

# Mindfulness

An image used to illustrate mindfulness is of an Indian village woman whose task in the morning is to go to the well for water. After filling her vessel, she balances it on her head. Then she returns to her home, simultaneously talking with friends, fending her way among the stones and exposed roots of the trail, and thinking about her duties for the day. She encounters and manages the distractions that come before her, but maintains her focus without spilling a drop of water.

This image illustrates how mindfulness produces an awareness of the mind *in its entirety*. One sees both the focus of attention and the distractions that arise in seeming competition with that focus. The focus is maintained. The distractions are allowed to come and go.

In meditation mental distractions do not simply appear spontaneously. They are brought from below the surface of the mind by the emotional power that we have invested in them. For example, if thoughts of a vacation continually arise it is probably because one's work load has become frustrating, tiring, or anxiety provoking. Memories of pleasant events occur partly from the hope that such events might happen again. As we see these emotional energies at work, mindfulness allows us to have a sort of dialogue with our mind. We choose when and in what manner to respond to these mental impressions.

Mindfulness also permits us to have no reaction-to simply observe the content of the mind and let it pass. Mindfulness, then, is not the same as psychological introspection, though it may produce some of the same results. During meditation, we are traveling through, not into, the mind. Mindfulness is also not a quality of personality that one either has or doesn't. In its early stages, mindfulness is more like a collection of skills than a state of being. These skills can be learned and practiced in meditation, because they are intrinsic to the mind's higher nature. Here is a partial list of the skills that create the quality of mindfulness during meditation.

- Recognizing the critical, judgmental self talks that we apply to our thoughts and feelings during meditation and stopping this kind of self condemnation
- Joining -becoming one with- the thoughts and emotions that pass through the mind and thus accepting ourselves as we are
- Witnessing the thoughts and emotions that pass through the mind rather than becoming identified with them and acting them out inconsiderately
- Remaining flexible in the face of the wide variety of thoughts and feelings that demand action or attention
- Sensing the depth of emotion that has prompted a given thought and working with that emotional energy sensitively and patiently
- Remaining in the present rather than journeying to the past or future
- Recognizing and maintaining the focus of concentration, knowing that that focus is the antidote to becoming immersed in the thought train