

Just Plain Curious

53 mindfulness exercises
for families and friends



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What is mindfulness?

Being mindful means knowing where you are and what you are doing.

To practice mindfulness is to pay deliberate attention to what's going on in your experience, both inside and outside. We notice the details of the present, with nonjudgmental mind.

One of the extraordinary aspects of mindfulness practice is that it can be done without subtracting a single minute from your day. Many of the things you do every day - folding clothes, washing your hair, eating a carrot - lend themselves to mindfulness practice. Doing things mindfully will add pleasure and increase the quality of almost every action, a boon in this "buy-one-get-one-free" world, where we're always looking to maximize our time and effort.

Taking it further, practicing mindfulness with the expressed intention to benefit beings, in combination with other aspects of dharma training, becomes part of the time-honored toolbox for enlightenment.

Have fun with these exercises and build a few yourself. Do them on your own, together with family and friends, and in classes and communities of all kinds. Anyone old enough to understand an exercise is old enough to benefit from it. Stay loose, have fun and keep a curious mind.

May your practice benefit beings - till not even the word for suffering exists,

"Lekshe" Julia King Tamang

This work is offered with gratitude to the great meditation master, Kyabje Bokar Rinpoche; to my kind and generous benefactors at Great Vow Zen Monastery; and especially to Lama Michael Conklin, of Kagyu Changchub Chuling, my spiritual home. May great faith and tireless work continue to bear the fruit of their grandest aspirations on behalf of all beings.

What are the benefits of practicing mindfulness?

From a dharma perspective, we practice mindfulness to benefit ourselves and all sentient beings. The ability to know our experience directly will aid us in relieving our suffering and the suffering of others.

In ordinary ways, being mindful can contribute to a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction with our lives as we feel greater depth and a refined sense of experience.

Sometimes when mindfully noticing, you will see that something you're doing is not at all easy to appreciate. You might notice, for example, that you waste an awful lot of water or paper in your life. In the exact moment of noticing, it's joyful to see an aspect of your life so simply, clearly and precisely. Even when that pure noticing is quickly followed by regret for what you discovered, it's hard to forget that the moment of discovery itself had a joyful, pleasurable quality to it.

The ability to carry mindfulness is also useful when working to change old habits or establish new ones. Watching with nonjudgmental curiosity, you can see your actions before they take shape. You might catch a fearful thought on its way to becoming speech, for example. On occasion, we discover old patterns of thinking and action that are no longer useful, and when we see them clearly, they sometimes effortlessly fall away like last season's leaves, making way for new growth and a fresh start.

Mindfulness and stability of attention elevate performance in most tasks. Mindfully done work will bear in quality and style the marks that indicate the presence of the worker.

Practicing mindfulness will help you be able to stay present with intense experience, which may open the door to staying with difficult relationships, difficult work and any sense of limitation you might have. And when you do choose to leave it will be done in choiceful awareness, not flight of habit.

But the worldly benefits of mindfulness are slim compared to the role it can play in practice. When combined with the appropriate action, view and meditation, we can achieve complete enlightenment.

That's good news for something that's also fun to do!

Some ideas for using this book

You might find it helpful to do each of the exercises for a week at time. This will yield a greater variety of learning experiences, and more time to make progress on actually remembering to practice throughout the day.

Read the exercise and think about it. Either read through the debrief questions beforehand, or save them till after the week of practice is finished. You can refresh your memory by reading the exercise again a few times during the week.

Many people like to do the exercises with at least one other person. They are also useful in families, classes and other groups. If you're doing them with a group, you might want to talk about how you will each remember to do the practice during the week. It's easy to forget! Since the ways of forgetting are myriad, the ways of remembering will have to be, too.

Some people like to make a little practice card, or to leave this booklet open on their desk. Others use a magnet to hang a page on the fridge. If you have kids, be sure to hang it low enough so they can read it easily. It would even be possible to load the exercises as your screen saver, so they are on your computer desktop - whatever works!

The point of the exercises is to train the mind towards intentional, mindful behavior. It's important to be patient and kind to yourself as you are working. Judgement and harsh control will train the mind in force, so try instead to be patient and playfully curious. This will nurture a lighthearted curiosity, along with steady attention and the capacity to recall the practice.

