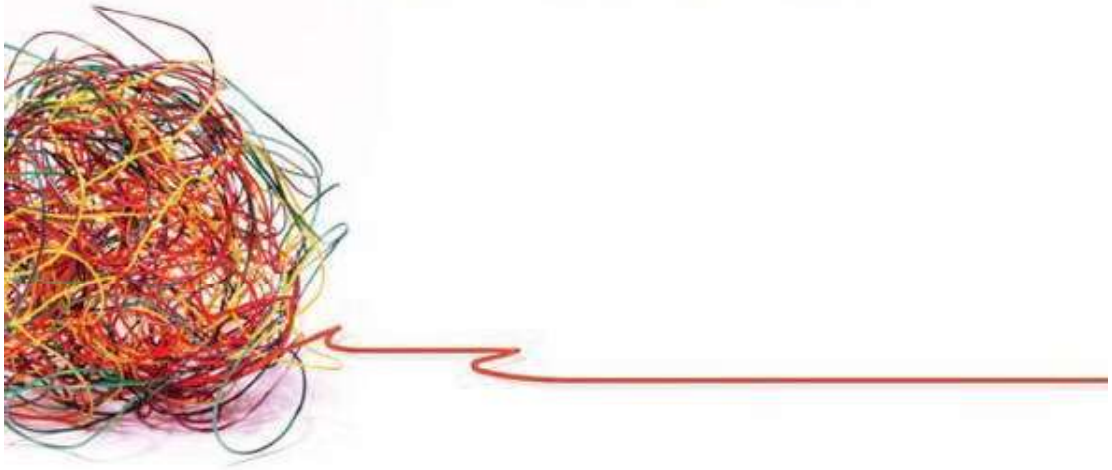
Mindfulness

AN EIGHT-WEEK PLAN FOR Finding Peace IN A Frantic World



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Danny Penman

FOREWORD BY JON KABAT-ZINN

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RODALE

Contents

Acknowledgments

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1. Chasing Your Tail

2. Why Do We Attack Ourselves?

3. Waking Up to the Life You Have

4. Introducing the Eight-Week Mindfulness Program

5. Mindfulness Week One: Waking Up to the Autopilot

6. Mindfulness Week Two: Keeping the Body in Mind

7. Mindfulness Week Three: The Mouse in the Maze

8. Mindfulness Week Four: Moving Beyond the Rumor Mill

9. Mindfulness Week Five: Turning Toward Difficulties

10. Mindfulness Week Six: Trapped in the Past or Living in the Present?

11. Mindfulness Week Seven: When Did You Stop Dancing?

12. Mindfulness Week Eight: Your Wild and Precious Life

Notes

Resources

Index

Observing thoughts and feelings

What do you notice when you do the Sounds and Thoughts meditation? Remember, there is no right or wrong way to feel—no success or failure.

Dana found something strange happened when she turned toward thinking: “When I was focusing on the sounds, then the thoughts were coming thick and fast and interfering with the sounds, but when I started actually to focus on them, the thoughts themselves seemed to go away altogether.”

This often happens. In the full daylight of awareness, thoughts seem shy. Why is this? We can think of it like this: thoughts consist of a momentary flicker of activity in a network of the brain, followed by a slower spreading of activation along a much larger network of associations. The flicker may be a very short “pulse” (probably corresponding to a brief image), but what we think of as a “thought” is made up of *both* that momentary pulse *and* a following tail. The tail follows the pulse like a retinue following a king or queen. The retinue is more like inner language with subject and object, verbs, nouns and adjectives, all strung together in a daisy chain of associations that, themselves, provoke further images that evoke further inner speech. Because much of the retinue that follows the pulse comprises mere associations triggered by habit, the act of bringing full awareness to the thinking process dissolves the daisy chain of inner language, leaving you more aware of just the pulses themselves. So, the thoughts soon lose their momentum and run into the sand. Of course, it’s often not very long before the thoughts find a gap in awareness just long enough to start another daisy chain, and then, once again, you start to see the retinue that follows the pulse. And so the whole train of thought begins to gather momentum until you are again pulled into the thought stream. It is truly intriguing to witness the activity of your own mind/brain.

During the Sounds and Thoughts meditation, Simon could not focus at all: “I have tinnitus—a high-pitched noise in the background all the time. When I was listening to sounds, the tinnitus became really prominent. I didn’t like it at all. Normally, I just try and shut it out, but I get so frustrated. It really spoiled it for me.”

Many things can disturb our practice, but tinnitus can be a particularly unwelcome visitor. It is like chronic pain, so unremitting, so intrusive and so

intimate. People vary in how they cope with it. During the day when there is a lot of other sound around it can seem OK, but at night, when trying to get to sleep, it can be very troublesome. Meditation on sounds seems just the opposite of coping. So why persist? Simon's experience begins to show why: "I experimented with allowing the ringing in my ears to be there, together with all the other sounds around the place. The noise in the ears did not seem to get any quieter, but my thoughts about it seemed to lessen—I think I was fighting it less, so I was able to relax more. I've tried to relax before, but relaxing always seemed to be about desperately trying to ignore it. I'd never tried allowing it to remain. It felt different somehow. And liberating." Notice Simon's willingness to experiment, to explore. In "turning towards" the very thing that was bothering him, he was noticing that the "tinnitus" consisted not only of the sound, but of the sound plus the whole retinue of "not wanting" and angry thoughts and feelings that were, in the end, attacking him and disturbing his peace of mind.

