

Few chapters from the book

What is mindfulness?

It is not about "a mind full of things". Well most of the time our minds are full of thoughts. Come to think of it most of these thoughts are either about the future or about the past. But mindfulness is about being able to know what goes on in your mind at present - right now. But it is interesting to know that thoughts come in sequence one after the other. This happens so fast that we cannot even notice it happening unless we really slow down.

For instance, as you read this sentence you may suddenly remember something related to this topic or something completely unrelated. May be about some work you were doing yesterday. Then your present thought changes to the thought about the work you did yesterday. The moment you realize it, then you have the thought of awareness - that "it is a thought of knowing" it is different from the previous thought. So in the initial stages of the development of this skill you begin to notice the immediately preceding thought. But if the topic that you are thinking is stronger than the thought of awareness, then it can come back.

Don't worry - it is fun when you start observing this mind game. It is like learning a new language or a craft.

Once you are aware of what goes on in your mind you can take charge.

You have learnt from your childhood the advice - "when you get angry count up to ten before doing or saying anything." But most of the time we realize that we were angry long after action was taken. Developing mindfulness to become aware will help us realize that we are losing our temper as it happens so that we can decide how to respond. Otherwise, the natural tendency is to react through habit.

The other important aspect of developing the ability to become aware of the current mental status is being able to understand the real motives of our own actions. We become more sensitive to our own likes, dislikes, and emotions. This reduces our inner conflicts helping our mental health in the long term. Otherwise, we suppress our emotions without really being aware of them. They then start to grow as pent up emotions to erupt at unexpected moments or cause physical or psychological disorders.

Mindfulness gives us the skill to become aware when the mental loads we carry are too heavy. When we weigh our bags before air travel we know what to leave behind, to pack tight and pack light. Similarly, mindfulness helps us to become aware when the emotional loads are too heavy so we can take stock to let go of things that really bother us.

It is interesting to note how we cling on to thoughts that make us unhappy, like a thought about a person who has done wrong to us. We carry that person in our mind the way we used to carry the loved one in our mind during our courting days. It is the habit formed by latter - to continue thoughts of pleasure make us harbor thoughts about the wrongdoer also throughout the day. Once we develop the skill of becoming aware of what we are doing, we can choose not to think about that person in an emotional way. We learn to let go of those thoughts that build emotional pressures.

In some Asian countries hunters use a simple trick to capture monkeys. They make a hole in a coconut that is small so that a monkey can reach inside only by squeezing the hand. Inside the coconut they place peanuts. Monkey reaches for pea nuts, grabs a few and closes the fist but fails to pull the hand out with the closed fist. It cannot think by letting go of the pea nuts that it can pull the hand out. Eventually the hunters capture the monkey.

To be free the monkey has to let go of the handful of pea nuts. This is exactly what happens to us. Only if we let go of the painful thought we can be free from the suffering, so there is space to resolve or take action about the true issue.

Being aware gives us a capability to operate from a different platform that is free from unnecessary baggage.

How do we develop this skill of mindfulness?.

Well, like any other skill we learn this too in a step by step way. Once mastered, it is like cycling. It is going to be with you.

How long does it take to develop the skill?

Don't have time targets. You have enough time targets already. This is a natural capability you already have. You are going to rediscover it and fine-tune it. Like any other skill it is all about practicing. Once you start practice it is going to be with you throughout your life.

How do you develop the skill?

Unlike other skill developments, don't be very serious. Make learning this skill fun; after all you learn this to be Free!

Don't have a rigid target to be perfect. You have enough such goals already. The practice itself is the goal. The hen does not check time but she just sits on her eggs until they hatch. Just because you are in a hurry you cannot cause a flower to bloom. What you can do is water, and look after the plant. Blooming is part of the nature. Similarly, being mindful is a natural capability. You keep practicing and you will realize it has an impact on you. That is all.

If you have learned or heard anything about Mindfulness and Awareness leave them behind for a while.

You probably have heard this is linked to meditation. If it is in the context of developing one's mind then it is true. Otherwise, forget any other connotations.

You are going to learn to observe some mundane things slowly, very slowly to pick up the art of becoming aware. Once you get a hang of it you can apply them to any phenomena in life and you will discover your own speed and the path.

