

The Seven Essential Attitudes

In *Full Catastrophe Living* (1990), John Kabat-Zinn outlines seven specific attitudes that form a foundation for mindfulness. They apply directly, moment by moment and day by day, as you cultivate and deepen mindfulness. These attitudes are *non-judging*, *patience*, *beginner's mind*, *trust*, *non-striving*, *acceptance*, and *letting go*. These attitudes support each other and are deeply interconnected. Practicing one will lead to the others. Your ability to bring these attitudes forward in your mindfulness practice will have a great deal to do with your long-term success and ability to calm your anxious mind. In the actual meditation practices you will learn, you will revisit them many times, and will come to understand what vital supports they truly are.

Non-judging: Mindfulness is compassionate, openhearted, choice-less awareness. It is cultivated by taking the position of an unbiased attentive witness to your own experience as it happens in the present moment. To do this requires that you begin to relate to the contents of experience, without judgment, as the present moment unfolds. The habit of categorizing and judging experience locks you into patterns of reacting and repeating thoughts, feelings, and behavior. You may not even be aware of these patterns. Judging acts to separate you from the direct experience of each moment and from the unfolding reality of life. When you practice mindfulness, it is important to recognize the judging quality of mind and identify the judgmental thinking as it arises. It is equally important not to judge the judging! Simply note that judging is present.

Patience: Patience is the ability to bear difficulty with calmness and self-control. It requires connection with your calm inner core and also some faith and courage. Patience also requires a degree of kindness and compassion for yourself as you bear the upset of the situation. Often, impatience arises when the *ego*, the self-centered part in each of us, screams for things to be different than they actually are. There is a certain wisdom that supports patience. This wisdom recognizes that things have a life cycle of their own and that the ego is not always calling the tune. As you learn to rest more and more with this truth, your patience will grow even stronger. To become more patient, you must learn to recognize impatience. Notice any tendency to rush through one moment to get to the next.

Beginner's Mind: When you begin to observe what is here in the present moment, the thinking mind tends to believe it knows all about what is happening, or it tries to control what is happening by desperately seeking more information. The activity of thinking forms as a kind of filter between you and the direct experience and true richness of life as it unfolds moment by moment. To practice beginner's mind means to open to the experience in each moment as if meeting it for the first time. Imagine the wonder of a child as she encounters something for the first time. The first smell of a flower, the first drop of rain, the first taste of orange: all are experienced without the intermediate layer of thought or comparison to the past. These moments are experienced just as they are, in the now, directly, as smell or touch or taste, as sound or sight. In truth, each moment *is* unique. Though you may have experienced a thousand sunsets, you have not experienced *this* particular sunset. The same is true of a lifetime of in-breaths, or the hundredth time you taste your favorite dessert. This particular breath and this particular taste have never happened before and will never happen again. When practicing mindfulness, you are asked to cultivate this same quality of direct experience, receiving whatever arises as a unique and precious experience. To do this is to practice beginner's mind.

Trust: A basic part of learning to meditate is learning to trust yourself and your feelings. You learn to trust that you can see clearly what is actually happening to you. As you practice mindfulness, you will deepen your awareness of life and your own moment-to-moment experience. You will develop increasing sensitivity and accuracy in discerning what is here now, and what is happening in your own body and mind, as well as what is happening around you. You will learn that you and you alone are the best person to know what is going on inside your own skin and what is happening outside of it. You do not need an expert to tell you these things. You can learn to pay attention and to be present using powerful capabilities of attention and awareness that you already have. It is important to learn to trust in your own authority to know yourself, rather than to look outside yourself

for authority. In this process, you discover what it really means to be your own person and to live life with authenticity.

Non-striving: We spend so much of our lives doing things and trying to change things. This habit of *doing* often carries over into meditation, and it can be a real problem. The ego mind wants to get more of what it likes and wants to get rid of what it doesn't like. When it decides you aren't the way you should be, the ego mind even puts on the pressure to change *you*. This pressure to do and to change is felt as striving, or straining to be different, to go elsewhere, or to do something else. The practice of mindfulness involves simply paying attention, without judgment, to whatever is happening. In this sense, meditation is a unique human activity. Meditation is about non-doing instead of doing. To practice meditation is to practice being, not doing. When you feel a sense of striving or of trying to change things, notice that without judging yourself. In a deep sense, the practice of mindfulness is about truly relaxing, allowing whatever is happening to happen, and bringing clear, compassionate awareness to it as it happens. Meditation involves a paradox. The best way to achieve your goals about meditation (whether they be control of anxiety and panic, stress reduction, spiritual growth, personal development, or anything else) is to back off from striving for results and instead start to focus carefully on seeing and accepting things as they are, moment to moment.

Acceptance: The process of acceptance begins with the willingness to see things exactly as they are in the present moment. Can you keep your attention focused exactly here and now, taking each moment as it comes and connecting with whatever presents itself? Often, to be able to accept what comes into awareness, you must pass through periods of intense feelings such as anger, fear, or grief. These feelings themselves require acceptance. Acceptance means seeing things exactly as they are rather than as you think they are or as you think they should be. Remember, things can only change in the present moment. You have to see things as they are and yourself as you are—truly—in this moment if you wish to change, heal, or transform yourself or your life. Acceptance includes softening and opening to what is here. The sense of struggle is released. By ceasing to deny and to fight with the way things are now, you can find yourself with more energy to heal and to transform what is here. Acceptance does not mean you have to like everything or that you have to take a passive attitude. It does not mean you have to be satisfied with things as they are, or that you have to stop trying to change things for the better. As we are speaking of it here, acceptance simply means willingness to see things as they are, deeply, truthfully, and completely. This attitude sets the stage for acting in the most potent and healthy way in your life, no matter what is happening.

Letting Go: Letting go, or *non-attachment*, is another attitude essential to mindfulness. Much of the time, people are practicing the opposite attitude, clinging, without even knowing it. Often, what you cling to most strongly are ideas and views about yourself, others, and situations. It is a kind of clinging on the inside. It may be difficult to see, but is easily felt. These ideas to which you cling filter and shape your moment-by-moment experience in profound ways. When you start paying attention to your inner experience through meditation, you will rapidly discover which thoughts, feelings, and situations your mind seems to want to hold onto. And you will notice other things that it wants desperately to get rid of. Clinging is driven by liking and disliking, and by judgments about things. As you practice mindfulness, it is important to put aside the tendency to judge each experience. Instead, you teach yourself to *recognize* judging. Don't get caught up in good or bad, high or low, pleasant or unpleasant. Just let your experience be what is, moment by moment. This *letting be* is actually a way of *letting go*. By not interfering, by just letting things be, you give them a better chance to go. Can you feel the sense of contracting and hardening that arises around both pleasant and unpleasant situations? Letting go just means releasing the contraction around the thing and allowing it to be. It is not necessary to push the thing away. No force is required. Just soften the contraction. Just let go. You do it all the time, actually. Make a fist. Squeeze it tight. Now let go. Notice the feeling. Try it again. This is the physical sensation of letting go. Practicing meditation, you are practicing letting go on the inside. Become familiar with the interior sense of contraction, in the body and mind. Then practicing letting go of that.