

Mindfulness for Educators

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The most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching—and living—becomes. —Parker Palmer

These words from Parker Palmer's book *The Courage to Teach* (Jossey-Bass, 1998) have inspired many educators to explore the inner landscape of a teacher's life. Eloquent and provocative, Palmer's work illuminates the perils, paradoxes and challenges that one faces in the world of teaching from a non-sectarian perspective. The Buddhist tradition offers a methodology for uncovering our inner terrain and for gaining insight into what is happening inside us as we teach. It is called mindfulness, and it is of growing interest and significance to teachers, students, and the world of education in general.

Understanding Mindfulness

Despite its growing use in common language, there remains considerable confusion about what mindfulness is. Jon Kabat-Zinn offers a simple description of mindfulness: "Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." The Venerable Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a Burmese meditation master, says, "You should be relaxed and practice without tension, without forcing yourself. The more relaxed you are, the easier it is to develop mindfulness." These descriptions pointing to the experience of mindfulness emphasize a certain level of simplicity and ease of the practice.

Many Western students (and I know this from my own personal experience) come to meditation with habits of getting things done, of

mobilizing a lot of energy to take on a project, and of judging how well we are doing whatever we are doing. We then identify with our successes and failures. Mindfulness, in either formal or informal meditation contexts, involves just the opposite of these habits of mind. It is helpful when we can change our habits of mind by letting go of a doer doing mindfulness, and by no longer identifying with success. If we can begin to bring a sense of open ease, interest, and relaxed non-judgment to our practice, either on the cushion or in the midst of our lives, there will be a flowering of more continuous mindful awareness. As one of my teachers has said, "This is not difficult to do: it is difficult to *remember* to do."

We gain confidence when we begin to practice a nonjudgmental, observing attentiveness to all we do, both internally and externally. At the same time, we cultivate a light touch and come to understand that mindfulness is not fussy. We recognize and then let go of judgments projected onto ourselves as we try to be mindful in the world, in the midst of complex jobs, and in educational contexts. If we make an attempt and then judge our experience, we can shift our attention to recognizing the thinking and judging of the experience. Mindfulness involves a mirror-like awareness, accepting whatever arises. So we make attempts to be mindful, even in difficult circumstances...and then we lose it. But the important thing is we then notice we have gotten lost, and begin again with renewed interest and curiosity.

As an educator of teachers, I find it essential not only that teachers learn and practice mindfulness, but that they also cultivate lovingkindness and compassion for themselves and their students. As mindfulness increases, the heart develops a greater capacity for caring, and the attitudes of lovingkindness and compassion naturally follow. The mind learns more generous attitudes of the heart simply through the persistent, gentle, yet pervading application of mindfulness. It is said in the Buddhist tradition that every moment of true mindfulness is also a moment of lovingkindness.

Teachers serve as examples to students and to their community through their attitude, their actions, and their interactions. They can teach mindfulness and compassion simply by the way they model these qualities in the classroom and in the school community. This can only be of great benefit, and will affect the welfare of our society and the world. It begins at any moment when the light of mindful awareness shines on experience.

Opportunities for Educators

The challenges of cultivating and applying mindfulness are the same for all people, but educators can learn to take advantage of particular opportunities. Teaching and learning are interactive human endeavors. Because all human activity is unpredictable, and since teaching and learning involves human beings in relation to a subject matter as well as to one another, there are numerous opportunities to cultivate at any moment the insightful practice of mindfulness of mental states. For example, the hindrances of desire, aversion, lack of energy, too much energy, or doubt are some of the most common mind states we pay attention to when we practice both formal and informal meditation. They come up repeatedly in educational contexts, both when we are learners and when we are teachers, perhaps because of the particular nature of our work.

Yet teaching is not simply a mental activity:

it also involves one's bodily presence. Because we are standing, writing on the board, gesturing with our hands, speaking, listening, and being silent, while walking and moving throughout the day, we as teachers have a wonderful opportunity to cultivate the grounding practice of the first of the four classical foundations of mindfulness, mindfulness of the body.

For example, several teachers I have worked with have cultivated awareness of drinking water in the midst of their days. Thirst arises from talking, from warm rooms, from expenditure of the physical energy of circulating and engaging with students around the subject matter. Each time a teacher feels thirst, an opportunity arises for feeling the hand touch the glass or water bottle, feeling the contact of the water in the mouth, feeling the swallowing and the diminishing of thirst. At the same time as mindful awareness of the body is practiced, there is also a pause, an interruption in the fast pace of a classroom period. This pause brings moments of greater spaciousness. We need not bring strong, concentrated energy to any of this, but rather a light, compassionate, mindful touching into the body in the midst of our work. When we do not judge or seek success, there is a relaxed, unforced quality that allows mindful awareness to flourish.

Educators I have worked with over the past years have reported simple yet profound shifts in understanding in how to bring mindful awareness into their work lives. When the experience of mindfulness of the body is practiced often and then comes more naturally, it can be a touchstone from which a teacher can make decisions in her teaching practice in the moment. Awareness of the body opens up the possibility for pausing and noticing not only internal changes but also external changes that are asking to be made. Awareness of mind states opens up the possibility of asking ourselves whether the arisen states are necessary or not. If we can see mind states arise in the moment while teaching, then in the same moment we can change our minds and change the impact on ourselves and on our students.