Remind yourself that practicing these and other mindfulness exercises will help create peace and clarity in the world, one person at time, starting with yourself.

There is no failure in these practices. If you practice from a place of gentle curiosity, whatever you notice, even if it's that you forgot to practice, or lack the motivation to stick with it, you're learning. Whatever you experience is completely unique and if you're honest with yourself about your experience, that experience is true for you, no matter what others say.

Your mind is a great laboratory, full of amazing potential and the goal is to get to know it well. If you see a habit of mind that seems problematic, don't worry, it is probably shared by millions of people around the world. Bringing loving patience to any obstacles you meet will train you to be patient with others, as well. You can even make the wish, "May everyone who has this very problem be freed of it, without exception." Gentle, non-critical noticing works best, or as the kids say, try being "just plain curious."

All the Water in Your Life

This week, notice all the water in your life. Notice water in your house, outside, in buildings and in unexpected places, like inside a peach. Notice how you use water and how it feels, tastes, sounds and smells. Try to see water and the absence of water everywhere. You have probably been near water all your life. What do you notice when you are mindful of water?

Questions

What did you notice when you were mindful of water in your life?

Did you learn anything new about your experience of water?

Where are all the places you noticed water?

Did you use water in a way that you weren't aware you used it before?

Did you waste water?

What did you notice about the sound of water?

Where did you notice water that you did not use?

Did you have any feelings about the water in your life?

Did water have a taste? A texture?

Did you notice differences in the water in different places?

Did you use more water at home or away from home?

The Sound of a Phone Ringing

This week, notice the sound of phones ringing.

Questions

How did you feel when you heard a phone ringing?

Do you feel differently when the phone is yours and when it is someone else's?

When you hear your own phone ring, how does it affect your body?

Does the number of times it rings affect how you feel about the ringing?

Mindful of the Color Blue

Be mindful of the color blue, in all of its subtle and less-subtle appearances this week. Notice where you see it and when. Notice your reaction to blue. Look for blue both inside and outside, in the dark and in the light.

Questions

What did you notice, looking for a particular color this week?

Where and when did you see blue?

Did you see blue anywhere you didn't expect to see it?

Did you learn anything, watching for blue this week?

Did you notice the color blue in anything you would not have called "blue" before this exercise?

Pain and Soreness of the Body and its Parts

This week, notice pain or soreness in the body. For some people, pain is a constant companion. For others, it is an occasional visitor. When you notice pain, take a moment to consider its qualities (hot or cold, throbbing or sharp or dull) before calling it pain.

Questions

What was it like to notice the various qualities of pain, instead of lumping it all into the simple term, “pain”?

Did you learn anything new about your experience of pain?

Is the pain inside your body, or on the surface, or not really “in” the body at all?

How did you react emotionally when you noticed your pain? Was it different when you put your awareness on it?

Does pain have a shape or color?

What happens when you rest your awareness on the pain fully and really let the pain happen, without trying to avoid it or change it?

Those Little Nervous Habits

This week, notice all your nervous habits, including, but not limited to scratching, nose rubbing, toe tapping, shifting right and left, humming, singing, shaking your leg, clicking your pen and more. When do you do it? When do you not do it? What causes you to start and stop?

Questions

What did you notice when you were mindful of your nervous habits?

Do you have a choice about these habits? Do you want to?

Is the habit useful? If so, how?

What happens to the habits when you put your awareness on them in the moment of doing them?

Mindful Silly Walking

This week, try to do a silly walk at least once a day. It doesn't matter if you do it in private or around others. Notice how the silly walk affects your body and your mind. Do at least one silly walk in the dark. Try a silly walk when you are cranky and when you are happy. If you are afraid, try a silly walk.

Questions

What did you notice when you did silly walking?

Does the silly walking affect your mood?

How did you feel when others saw you silly walking, when you did it around others?

Did you use your body in unfamiliar ways when you did a silly walk? How did that feel?

Tidying Up

This week, leave at least one space a day cleaner than you found it. This can be a room, a cupboard, a car, a purse, a driveway, a shower—anywhere!

