

“Mindfulness as Love” description:

What is mindfulness, and how can we use it to greet each moment of our lives with greater acceptance and love? Linda Coutant, Ed.D., is a certified instructor of the Koru Mindfulness Curriculum for emerging adults. She will discuss mindfulness’ roots in the spiritual traditions, share her own experiences in searching for a deeper spirituality, and offer thoughts on the possibilities mindfulness has toward greater love, empathy and acceptance.

Talk to Boone Unitarian Universalists – July 19, 2020:

Thank you, Kathy, for the introduction.

My topic is “Mindfulness as Love,” which I hope enhances your thematic exploration of love, empathy and acceptance.

First, how many here are familiar with mindfulness? For those of you who aren’t familiar, let me explain briefly what is. I like to use Jon Kabat-Zinn’s definition. He was the one who secularized Buddhist meditation 40-some years ago through his Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction program, an 8-week course used in hospitals and counseling settings to reduce stress, pain and address myriad health issues. He says mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment without judgment. Rather than allowing our minds to wander to the past or the future, we stay focused on the present moment with an attitude of curiosity and acceptance. This allows us to explore what we’re experiencing mentally, emotionally and physically. And, knowing that, we have an opportunity to ask ourselves, how can I function better?

We can strengthen our awareness of the present moment — or what I call our mindfulness muscle — through meditation... using anchors such as our breath, sound, movement such as tai chi, or bodily sensations while seated in a chair — to hold our attention. Thoughts, emotions and physical sensations will still come to us, but in this space of observation we can notice their patterns more objectively. Meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg calls this “wise attention.”

A good analogy for mindfulness is that of a river: Our mind has a current, sometimes it is very strong. Our thoughts and emotions can pull us into the rapids of that river, thrashing us about, and mindfulness skills can work like a rope we throw up on the bank. We can use deep belly breathing, sound meditation or other skill to pull ourselves out of the current and sit on a rock and become the observer — watching the stream go by. The longer we watch, we might observe the current slow down and become more calm.

So for example, if you watch the evening news and perhaps later feel angry and take that anger and hurt out on others, a strong mindfulness muscle can help you discern at what point you began feeling angry — even where you felt it in your body — and then knowing that, help you make a conscious choice to, perhaps, turn off the news or practice a relaxation technique to better cope with the news. Or, to use your anger more mindfully to advocate for change. We can’t always control external factors in our lives, but we can learn to control our internal responses to them. In other words, it’s really not the

circumstances in our lives that determine our happiness or our suffering — instead, it's largely the way we think about and relate to those events. Almost all forms of suffering can be diminished — even a little bit — by shifting our internal approach to these difficulties.

I started meditating in my 20s at the advice of a psychologist to help combat anxiety and depression. In my 30s, some stress-related health issues led me to take a 6-month course in tai chi as a way to better manage stress. For me, these 15 to 30 minutes of daily practice, of “wise attention,” began to open a deep yearning for more stillness, more clarity, more connection to what is called God or Higher Self or Love. Wise attention helped me become more plugged in to my True Nature — it has helped teach me love and acceptance of myself, as well as greater acceptance of anyone and anything around me.

While the form of mindfulness we teach to college students is secular as a means to building resilience, mindfulness has its roots in the spiritual traditions: in Buddhism, becoming still is the path of awakening; in Christianity, contemplative prayer leads to a connection to Christ; in Hinduism, yogis cultivate inner knowing. I see mindfulness reflected in the 7 principles of Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Neuroscience is catching up to what these spiritual traditions have long espoused: Mindfulness strengthens the mind-body connection. Focused deep breathing from the belly, for example, activates the vagus nerve, which is part of the parasympathetic nervous system that slows our heart rate, lowers our blood pressure and calms us down. Meditation increases the gray matter in our brain that handles not only attention, but also compassion and empathy. Research shows that as parts of our brain become awake to our own pain and suffering, they also prime us to sense the pain and suffering of others. For example, a study a few years ago showed that after 6 weeks of loving-kindness meditation, a group of white people showed greater empathy toward strangers who were People of Color or people experiencing homelessness. When these parts of our brain can notice whether we're responding to people or events in our lives from a place of love or from a place of fear, then we are more able to make a choice of which emotion we want to cultivate. As a Native American elder once said: “In my heart there are two wolves: a wolf of love and a wolf of hate. Which one is strong depends on which I feed each day.”

Which brings me to why mindfulness can be especially useful today: There is pain and suffering in our world. There is hate — and also there is love. We have both individually and collectively. We may not be able to control external factors in our lives, but we can learn to control your internal responses to them.

Here's an example I use when teaching mindfulness to young people: A friend says something to me that hurts my feelings. In reaction, I might unconsciously blurt out something equally mean as a defense mechanism, OR my mindfulness muscle can get in gear, first allowing me to recognize the emotional hurt and then allowing me to choose a different response — such as shifting my breathing to calm myself down, changing my thoughts to recognize her remarks as untrue, and maybe even gathering the courage to tell her I'm hurt by her words. It also allows me to dig deeper to explore why her words hurt me at all.

This may sound like a simple example, but I believe our society is being tested — more so now than in generations. So I ask you, can you love yourself enough to spend 10 minutes a day in silence — what Thomas Keating calls “God's first language”; can you love your neighbors enough to spend 10 minutes a day cultivating empathy and compassion; can you love strangers enough to spend 10 minutes a day choosing love over fear? (8 minutes)

Let's take our final minutes to practice being mindful. I invite you to get comfortable in your chair....notice any areas where you're feeling tense and just relax those muscles. ... I invited you to close your eyes.... And, focus on the sensations of breathing. This may be the rise and fall of your chest, or the pushing in and out of your belly. Just observe. ... You might notice that each breath has a beginning, a middle and an end. ... If your mind begins to wonder, just gently and lovingly acknowledge the thoughts and return your attention to the sensation of breathing. This is what we do over and over again in meditation. ... Now, I invited you to open your eyes. Congratulations, you just completed 2 minutes of silent meditation.

Thank you, I'm happy to entertain any questions you may have...

Resources:

Tree of Contemplative Practices - <http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>

"Buddha's Brain: The practical neuroscience of happiness, love and wisdom" by Rick Hanson

"Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life" by Jon Kabat-Zinn

"Real Happiness: The power of meditation" by Sharon Salzberg

"The Mindful Twenty-something" by Holly Rogers

Whispering Waters Sangha: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/whisperingwaterssangha/>

Online Koru meditations: <https://student.korumindfulness.org/resources.html>