

Mindfulness is the key principle that underlies all the teachings and practices in the Breathworks courses.

Mindfulness (also known as awareness) is a practice in which we become aware of the various facets of our experience in the present moment. We can learn to be aware of how we move, how we feel (both physically and emotionally) and how we respond or react to each moment of life.

On Breathworks courses, we start the practice of mindfulness with developing self-awareness of the breath and the body. We then move on to cultivate more subtle self-awareness of feelings and emotions, as well as thoughts. We then expand the practice to include awareness of other people and the world around us leading to a richly textured experience of life.

### **Developing awareness**

As we begin to practice awareness, we may notice that it is only too easy to be aware of such things as physical and emotional pain, but we may find it difficult to be sensitive to the many other things that make up our experience. We may come to notice how there is a continual process of reaction going on in response to life as it impinges upon us. We become aware of the push-me-pull-you tensions created by the impulse to avoid things we don't like and prolong experiences that give us pleasure. Much of the time many of us operate in this kind of automatic way, adjusting and changing what we do in order to try to avoid discomfort, without really being honest about what is actually happening. With mindfulness, we can develop an accurate and pragmatic moment-to-moment awareness of what our experience actually is rather than being locked into reactive habits of distorted thinking about our experience. This allows for a kind of space in which we can make more carefully considered decisions. This in turn helps us to fully realise the enormous potential for choice we have in life. Maybe there are things we cannot change, but we can at least see how we react or respond to everything that happens to us and develop strategies to change our relationship with our circumstances. This applies to everything that we experience, from minor discomforts or stresses to serious illness or pain. With mindfulness we can learn to transform any moment when we might feel a victim of circumstance into a moment of honesty, initiative and confidence.

### **Origins and development**

The practice of mindfulness originates from the Buddhist tradition and has been central to all the different Buddhist schools for some 2,500 years. Over the past thirty years or so, Westerners have been taking this very important discipline of mindfulness and applying it in a secular setting to help deal with the stresses and strains of modern life. One of the founders of this work is Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn who, along with colleagues, established the Stress Reduction Clinic at the

University of Massachusetts Medical Center in the late 1970s teaching Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). The main application of mindfulness in this setting was to help people suffering with chronic pain and illness. There have been over 16,000 participants through this programme since its inception with very beneficial outcomes of reduced stress and improvement to the quality of life for those suffering chronic conditions. More recently, a team of psychologists initially based at the University of Wales at Bangor, have developed a programme called Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) to help prevent relapse for those prone to depression. This is based on similar principles as MBSR.

At Breathworks we offer similar mindfulness-based approaches to anyone wishing to live a richer life and feel a greater sense of initiative and confidence. These strategies can be applied with great benefit to those coming to terms with pain and illness as well as those who simply want to find a way to live more fully, with a greater sense of integrity and wonder.

### **Mindfulness defined**

There are many different definitions of what is meant by 'mindfulness'. Although we might think it means being 'full of mind' in the sense of the mind as the seat of thought, mindfulness is in fact a translation of an Indian word that includes heart, mind and bodily sensations. So, mindfulness is a very rich, inclusive and multi-faceted quality of awareness. We have listed below some of the definitions that we think are particularly useful in how we can understand mindfulness.

- "Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally". (Jon Kabat-Zinn)
- "The state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present". (Brown and Ryan)
- "... in mindfulness practice, the focus of a person's attention is opened to admit whatever enters experience, while at the same time, a stance of kindly curiosity allows the person to investigate whatever appears, without falling prey to automatic judgements or reactivity". (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale) <sup>1</sup>
- "The element of non-reactive watchful receptivity in mindfulness forms an ingenious middle path which neither suppresses the contents of experience nor compulsively reacts to them"(Analayo) <sup>2</sup>
- "Mindfulness includes an affectionate, compassionate quality within the attending, a sense of open-hearted, friendly presence and interest." (Jon Kabat-Zinn).
- Mindfulness can be seen as ATTENTION + INTENTION

In the dictionary 'attention' is defined as both 'concentrated direction of the mind' and 'an act of consideration, courtesy, or gallantry indicating affection or love e.g. attentions given to a lover'. So, mindfulness has qualities of a clear, directed mind with an emotional tone of care.

Intention indicates that one is aware of why one is paying attention and what one's motivations are.

A useful description of how attention and intention interplay in mindfulness has been described by practitioners of non-violent communication as:

"My intention is to connect whilst paying attention to the present"

We can see from these definitions that mindfulness has aspects of:

- Presence
- Open-hearted qualities of friendliness, kindness and connection
- The ability to make choices to respond rather than react and not fall prey to habitual reactive patterns

### **Breathworks and Mindfulness**

At Breathworks we have drawn on a number of different sources and describe mindfulness using various teachings and metaphors. This provides course participants with a number of different ways to connect with the practice of mindfulness, allowing for different temperaments and character types.