In Summary

Ability to become aware of what goes on in your mind will give you the ability to be in charge- and to choose your response.

This is a skill that can be developed.

To develop this skill, learn to bring the attention to the present moment. For that choose some of your routine activities to be done slower than normal when possible.

Choose the most suitable practice from the many suggested in the book.

My personal favourites are becoming aware of breath and learning to walk paying attention to walking.

Make bringing mind to the present moment a part of your life. In fact once you start this practice this will be the norm.

This ability to become aware will help you look at yourself objectively thus giving you an opportunity to learn more about yourself, and how you interact with others.

You will begin to enjoy a degree of inner calm, and you will be more stable in life situations, consequently you will be more effective in whatever you do.

29. Formula to Fail

I was reflecting upon why I crashed my advanced level examination (equivalent to University Entrance) the first time I sat for it. I could identify five reasons. I started observing these tendencies in myself and always tried to overcome them. Whenever I overcame them I was successful, otherwise I failed. During my numerous training programmes I have asked thousands of participants whether this is true for themselves and the answer was a very convincing YES! Let me share them with you and I would like to know whether you would feel the same. Ever since I discovered these five factors, I have been speaking about them to students at school gatherings on "how to fail exams!" In order to simplify my presentation I developed an acronym called RAPID.

R= Restlessness and remorse - meaning lack of focus, inability to stay on course and being worried about what was done or not done in the past..

A= Aversion- fighting and avoiding situations that I do not like

P= Procrastination - postponing things to be done later

I= Indulgence – giving into the demands to satisfy senses forgetting the task at hand

D= Doubt-lack of self confidence, not having a clear idea of the path to be followed.

Let me now elaborate how these manifested in my student life.

Restlessness and remorse- Although I entered the Advanced Level class hoping to become a doctor (a profession I still love), when it came to studies I really did not have a focus. I used to sit hoping to study a particular subject only to change the subject in a few hours without completing the lesson I set out to study. I never went to a tuition master continuously. I got easily distracted to other issues that were outside my immediate relevant subjects, including politics. As I was getting closer to the examination the thoughts of repent filled my mind building stress. I was thinking I should have done that!

Aversion- The expression “ I hate that subject “ was the way I wish to describe my attitude towards the subjects or subject areas that I could not master. I avoided the difficult subjects. I use to lose my temper very often and many a time with my room-

mate. He and I differed how we should be keeping our room- absolutely irrelevant to the objective of getting through the exam!

Procrastination- I had very good reasons why something should not be done at a particular moment. I postponed doing certain tutorials at home hoping to do them in class and once I was in the class, I postponed them to be done during the tuition sessions. I kept on postponing and ultimately did not do them. The end result was that there were many questions I had not attempted even after my third shy. Looking back my excuses were flimsy ones - as it was too early in the day, or too late in the day, just after a meal, or was about to eat, before Practices, after Practices and so on – simply anything to delay..

Indulgence- Having come from the village to the city the new found freedom gave me enough opportunities to go for movies, hang around or visit friends, seeking popularity in school (I spent more time in the cadetting room and later on, in the prefects room than in the class room). When the alarm went early in the morning I stopped it and continued to be in bed that when I finally got out of bed, it was quite late. I found studying at the table not so comfortable and discovered that the most comfortable way was to lie on the bed and study only to find I had fallen asleep!

Doubt- Obviously this type of student life did not lend to developing a strong self confidence in myself. I did not have a clear understanding as to what was needed to be effective at the examination. When I sat the examination the first time I did not know the minimum marks I should get to enter the medical college. I discovered some topics of the chemistry and zoology syllabus for the first time at the examination hall!

Later I discovered how these tendencies affect achieving goals set by us in our day to day life and in the world of commerce as well. If we accept that these are human tendencies then as long as we have humans running businesses and organizations these aspects can affect the way we work and it is nothing but natural.