Questions

How was it to tidy up a space each day?

What did you notice before you tidied up, during the tidying and after?

What did you learn about leaving a space cleaner than you found it?

Did anyone else notice that you left spaces more tidy?

All the Small Worlds Around You

This week, notice tiny living things. Look for spiders and insects and creatures that fly in the air. Notice things in water, and on land in and in the house and car. Look for tiny things that are alive and tiny things that are dead.

Questions

What did you notice when you looked for tiny things?

How did it feel to notice the tiny living and tiny dead things around you?

Do you think there are even tinier things? How often are you aware of those tiny things?

Did you do anything differently when you began to notice tiny things?

Did it affect your sense of your own size to notice such tiny things?

What feelings did you have when you noticed tiny things?

What am I Not Seeing?

This week, look for what you are not seeing. You can look for what you do not see in a room, or what you do not see in a conversation. For example, when you look at a tree on a sunny day, do you see the space between the leaves? When you see your friend, what do you not see? When someone asks a question and you answer it, you see the answer, but is there anything you do not see?

Questions

What did you notice when you looked for what you do not see?

Did you try looking for what you did not see in a conversation? What did you notice?

Are there kinds of things you tend not to see? Or circumstances in which you tend to not notice what you are not seeing?

When you see something you were not seeing, what happens?

What seems to keep you from seeing certain things?

Insects, Spiders, Slugs and Snails

This week, notice insects, spiders, slugs and snails. How do you feel when you notice them? Do you have a different reaction when you see them inside than when you see them outside? Does it make a difference whether you are standing or sitting? Does it make a difference how close you are?

Questions

What reactions in your body or mind did you notice when you looked at spiders, insects, slugs or snails?

Did you notice these little creatures? If not, do you know why?

Do you have any sense where your reactions about these little beings come from?

Not Doing Much

This week, choose some time to do nothing. We often fill our time with doing, doing, doing. But this time, try taking a little bit of time to do nothing at all. Try one minute, five minutes, ten minutes. What happens when you do nothing?

Questions

What did you notice when you did nothing for a little while?

Could you actually do nothing?

Was there a difference between doing nothing for one minute and doing nothing for 5 or 10 minutes? What was it like?

Can anything good or bad come from not doing? What?

What happened in your body when you did nothing for awhile?

What happened in your mind when you did nothing for awhile?

Is there a reason to “not do anything”?

Things I Take for Granted

This week, notice one person or one thing each day that you usually take for granted.

Questions

What happened when you noticed something or someone you usually take for granted?

Did you do or say anything differently when you noticed someone or something you usually take for granted?

Did you tend to take certain kinds of people or things for granted?

Are there certain kinds of things or people you do not tend to take for granted?

Loving What's Around You

Take ten minutes each day to love everything around you. You might pretend that you are a teacher of the quality of love and are offering an example of what it looks like. Some people find it easier to open their hearts to animals, others use plants or clouds, and still others find humans are their easiest way to access the experience of loving. Use whatever focal point you need, but be sure to expand that love to encompass as much as possible.

Questions

What did you notice when you tried to love what was around you?

Was there something or someone in particular that seemed to inspire your sense of love?

When you tried to expand the sense of loving to all things around you, what happened?

Did your body have any particular experience when you were practicing loving what was around you? Your face? Your eyes? Your hands?

Was there anything that was difficult to include in your loving?

Noticing the Time of Day

This week, notice the time or times of day that you seem to like best. Notice both the experience of your body and your mind during the times of day you liked the best.

Questions

Does the time of day you enjoy depend on whether it's a week day or weekend?

What times of day did you like best?

Why were those times special to you?

What times of day did you like less? Why?

How did your body and mind feel during a time of day you enjoyed?

Pushing Buttons

Most of us push several buttons a day. This week, notice all the times you push buttons. Notice the experience of pushing buttons. Notice the kinds of events that occur after you have pushed a button.

Questions

Did you tend to push buttons with a finger or an object? If a finger, was it usually the same finger?

Did you tend to look at the buttons when you pushed them?