### **Awareness**

At Breathworks we start our journey of awareness with basic breath and body awareness. We use the name Breathworks for our project because we can learn to use the breath to help us develop mindfulness. Each of us is breathing every moment whilst we are alive, yet most of us barely notice the breath. When we become aware of our breath we can use it as a tool to help bring us back to the present moment, where we experience it as felt sensations in the body. Likewise, any other dimension of body awareness can help anchor us in the present because this is when the actual sensations are occurring. Gradually we can build on this new skill of present moment awareness and become more sensitive to all aspects of our experience in the moment, while we are experiencing them: our sensations, feelings, thoughts, emotions, other people and the world around us. This may sound a simple idea, but it is extremely hard to put into practice. Usually we are attending to the activities of the moment with only a small part of ourselves, while our minds and thoughts are miles away. Usually we live on auto-pilot, going about our lives with little awareness of the detailed experience of the moment, or even the intention behind our actions.

"The whole path of mindfulness is this:  
whatever you are doing, be aware of it"<sup>3</sup>

### **Attraction and repulsion and the twin poles**

One of the reasons we are not fully aware is because we are so caught up in avoiding aspects of our experience that we find painful and grasping after those aspects that we like. Darlene

Cohen, a Zen Buddhist from San Francisco who has lived with Rheumatoid Arthritis for many years, writes of the twin poles of working with pain, and this approach can equally be applied to any kind of suffering:

If you have chronic pain, your job is to (1) acknowledge that pain and its burden and (2) enrich your life exponentially. If, at any given moment, you are aware of ten different elements - for instance, the movement of your eyes as you focus on this page, your bottom on the chair, the sound of cars passing outside your room, the thought of the laundry you have to do, the hum of the air conditioner, the sliding of your glasses down your nose, an unpleasant memory of sharp back pain, cool air going into your nostrils, warm air going out, and throbbing pain in your hips - that's too much pain, one out of ten; that's unbearable pain that will dominate your life. But if, at that moment, you are aware of a hundred elements - not only the ten things you noticed before but more subtle things, like the animal presence of other people sitting quietly in the room, the shadow of the lamp against the wall, the brush of your hair against your ear, the pull of your clothes against your skin - and you have pain along with all those other things you are noticing, then your pain is one among a hundred elements of your consciousness at that moment, and that is pain you can live with. It's merely one among the multitude of sensations in your life.

This is coming at chronic pain from two angles - one is acknowledging it and understanding what it costs you in terms of suffering; the other is opening up your life, making it so rich that no pain can commandeer it. Before you lose your creative energy to depression and before you are disabled by...your anxieties, you can begin to live with your suffering in such a way that life's frustrations and disappointments are part of the rich tapestry of living. In order to have such an attitude, you need to cultivate skills that enable you to be present for all of your life, not just the moment you prefer.<sup>4</sup>

This attitude also forms the heart of the approach we take on the Breathworks course:

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Move TOWARDS the experience we are having in the moment, even if that experience is painful or unpleasant. When it is painful we can soften into it, lean into the resistance whilst bringing a kindly awareness to bear on this aspect of the moment

AND THEN

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Broaden out around it – like pulling a camera lens back from telephoto to wide angle. Notice all the other things that are going on in the moment as well.

By taking this approach we are learning to wake up and become sensitive to all aspects of our experience, both the painful and the pleasurable, which will greatly enhance our overall quality of life. Experiences of suffering can sometimes de-sensitise us if we try to block them out from our awareness in that we end up blocking out a whole band of sensitivity in the process. In this way we come to see that, paradoxically, when we try to keep pain at bay, we keep pleasure at bay too. Conversely, by accepting the difficult things in life, we also open a door to experience pleasurable, tender emotions and qualities such as love and beauty.

### **A Bigger Container (ABC)<sup>5</sup>**

Another way of looking at being mindful of a broad and rich experience of the moment is to use the metaphor of A Bigger Container. Most of us are susceptible to tendencies of either suppressing aspects of the moment we find unpleasant on the one hand, or being overwhelmed by them on the other. With mindfulness, we can learn to ‘hold’ experiences within our awareness without getting thrown about by them – remaining open to both pain and pleasure within a broad and rich perspective. In this way we can develop a broad and stable awareness that is like a bigger container. An image that describes this is comparing a teaspoon of salt dissolved in a small or large container of water. If you put a teaspoon of salt in a small glass of water it will have a very strong taste. But, if you put the same teaspoon of salt in a big lake of clear water the taste will be negligible and the body of water will be largely unaffected. With mindfulness we can become like this deep and clear lake, where individual experiences do not overwhelm us and we can remain stable and steady within the ups and downs of life, whilst being honest about what is happening moment-to-moment.

