



Dropping into mindfulness

*Mindfulness can be a great stress reliever,
but it can also help you in moments of great gravity.*

Words Bryony Lancaster Photography Gabriela Fearn

It's been proven that the pain we feel when we deem a situation as "unacceptable" is more than if we can stay in a space of awareness, and that mindfulness can help manage pain. Recently, I was able to put this to the test.

I had just finished teaching a four-week mindfulness course. Having farewelled 25 happy meditators, I met my family at the beach for a surf before having a nasty accident. It was a shore break at low tide, so not a great combination to start with. I caught a wave and got picked up, turned sideways and smashed into the sandbank onto the side of the board, which got jammed between my pelvis and ribs. It also almost broke my hand that was under the board and me.

As I was carried up the beach in floods of tears, I was sure I had broken my pelvis. I spent the next 24 hours in hospital getting x-rays and blood tests, ruling out breaks and internal bleeds. As I lay in hospital in the emergency

ward, I became aware of how quickly things had changed that day and was struck by how fast life can alter direction. Just hours before I was so happy and my heart was full, and here I was in hospital in great pain and racked with fear.

Putting the mindfulness practice to practise

With mindfulness on my brain, I automatically slipped onto the well-trodden pathway of awareness of my body and breath (the first foundation of mindfulness). I have practised this so many times before and after many years of this being a cornerstone of my practice. I know that there is no aspect of our lives that need be excluded from awareness, including lying in pain in hospital.

I was able to swiftly slip onto the pathway laid out by thousands of meditators before me: to feel my body. And of course I could — it was in agony and shock! I was able to notice my breath as it moved through my body. With every

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The four pillars of mindfulness

1. Mindfulness of the body and breath

Feel your body around you. Notice yourself being breathed.

2. Mindfulness of the feelings

How is it in there? How do you feel? It can help to label feelings as “pleasant”, “unpleasant” or “neutral” to see the transitory nature of your feelings.

3. Mindfulness of the mind

Notice the quality of your mind state; don't try to manage it, just notice how it is. It can help to ask, “What is happening right now?”

4. Mindfulness of the environment or dhamma

Use the senses to listen, feel, taste, smell and touch the moment, without trying to manipulate it in any way. Just playing witness to life as it unfolds around and within you.

inhale I was tentatively moving through the damaged tissue; I could feel with such a gentle inquiry into the hip and the muscles still gripping from the impact. Feeling into the pain allowed it to hold me less tightly. I could examine the sensations in my body without reacting to them emotionally, just with a curiosity.

I was able to sense into the realm of my feelings (the second foundation of mindfulness). I had cried like a child on the beach, deep shock and trauma had opened something so vast in me that I still don't fully understand; I felt so vulnerable and tender. Leaning into this and wrapping myself in compassion helped to alleviate the suffering and provided a gentle landing onto which I could rest and simply allow my feelings (both sensations and emotions) to come and go in their mercurial way.

I was able to notice my mind state (the third foundation of mindfulness) and to see clearly the thoughts that were there. Guiding myself away from runaway thoughts, I could tether my mind by asking, “What is happening right now?” in an effort to stay present and not go down

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Lastly and, perhaps most easily, I was able to lean into the fourth layer of mindfulness and use the environment around me (or *dhamma*) to fully keep me held in the present moment. These included the various beeping sounds of the machines around me, the voices of the busy nurses and the other patients coming and going, the lights above and the smells of the hospital — it was all washing around and through my sense doors and my periphery. I lay there for what felt like hours in this way, allowing my breath to move and my body to surrender to all that was going on. It was, despite the situation, peaceful.

In a way, when we can see all of this happening around and within us, it gives us tremendous equanimity. We realise “I am not this pain, this fear, this body” but rather the awareness that observes it all.



The journey towards freedom

Mindfulness is not hard. It's about reminding yourself to do it, right? And after a while, this can become second nature.

By dropping into the state of meta awareness, we are able to see our minds and the stories they tell us with greater clarity. Suddenly, by shining the light of awareness on all parts of us, even the previously unseen parts hold us less tightly.

Not only does it help with the tough times, but also extracting the greatest joy from ordinary moments. Fully tasting a perfectly brewed chai, the most amazing ice cream, laughing with a best friend, hugging someone you love. Or, in the case of the morning of the accident, I had been profoundly aware of how happy I felt to be with my family, in a peaceful country on a clean beach having taught what I love, and I was full to the brim of joy in that moment. Heading out to surf with my three favourite people and knowing how fleeting it could be. Mindfulness teaches us that all we have is now. By waking from the trance we can enjoy life more fully in the good moments and endure it more gracefully in the challenging moments.

Ultimately, yoga (*asana*) is the warm-up for meditation; it's the movement towards stillness and the journey towards freedom. But in order to get to that place of stillness and inner freedom, we have to be willing to feel. The only way is through. We have to

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I tried for many years to just feel the good stuff and block out the bad. Unfortunately it doesn't work! However, yoga, or asana, can provide a brilliant precursor to stillness or an insight into your practice. We get to practise feeling equanimous during a long *virabhadrasana II* (warrior 2) pose or *utkatasana* (chair pose) so that we can better sit on our meditation cushion, despite the resistance we will certainly feel. In the end, we have to open our hearts to all that is — both the heaven and the hades of life. But the good news is that this helps us to be more resilient, adaptable and wise and, with what the world is currently facing, I believe this is more important than ever before.

I have felt tremendous support from being able to use different maps from various wisdom traditions to create more of a pluralistic practice. To take the jewels from various traditions, whether it's the Indian or Chinese methods of asana or the Buddhist methods of meditation, to move towards freedom.

Even though it's been on bumper stickers and quoted for so many years, Gandhi's advice “be the change you wish to see in the world” still holds such poignant relevance for me and I truly believe the changes that we seek in the world must begin with us. ♻️