Did you have a sense of the events that would happen after you pushed the button?

Did pushing different buttons give you different emotional reactions?

Was your button pushing necessity or habit?

When you pushed a series of buttons, did you think about each button as you pushed it or did you push a sequence without seeming to think about it?

Looking at Pictures

This week, pay some attention to how you look at pictures. Do you focus on one part of a picture to the exclusion of the rest of the picture? What draws your attention to the picture at first and why?

Questions

What did you notice about how you look at pictures?

Did you tend to look or not look at any particular kind of pictures or any part of pictures more than others?

When you look at pictures, do you talk to yourself?

Do you tend to look at pictures of certain subjects, like people or animals, or abstract art, more than others?

Did it seem to make a difference whether the picture was color or black and white?

Was there a difference in looking at digital images instead of analogue images?

Were there pictures that caused you to have judgmental feelings? If so, which ones?

Listening to Music

This week, notice your experience when you listen to music. Notice the effects of music on your body and your mood. Notice how you react when the music you hear is or isn't music you like.

Questions

What did you notice when you listened to music?

Did you prefer some music to others? If so, what was different when you listened to music you didn't like?

Did you sometimes prefer no music?

Did the volume of the music make a difference to you?

When you hear music you don't like, is the displeasure a physical sensation, an emotional sensation or something else?

Did you experience a difference between "listening to music" and "hearing music"?

Did you hear any music in nature?

Did you hear music in your head? Anywhere else?

Noticing Change

This week, notice things around you that change. You might see fruit molding in a fruit bowl, or your own face changing in the mirror. You might see the sky changing or the sounds around you might change. You might watch your feelings change or you might notice something that seems not to change. See how much change you can notice this week!

Questions

What changed?

Did you notice anything that didn't change? If so, what was it?

Did the amount of change you see depend on over how long a time period you were watching something?

How did you feel when you noticed something changing? How did you feel when you watched many things changing?

How did you notice things were changing? What were the signs of change?

Did you have different emotional reactions to change? If so, were you glad, resistant to change, or indifferent? In which cases did you have these feelings?

Something to Wear

This week, notice your experience of getting dressed. How do you choose what to wear and why do you choose the things you do? How do you handle your clothes? Do you put them away in a certain kind of order, or do you drop them on the floor or hang them over a chair? Do you wear things more than once? What colors do you choose? What fabrics and why?

Questions

What did you notice when you got dressed?

Did you prefer certain clothes over others? Do you know why?

Did you notice the feel of the fabric and cut of the clothes?

Close your eyes. Do you know what you are wearing today?

How do you adorn yourself, if at all? Do you wear makeup, jewelry, scents or other embellishments? What is the experience of putting them on and taking them off?

What's in a Word?

This week, notice words all around you. Do you have a preference for the written or the spoken word? Do you like the sound of certain words more than others? How does it affect you if someone mispronounces a word? Do certain words, which are really only letter combinations, have more effect on you than others? Where does their meaning come from? Look closely. Are there words you say more than others? Are there words you say as a habit, that maybe you don't even notice as you say them? Do certain words make you feel certain ways—happy, sad or something else? Are there words you never or very rarely use?

Questions

What did you notice about the words you used?

Is there anything you'd like to change about the way you use or don't use words?

How can words carry an impact or seem to cause a feeling?

Things that Sparkle

This week, notice things that sparkle. Look for things in nature that sparkle and man-made things that sparkle, too. Are there sounds or tastes or people that sparkle? What does it mean to sparkle?

Questions

What did you see or experience that seemed to sparkle?

What was your feeling when you noticed sparkling things?

Does the “sparkle” come from the thing, or from your experience of it? Can you tell?

Things are Looking Up

This week, look up, wherever you go. Look at ceilings, archways, bridges, the sky and whatever else is above your head.

Questions

Did you see things you haven't seen before? Did you see things you've seen in a new way?

Was anything different when you noticed the space above your head and all things in it? If so, what?

Were there places or times you didn't want to look up, or places or times when you did?

If you don't look up and see what's up there, is it still there?