Sharon's experience shifted dramatically just a few minutes into the meditation. "It felt easy at first because I had no thoughts, I wasn't drifting away. Then—I know this sounds silly—I felt as if my whole body was getting light, floating; it was great, but when it disappeared I felt really disappointed. Then I started to remember other times when I'd felt let down … and this made me really sad. What a roller coaster." Sharon had experienced the way in which the weather pattern in the mind can change in an instant. One moment she was enjoying the floating feeling, the next it was gone, and the resulting disappointment left her with a stream of unwanted thoughts and associations.

The thought stream is so powerful that it can pick us up and whisk us away before we're even aware of it. You can imagine yourself sitting on the edge of a stream or small river, watching your thoughts as if they were leaves on the stream floating by. The next moment, you find that you've left your seat and sleepwalked into the middle of the stream. It's only a little later that you wake up and see that, *yet again*, you've become immersed in your thought stream. When this happens—as it surely will—you might congratulate yourself for having woken up, then compassionately acknowledge that your mind is wandering, gently haul yourself back on to the bank of the stream and start over again. The experienced meditator is not someone whose mind does not wander, but one who gets very used to beginning again.

If you’re feeling especially wound up or tense, the thought stream isn’t a gentle babbling brook, but a tsunami of enormous power. It drags you along, kicking and screaming. It might take several minutes before you even realize you’ve been swept away from the meditation. And, even then, you’ll forget where you were. You can struggle to remember if you were focusing on the breath or the body or sounds. This confusion often happens if you’re beginning to do the meditation without listening to the audio files. When this happens, you can steady yourself by focusing on the breath as it moves in and out of the body, without giving yourself a hard time. After a few moments, you’ll remember the point that you’d reached and will be able to start over, picking up the thread from where you left it.

Tom’s story

Today I learned that failure really doesn’t matter that much. I’m still alive. I have all four limbs and my mind seems more or less intact.

While I was meditating, I realized that I was continually losing focus. My mind felt out of control. No matter what I did, my mind would not settle. This was partly because I’d had a particularly bad day at work. I’m a legal clerk. I pride myself on always getting everything ready for a case, come what may. Today I didn’t finish on time: I’d mislaid some of the paperwork. I could tell my boss wasn’t pleased.

Normally, when I’m stressed, I’ll go down to the bar and have a few drinks and then get up the next morning, ready to get going again. But today was different. Instead of drinking, I decided to meditate. It was hard, hard, hard. I hate this feeling of being out of control; I feel as if I’m not good enough—just a failure—and after a while, it felt that I was a loser at meditation too. After twenty minutes of struggling, I opened my eyes and realized that compared to before, and to my normal state of mind, I was actually quite calm. Everything seemed a little bit clearer and more transparent. Far from being a loser at meditation, I’d succeeded in gaining perspective. I learned that when you “fail” at meditation you are actually practicing. If your mind didn’t hop around, there would be no chance to spot your furious thoughts in action and to regain awareness of your mind. They kept telling me this during the mindfulness course, but somehow it didn’t sink in until I saw it for myself.

After “failing” at meditation I put on a jacket and went and watched a wonderful sunset. I had a glorious night’s sleep too. Tomorrow I’ll probably learn the same thing again. And the day after that as well …

What is particularly difficult is to notice the thoughts that somehow get under the radar, and are not seen as “thoughts” at all.

You may be sitting quietly, observing thoughts as if they were appearing on a screen or stage in front of you, or as if they were leaves floating past on the stream. Some thoughts are easy to see: perhaps you find yourself thinking, I wonder what's for dinner tonight? And very quickly see, "Ah—there's a thought about dinner." But, sooner or later, you may suddenly remember an email you meant to send, and you find yourself planning when you can get back to the computer. Even then, you may eventually see that this too was a thought. But what if you then say to yourself, "This is not going well—I shouldn't have gone off for so long" or, "I'm just not getting this." It is much more difficult to see *these* intimate self-judgments as "thoughts." They feel more fundamentally true—realistic comments on "me" and how I'm doing.

So if we are imagining watching a movie, we need to be aware, not only of what's on the screen, but the whispers that come as if from the seat behind us. The cinema has "surround sound"! And if we are imagining sitting on the bank of a stream, then we need to be aware that there may be a tributary to the same stream that is running behind us as well as in front. Some thoughts just don't feel like thoughts, and these require our special attention, and special reserves of quiet patience. In these times of maximum stress and confusion, we learn the most, for it is when we see the most compelling thoughts as mental events—rather than truly reflecting reality—that we glimpse the possibility of freedom most of all.

If some of these practices seem a little repetitive, *it's because they are.* Meditation is a simple practice that gains its power from repetition. It's only through this that we can become aware of the repeating patterns in our own minds. Ironically, meditative repetition frees us from endlessly repeating our past mistakes and the automatic pilot that drives self-defeating and self-attacking thoughts and actions. Through repetition, we gradually tune into the subtle differences that each moment brings.

Think of the meditation as planting seeds. You give young seeds the right conditions, but you don't try to dig them up each day to see if they've grown roots. Meditation is like cultivating a garden: your experience deepens and changes, but this takes place in horticultural time, not clock time.