RESTLESSNESS - It is very common to shift from one activity to another without completing what is in hand. The present day work life environment, in fact, has many external factors that thrive on this human tendency. The e- mails, SMSs, and the phone calls can do exactly the same thing. At a more strategic level not being focused on the agreed strategy is very common and some of the decisions and actions we take are completely counter-productive to the agreed strategy. This I see as a result of the

presence of restlessness as a human tendency. At the same time it is the remorse that causes tension and stress in many instances in the executive's life as well.

AVERSION- We say "*kill the messenger*". This is exactly what we do when aversion is present in our mind in the context of work. In many business situations we do not want to accept the bad news. When the market research says that there is negative perception in the market we ask for more evidence. At the meeting the one who challenges the status quo is not the most popular. We avoid listening to that person..Sometimes we even fight with the clients! We avoid speaking to the difficult clients because of this dislike. At a strategic level we try to fight the competitor rather than the competition by winning the customer. How many ego battles fuel the advertising wars providing only amusement to the public.

PROCRASTINATION - The moment we say "Let us do this next Monday", what we do is delaying the activity by one week without even realizing it. There are many important but not so urgent activities in work life and in the organization. We delay doing these until they become Urgent and Important thus creating excessive stress. The habit of procrastination is in a way linked to physical sloth as well. At the same time the mind also gets lazy and slows down. If allowed to continue this too can become a dominant barrier to success. At a strategic level we take inordinate time to make decisions because of the presence of this tendency.

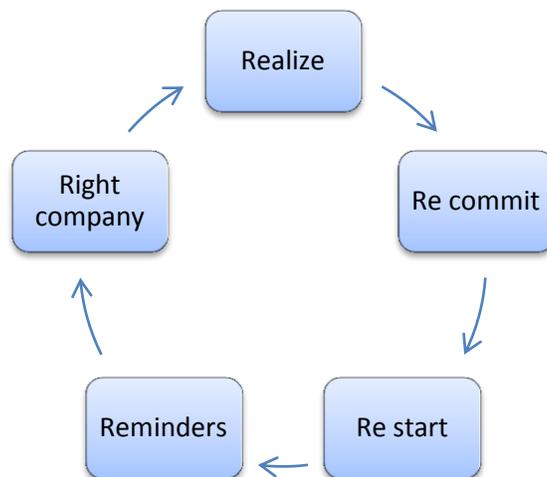
INDULGENCE This can expand from individuals indulging in excessive satisfaction of their senses and allowing them to have habits that cost money, time, health and reputation. Other than that, subtle forms of this tendency can drive us to favour those whom we like, to carry on comfortable tasks without moving away from the comfort zone, and to build organization practices physical and otherwise that soothe our personal egos and images. Excessive luxuries can be a result of the presence of this tendency.

DOUBT - This can vary from the lack of self- confidence of the individual to the organization not having a common understanding of the purpose and the path. The common issue of not having a collective understanding of the organizational strategy among the staff is in a way a manifestation of this tendency among individuals.

Actually I could structure these concepts after reflecting upon the five hindrances mentioned in the Buddhist texts. In describing these, the texts provide some very interesting similes. They are, of course, given in the context of spiritual advancement

but I think it is quite appropriate even in the mundane situations that we discussed above.

The 5R formula to overcome RAPID



REALIZE- Mindfulness help us to become aware of the fact that we are drifting away from the goal and what factors cause the drift. This is realization.

RE COMMIT- Since it is nothing but natural for such deviations it is always a good idea to re commit to the original goal. Haven't we learnt this from many stories told to us early in life? This is a strong mental commitment we can make by reflecting on the positives of achieving the goal and the negatives of not doing so.

RE START- Having re committed we must re start the process from the place we have already stopped. At this point it is important writing down exactly what is the first task that will be done towards the goal. It should be so clear we should be able to indicate a Date and a Time to do it. Otherwise it can stay in the realm of wanting to do not in the realm of doing.

REMINDERS- This is a good way to bring us back to the task at hand. These can be words statements and pictures that can remind us constantly of what we want to achieve or commitments to made publicly, promises made to loved ones.

RIGHT COMPANY- This is the most important step. Right company or the right association is so critical to achieving goals. What I mean here is not merely regular

association with right kind of persons but more importantly allowing such persons words, deeds and thoughts influence your own actions. In that context they can be words of wisdom found in books, or biographies of successful people.