

The Inner Investigation

BY JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

We can start the practice of mindfulness meditation with the simple observation and feeling of each breath. Breathing in, we know we're breathing in; breathing out, we know we're breathing out. It's very simple, although not easy. After just a few breaths, we hop on trains of association, getting lost in plans, memories, judgments, and fantasies. This habit of wandering mind is very strong, even though our reveries are often not pleasant and sometimes not even true. As Mark Twain so aptly put it, "Some of the worst things in my life never happened." So we need to

train our minds, coming back again and again to the breath, simply beginning again.

Slowly, though, our minds steady and we begin to experience some space of inner calm and peace. This environment of inner stillness makes possible a deeper investigation of our thoughts and emotions. What is a thought—that strange, ephemeral phenomenon that can so dominate our lives? When we look directly at a thought, we see that it is little more than nothing. Yet when it is unnoticed, it wields tremendous power. Notice the difference between being lost in a thought and being mindful that we're thinking. Becoming aware of the thought is like waking up from a dream or coming out of a movie theater after being absorbed in the story. Through mindfulness, we gradually awaken from the movies of our minds.

What, too, is the nature of emotions—those powerful energies that sweep over our bodies and minds like great breaking waves? In a surprising way, mindfulness and the investigation of emotions begin to deepen our understanding of selflessness; we see that the emotions themselves arise out of conditions and pass away as the conditions change, like clouds forming and dissolving in the clear open sky. As the Buddha said to his son, Rahula, "You should consider all phenomena with proper wisdom: 'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.'"

On the subtlest level, we learn not to identify with consciousness itself, cutting through any sense of this knowing faculty as being "I" or "mine." As a way of cultivating this radical transformation of understanding, I have found it useful to reframe meditation experience in the passive voice; for example, the breath being known, sensations being known, thoughts being known. This language construction takes the "I" out of the picture and opens us to the question, "Known by what?" And rather than jumping in with a conceptual response, the question can lead us to experience directly the unfolding mystery of awareness, moment after moment.

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