we practice mindfulness of all these aspects of life, and experience the benefits of practice first-hand, our confidence in the practice deepens, and we:

See the Necessity of Making the Practice Full-time, 24/7, 365 (“I Vow to Be Here Now”)

We begin to see that the openness, kindness; improvements in our actions, state of mind, emotional stability; access to insights; and ability to live in “the Zone” represent such a vast improvement over the “mindless” life, and that the fulfilling life we mentioned at the beginning can indeed be lived via mindfulness as a way of life.

This inspires us to practice - live - mindfulness at all times: being aware, letting go, coming back, and dwelling in a relaxed, open, full-time awareness.

So...let's do it!