Feeling Down

This week, look down. What's below your usual range of sight? What are you walking on, lying on, stepping over? What's below the surface of your soles and a hundred miles below that? Are there things that live below your usual sense of space? What's going on down there?

Questions

Did you see things you haven't seen before? Did you see things you've seen in a new way?

Was anything different when you noticed the space below your head and all things in it? If so, what?

Were there places or times you didn't want to look down, or places or times when you did?

What was the effect of being aware of things below you this week?

What Are You Grateful For?

This week, be aware of things in your experience and which of those things you are grateful for. How much of what you have inspires you gratitude? Do you mention it to yourself or others when you are grateful?

Questions

Were you surprised at how little or how much you are grateful for?

Do you tend to express your gratitude or not? If you do, how is it expressed?

Were you surprised to find yourself grateful for anything?

What is the feeling of being grateful like for you?

Is there a particular kind of thing you are grateful for?

On the Other Hand

This week, use your non-dominant hand several times a day to do things you would normally do with the other hand.

Questions

What was it like to use your non-dominant hand? What did you notice?

Did it get easier with some tasks to use your non-dominant hand?

What strategies did you use to do things with your non-dominant hand?

Do you have a dominant foot?

Being On Time

This week, notice your relationship to time. What is your sense of “on time”? Are you a literalist, so that 5 o’clock means exactly 5 o’clock or does ten minutes one way or other seem natural to you. What do you do, if anything, to keep yourself “on time”? How does other people’s sense of time effect you? What arises for you if people are early, late or “on time”? How does it make you feel?

Questions

What did you notice about your relationship to time?

What did you notice in your body when you were “on time,” early or late?

What did you notice in your mind when you were “on time,” early or late?

Did it bother you when others had a different relationship to time?

Where do you think your ideas about time come from?

Going Slow

This week, practice going slowly. Practice it sometimes as the physical act of moving slowly. Other times, practice going slowly as a mental act—move at the regular pace, but keep a kind of mental spaciousness in the way you move and act. Make an effort not to rush in any way.

Questions

What happened when you made an effort not to rush?

Was going slow pleasant or did it make you feel angst—or something else?

Did you get behind by going slowly? Ahead?

Did you notice things you don't normally notice when you went slowly? If so, were they things inside you, outside you, or both?

Did other people seem to react to you going slowly?

What causes you to go fast?

Did you have a preference for going slowly or do you prefer to go faster?

One Thing at a Time

This week, practice doing one thing at a time. Give up multi-tasking as much as you can. Notice the experience of doing only one thing.

Questions

Do you usually multi-task? If so, when and why?

What was it like to just do one thing at a time?

Were you more or less efficient and effective doing one thing at a time?

What was the effect on your body and mind of doing one thing at a time?

Do you prefer to multi-task or to do one thing at a time?

Do you do any activities that cannot be done without multi-tasking?

The Least Technology

This week, do something each day that you normally do using high technology, with less technology. Reading, writing, laundry, heating your house, preparing a meal, sewing, artwork, gardening or taking care of yourself—pick one thing each day and do it with a more low-technology method.

Questions

What was it like to do things with less technology?

Did your experience of the task change when you used less technology? How?

Are there benefits to doing things with more or less technology?

Was there anything you liked doing better with less technology?

Did it take more or less time to do each task with less technology? Would you say it would take more or less time to use that level of technology over the course of a year?

Waste

This week, notice what you waste. Do you waste water, food, time, packaging materials or words?

Questions

What did you waste?

What did you waste most often?

Is there a way to waste less?

Could you use anything you currently waste? Could someone else use it?

What is the result when you waste things?

Does it cost you more to waste things or to not waste them?

What would happen if everyone you knew wasted what you waste, in the amount you waste it?

The Finish Line

This week, see what you finish and what you don't. When and what do you leave things unfinished? Is it usually planned or not? Do you ever find it useful to leave things unfinished, or to finish them? Do you finish or not finish by habit or intentionally?

Questions

What did you notice about finishing or not finishing things?

Was it usually a habit or unintentional?

Were there particular kinds of things you meant to finish, but usually did not? Do you know why?

Were there certain things you nearly always finished? Why?