Applied Mindfulness 1

In an online course that I taught recently, one elementary school teacher wrote about her experience of applying mindfulness to a particular classroom situation. She had noticed a buildup of stress in her body from students' lack of attention: the weather was beautiful, it was nearing the end of the school year, and a certain infectious, bubbly distraction had overtaken the class. We all know what this feels like, right?

She made the decision to turn off the lights for a moment and to ask the students to take their seats. Even though it took repeated requests for the students to take their seats and to calm down, during those moments of pausing she found an ability to reflect on what was happening and what needed to happen next. The students eventually quieted down and became more attentive. This allowed her not only to transition to the next activity with more ease but also to let go of the tension in her body, which she recognized was triggered by negative emotions toward herself and her students.

Taking a moment to pause mindfully in the midst of teaching brought greater clarity to this teacher's mind. By noticing the tension in her body, she was also able to see how the bodily stress brought delusion in the mind, clouding over her ability to see clearly in the midst of her work as a teacher. She talked about how the mindful awareness, coupled with a pause in the classroom's activity, helped her to see "a way out of the chaos."

This example of this teacher's practice illustrates how mindfulness of the body leads to awareness of mind states. When mindfulness of the body is established, we begin to notice the hindrances of desire, aversion, restlessness, boredom, and doubt. Many of us might feel these hindrances indicate our practice has failed, that we have let the students or the situation get under our skin. Yet a nonjudgmental mindfulness of their impact on mind and body will lead to a more subtle understanding. By opening to the hindrances, or to any other of the myriad emotions that arise during teaching, we can begin to understand them and find more skillful ways to change the situation.

Applied Mindfulness 2

For several years I held the position of Chair of the Education Department at the graduate school where I worked. Almost every meeting I attended on a daily basis was a situation of conflict. Competition among various forces and groups for limited funds was often the source of the conflict, and in my role I would usually have to jump into the middle of the fray one way or another. I would leave the meetings utterly drained from the experience. When I got home I would sit down for a short meditation, and for the first ten minutes or more I was simply reliving the meeting—arguing with this person, remembering the painful thing that person had said, and imagining what I could have or should have said. The thoughts and emotions triggered by the meeting were reflected in the tension and stress held in my face, shoulders and stomach.

I learned that if I could just let these thoughts run their course, like sheep out to pasture, they would eventually quiet down. With the thoughts still in the background, I could feel a shift from an external focus to an internal one, where the attitude of mind became the foreground. At that moment, there would be a sense of integration and wholeness at the level of the body-mind process.

As I was able to reap the benefits of meditation practice each day in helping me better understand and balance my reactions to the stresses I was facing, I got curious as to how to bring this kind of integration to the actual experience of the meeting, rather than waiting for formal meditation on my own at home. In reflecting upon it, I was able to identify a few simple steps to the meditation-in-action process I used. I still aspire to use these regularly in all daily life settings, and find them especially useful in my work as an educator:

- As I applied mindful awareness to the meetings I attended, I learned that by paying attention to my body first, feeling myself sitting, and staying in contact with the chair either at the buttocks or the back, I could reconnect with being in the present moment and being in contact with my body. This was an important first step.

- Then, from that experience of mindfulness of the body, I could observe the various emotional states as they came up again and again in the meetings: annoyance, anger, aversion, nervousness, or contraction in the mind. I saw clearly how the body could serve as a beacon, shedding light on mind states that the ordinary thinking and reacting mind cannot pick up on. At those moments of clarity, I experienced the kind of integration and wholeness of the body-mind process that would arise in formal meditation practice. It came to me as a kind of “meditation-in-action” experience.
- However, the in-the-moment realignment of body, heart, and mind states did not automatically bring about change. It was through reflection and inquiry that I began to see, after the fact, the mechanics of suffering. At the root of it all, I was identified with my position, my views and opinions, and my reputation. I realized that this level of identification caused me to promote self-advocacy and take an adversarial stance. These in turn created a high level of negativity all the time, which kept the cycle of suffering constant.
- From flashes of understanding gained through reflection and inquiry, both in the moment and in retrospect, I decided that I did not want to remain identified with that level of negativity all the time. Perhaps this is what the Buddhists regard as wisdom, an understanding of the texture of suffering at more and more subtle levels, accompanied with an aspiration to heal the suffering.
- Back in the midst of difficult meetings, I would practice noticing the arising of the mind states, coupled with identification—and then I would mentally let go. It’s an incredible relief to discover you don’t have to hold on to the things you are accustomed to holding on to. This internal letting go eventually allowed me to respond with greater ease to the people and the issues presented in the meeting with less reactivity.
- Paradoxically, by feeling the suffering of the moment in my body, mind, and heart,

and then by opening to it, accepting it, and letting it go, I found I was a more effective participant in meetings and in the educational community as a whole. Working with mindful awareness in the midst of work also allowed me to stay in contact with the possibility of freedom at any moment.

All of this took both practice and training, and yet over time I noticed that I could find joy and ease in situations that were formerly almost intolerable. Mindful awareness in the moment, coupled with reflection and inquiry after the meetings, as well as patience and an easy perseverance, brought a change in the mind. I still get caught, but it is easier to see how it happens (by identification) and how it is changed (by letting go).

As I have gone on to share these insights and practices with teachers, educational administrators, and school counselors in retreats, workshops, and in online courses, many have reported similar experiences. With guidance and encouragement, and with a clear understanding of what mindfulness is and how it can be developed, educators can make a significant difference not only in their own lives but in the precious gift they bring every day to others. Our work as educators is so important, and the quality of self-understanding we bring to it is equally important.

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