

The Freedom of Mindfulness

by Lisa Hoffman

A phone ringing in the middle of the night is rarely a good thing, and the 12:30 a.m. call I received on Labor Day 2007 was no exception. It was my sister-in-law phoning from Ohio because my mother had started hemorrhaging and was in intensive care. It was touch and go over the next two days because the bleeding wouldn't stop. When she was finally stabilized, her doctors determined that she had cancer. She was finally released 10 days after being admitted.

My family and I rode a spinning wheel of emotions that ranged from fear to anger to relief. We found out that the type of cancer she has is highly treatable -- she wouldn't even need chemo. This experience has been a reminder of how important it is to be mindful of how my life is affecting me. Otherwise, it's easy to be driven by emotions or thoughts that have nothing to do with the person in front of me. I have certainly caused hurt in this way. Have you?

Right Mindfulness is part of the Buddha's Eightfold Noble Path, among his first teachings. Practicing this path transforms suffering because we can live in harmony and connection with all people and all things. If I'm not aware of my anger about my mother having cancer, I am likely to project it onto the unlucky people who cross my path. That projection is not about what is really happening. Mindfulness can keep me connected with what's in front of me.

Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh describes it this way in *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*: "Right mindfulness accepts everything without judging or reacting. It is inclusive and loving. The practice is to find ways to sustain appropriate attention throughout the day."

Mindfulness can seem pretty ethereal -- a vague notion of staying aware of the present moment. But how can I do this, when my thoughts and emotions so often conspire to take me away from right here and right now?

Luckily, the Buddha was practical as well as enlightened, and taught four common sense ways to be mindful -- to wake up. They are through the body, feelings, mind, and the experience before me, and are known as the four foundations of mindfulness. After learning about them, I thought *of course!* Knowing my physical state, emotions, thoughts, and how I perceive the person or thing in front of me makes it much more likely that I will have the actual experience. Without mindfulness, I will probably be stuck in reactions and projections that have little to do with right here, right now.

Over the last 12 months, I've had a real lesson in mindfulness from one of the most difficult clients I have ever worked with in my nonprofit fundraising consulting practice. He is tense, perfectionist, and the most detail-obsessed individual I have ever encountered. When my difficult client discussed *one line* in a direct mail letter 10 (perhaps more) times, I wanted to

reach through the phone line and throttle him. My whole body tensed up, my shoulders practically touching my ears and my lower back clenching and aching.

After meeting with this client, I headed back to my office thinking about all the ways he was controlling, stubborn, tedious, and resistant to new approaches. I suggested using their excellent website more directly to raise money, particularly because so many of the people they serve are young, and his response was, "Oh, we could never do that!" Pretty soon, I no longer saw him; I saw a figure representing trouble and annoyance.

Sound familiar? Is there anyone in your life who evokes such feelings, thoughts and strong physical sensations? I decided to approach him mindfully. It was not easy! I had become comfortable with my judgments and negative reactions. I began to notice when frustrated and angry feelings came up, when thoughts about what a huge pain in the neck he was dominated my thinking, when my body felt tight and closed. At the same time, I experienced my client as largely shut down to change. It was a painful, no-win situation. Should I "give him a piece of my mind"? Should I fire him? Should I just grit my teeth and power through until our contract concluded?

I decided to try and work with what was in front of me. My tenseness and frustration made a challenging situation feel impossible. So I began paying attention to him in a different way. What would make him feel more comfortable? What were his emotional and physical cues? What was an entry point, a middle ground between the most strategic way to proceed and moving forward in a way he could accept?

As I began through mindfulness to navigate *my* experience, I began to see more clearly *the* experience. He definitely was a difficult client. But once I was mindful of my frustration and other reactions, I could breathe deeply, drop my shoulders, and look at how we might take a step forward. I worried less about the most strategic step, and focused on simple, positive actions.

And we did begin to move forward. It was slow, steady and less than perfect. I began to have compassion for my client. I actually began to like him. One day I realized with a shock that he had a sense of humor -- we were having fun! And I was absolutely floored when he opened to ideas he had previously resisted.

Mindfulness is a powerful tool. Noticing how I feel, what I'm thinking, and how my body is reacting gives me choices. I was able to change how I approached my difficult client once I really knew how I was reacting. I learned that I could have compassion in any situation, even if it took a while to develop. "When we are mindful," writes Thich Nhat Hanh, "touching deeply the present moment, we can see and listen deeply, and the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy. Understanding is the very foundation of love."

In the case of my difficult client, the outcome has been surprisingly positive and to my liking. Sometimes it's not. And even then I can continue to make choices about how I respond. I find mindfulness gives me freedom regardless of the results. There is power in the present moment, no matter how I feel about it.

My mother begins radiation next week, and I will be going back to Ohio to support her and my family. Her prognosis remains positive, and we are all cautiously optimistic. There are still times when I am fearful. A very close friend recently died of ovarian cancer. I know too well that there are no guaranteed outcomes. I also know that I will mindfully experience whatever happens. That is my vow, and that is my freedom.

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