Were there certain situations or environments (like work or working out) where you nearly always finished what you started?

Did any particular feelings arise when you finished or didn't finish things?

Is anything ever finished? How do you know when it's done?

Your Hot Buttons

This week, watch for your hot buttons. What pushes your hot buttons? What reactions do you see in your body and mind and speech when your hot buttons are pushed? Do they get pushed in some situations more than others? Do certain people tend to be present when your hot buttons are pushed?

Questions

Is there any relationship between the hot button that's pushed and how you react?

Was your hot button ever pushed by reading, seeing or hearing something?

How long do you tend to stay reactive when your hot button is pushed?

Is there any particular environment where your hot button is pushed?

Do you do anything as habit when one of your hot buttons is pushed?

What happens to your heart rate when your hot button is pushed? For how long?

Do you ever push your own hot buttons? Can anyone but you push your hot buttons?

Now That's Scarey!

This week, notice your fear. When are you afraid? What happens when you are afraid?

Questions

Do you have any idea where the fear comes from?

What is the experience of being afraid?

When you are afraid, what's the physical effect?

Is there anything you tend to say when you are afraid? Or is your speech affected in any particular way?

Are there certain events, people or places that seem to incite you to fear more than others?

Did you ever have a fear that went away? How did that happen?

Joy

This week, notice your joy.

Questions

How do you recognize your experience of joy?

What tends to make you feel joyful?

What is the physical experience of joy for you?

Can something inspire joy in one moment but not at another time? Why?

Do sounds or tastes or visual things ever make you feel joy?

Is the experience of joy inside you or outside, in some external event or place or person, or in both or...?

Smelly!

This week, notice your reaction to smells. Good smells, bad smells, smells whose source you can't identify. Notice chemical smells and natural smells and your own smelly self. If you smell a smell and find yourself thinking it is good or bad, see if you can release the judgement and just smell it. What happens then?

Questions

What did you notice when you smelled things?

What happened when you smelled smells you like?

What happened when you smelled smells you did not like?

Did your body react to smells?

Did smells ever cause memories?

What seems to make a smell pleasant or unpleasant?

Do you ever miss smells?

The Texture of Life

This week, notice textures. Soft, smooth, slippery and slimy. What textures do you feel, and what's your reaction? Are you attracted to some textures? Repelled by others? Do you seek out certain textures in food or clothes? Do writing styles or music have texture? Does a thought? Feel a texture you averse to and see if you can let go of the aversion. Does it change the experience of the texture? Does the experience of the texture change if you close your eyes? Notice textures in nature and notice manufactured textures.

Questions

What did you notice, when you contacted various textures?

Did you have a preference?

Did the experience of the texture change if your eyes were closed?

Do your eyes experience textures?

Does your voice have a texture?

Could you experience texture without giving it a name?

Inner Sound

This week, notice the sounds of your own body. Listen at all times of day and under all kinds of circumstances.

Questions

What kinds of sounds did your body make?

Did you have reactions to the sounds?

Did you hear a sound you haven't heard before?

Did you ever hear your heart beat?

Did you hear any of the sounds of your body when you were sleeping?

Does your body speak a language? Where did it learn that language?

Remember Where You Put It

This week, practice remembering where you put things. When you put something down somewhere, or inside something, make a mental note of that. When you lose track of things, try to see what the conditions were when you lost track.

Questions

Were you able to keep track of things?

If not, what were the conditions when you tended to lose things?

Did you tend to lose track of any particular kind of thing?

What were you doing to keep track of things? Did it work?

Was there a place or a time of day when you tended to misplace things?

I Remember Now!

This week, notice when you are having or had a memory. What were you doing when you had it? Did you stop paying attention to what you were doing when you had the memory? Do your memories tend to be generally pleasant or unpleasant, neither or both? Do you intend to remember things or do memories just seem to pop up?

Questions

What did you notice about when you are experiencing a memory?

Did your memories tend to have any particular quality? (Happy, sad, short, long, true, made up?)

Do you remember in color?

Do your memories have sound?

Did you ever remember something that didn't happen?

What tends to trigger memories?