### **Kindly Awareness – Mindfulness of others and the world around us**

An attitude of kindly awareness is implicit in all the aspects of mindfulness we have so far discussed. It takes courage and dignity to look life in the eye and be open to both the painful and pleasurable sides of life with honesty and integrity. A kindly, gentle attitude is an important part of this process. We may find that, as we become more kindly towards our own sensations, feelings, emotions and thoughts; we will also gradually become more aware of other people. For instance, we may notice how we communicate with our friends, family, and others close to us. We may also start noticing how other people behave; how they move, talk, deal with difficulties and problems. As we practise mindfulness during the Breathworks course we may notice a growing emotional confidence that allows us to interact and communicate much more effectively with others, with a greater emotional robustness. This allows us to enjoy our relationships with others much more. We can radically turn our own experience of suffering or difficulty into a moment of empathy with others who suffer, rather than a cause of isolation or despair.

### **Choice – Respond, don't react**

On the basis of moment-by-moment awareness where we are letting things be just as they are – both the painful and the pleasurable – we can make choices as to how we respond to our experience. This is an extremely important aspect of mindfulness practice and it sets the scene for how our life unfolds. In dependence on the choices of this moment, the next moment arises and so on into the future. From this perspective we can see the future as a whole series of moments, all arising in dependence on moment-by-moment choices where there is the possibility of tremendous initiative and confidence. However, most of us are so busy either running away from experience or frantically grasping after things that we don't ever rest honestly in the moment with the opportunity to appraise the most creative way forward. We tend to ricochet from one reaction to the next in an endless round of distraction and unease.

With awareness, we have the chance to respond rather than react and to feel more in charge of our own destiny. We can always change our relationship to our circumstances in this way, no matter how seemingly dire things may seem.

We can see this as a four step process:

1. Recognising that there is a gap between stimulus and response
2. Seeing that there is a choice in that gap
3. Seeing that the choices we make matter
4. Knowing that we can only choose if we have awareness<sup>6</sup>

### **Further Aspects of Mindfulness**

On the Breathworks courses we also draw on some other key ideas such as:

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Healing and cure

(this is from Full Catastrophe Living by Jon Kabat-Zinn and describes the experience of people at the Stress Clinic in Massachusetts. All the principles apply to the Breathworks Course, Breathworks mindfulness-based pain management and strategies for living well).

“When we use the word healing to describe the experience of people in the stress clinic, what we mean above all is that they are undergoing a profound transformation of view. This transformation is brought about by the encounter with one's own wholeness, catalysed by the meditation practice. When we glimpse our own completeness in the stillness of any moment, when we directly experience ourselves during the body scan or the sitting or while practicing the

yoga as whole in that moment and also as part of a larger whole, a new and profound coming to terms with our problems and our suffering begins to take place. We begin to see both ourselves and our problems differently, namely from the perspective of wholeness. This transformation of view creates an entirely different context within which we can see and work with our problems, however serious they may be. It is a perceptual shift away from fragmentation and isolation toward wholeness and connectedness. With this change of perspective comes a shift from feeling out of control and beyond help (helpless and pessimistic) to a sense of the possible, a sense of acceptance and inner peace and control. Healing always involves an attitudinal and emotional transformation. Sometimes, but not always, it is also accompanied by a major reduction in physical symptoms and by improvement in a person's physical condition.

“This transformation of view comes about in many different ways as people immerse themselves in mindfulness-meditation practice. In the stress clinic, sometimes people have sudden and dramatic experiences during meditation that lead them to new ways of seeing. More frequently people speak of moments of simply feeling deeply relaxed or confident. Many times they don't even recognise such experiences at the time they are happening as being particularly important, although they often can't remember having had such an experience before. These incremental transformations can be quite subtle. Yet they can be as profound or even more so than the more dramatic ones. Dramatic or subtle, such shifts in perspective are signs of seeing with eyes of wholeness. Out of this shift in perspective comes an ability to act with greater balance and inner security in the world, especially when encountering stress or pain.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Serenity Prayer**

*May I have the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change;  
the courage to change the things I can;  
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

At Breathworks we adapt this well-known prayer to help course participants learn to make the crucially important distinction between accepting those things which can't be changed and changing those things that are within our power to change.

When dealing with chronic pain and illness, very often we need to accept the reality of the pain and illness, but to change our relationship to it. This is the point of creativity and initiative.

### **Being not Doing**

Most of us get our sense of identity and self-worth through what we do, rather than whom we are. When living through difficult times in life, our sense of identity is often challenged and threatened, especially if we have to deal with major life changes such as losing our job or a breakdown of an intimate relationship. With mindfulness we can learn to rest our sense of confidence and self-worth on the simple dignity of being alive – on who we are as a human being rather than what we do. We can take our place in humanity with a deeper awareness of ourselves, our connection with others, and the beauty and wonder of the world around us.

### References

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