Fair Trade

This week, pay attention to your use of currencies. Money, skills, words, favors and attention. Look at all the various currencies you spend. See who you trade with and what currencies you use with them, under what circumstances. Do you have rare currencies?

Questions

What are your primary currencies to get what you want?

Do you tend to spend, save or both?

Do you have any unusual currencies?

What currencies do you accept?

Do you tend to use the same currencies in every environment, or are your currencies context-dependent?

Did you reject any currencies that someone tried to use with you?

Daily Rituals

This week, notice the rituals or routines that make up your day. When do they occur? Are they intentional or unconscious? Whose idea were those routines in the first place? Do you have different routines on weekdays than you do on weekends? How many of your routines involve other beings?

Questions

What did you notice about your routines?

Did your routines happen every day or less regular than that?

Did your routines happen at the same time of day and in the same place?

Were you surprised at any of your rituals?

Did any of your routines or rituals cost money?

What if you couldn't do a routine? What happened?

Where did your routines come from? Are they imposed or do you choose them or both?

A Little Reflecting Time

Notice all the times you see your reflection. Look in mirrors, in glass, in water, in the eyes of others. What happens when you see your own reflection? Does it seem familiar or unfamiliar? What is reflected?

Questions

What happened when you saw your reflection?

Did you have an emotional reaction?

Did you look at your reflection or look away?

If you could change your reflection, what would you change? Why?

Your Feet

This week, notice your feet. Notice them in shoes, barefoot and in the shower. Look at your feet. Touch them. Notice how they work and how you use them. Do they hurt? What makes them feel good? Do they work well? Do you like your feet or not?

Questions

What did you notice about your feet?

What did you notice about your experience of your feet?

What made your feet feel good?

When did your feet not feel good?

How does your foot seem to work?

Where did the shape of your feet come from?

Clocks

This week, notice all the clocks and time pieces in your life. What's your relationship to clocks? Where did you find them? Do you have many or few? Notice their sounds, if any. Notice the design of the clocks you see. See if they are digital or analog. Does nature have clocks?

Questions

Where did you see clocks?

What kind of clocks did you see?

What is your reaction when you see a clock, or hear a clock?

Do you have a preference for certain kinds of clocks?

If all the clocks in your life suddenly disappeared, what would change?

Paper

This week, be aware of the paper in your life. Where do you see it? Where do you use it? Do you re-use it? Do you have preferences for paper of certain kinds? How much paper did you contact this week? What did you do with all that paper?

Questions

Where did paper show up in your life this week?

Do you have more paper in your life than you did ten years ago or less?

Do you have paper preferences? What are they? Why?

Did you find paper in any unexpected places?

Did you use paper in any way that you hadn't noticed before?

Does paper have a smell?

Questions?

Notice all the questions in your life this week. Do you ask many questions? Do you tend to ask the same kinds of questions or do you have many different kinds of questions? Are there questions you don't want to ask, or be asked? Do you have a physical reaction to certain questions? Do you sometimes make a statement disguised as a question? Listen to your speech and the speech of others and watch the media. Notice your experience of questions.

Questions

What did you notice about questions in your life?

Were there questions you wanted to ask, but didn't? Why?

Do you tend to learn more from answers or questions?

When you ask questions, do you usually have an answer in mind?

Did most of your questions get answered?

What kind of questions do people tend to ask you?

What's the most important question?

Death and Dying

This week, notice death and dying in your life. Where do you encounter it? What's your reaction when you do? Look in every experience for some aspect of death.

Questions

Where did you notice death or dying in your life this week?

What was your reaction?

Did you find death in any surprising places?

What died this week?

What does it mean to die?

Were was the experience of being more aware of death this week?

Sleep

This week, notice sleep. Do you feel like you get enough? What's your relationship to sleep? Do you sleep in long stretches, or wake up often? Do you dream? Do you nap? How do you feel if you don't get enough sleep? Too much? What's it like just before you fall asleep? Just before you wake up? How do you know you're sleeping or not?

Questions

What was your experience of sleep this week?

Do you have ideas about how much sleep you need? Where did they come from? When you let go of those ideas, how much sleep do you need?

Is your experience of sleep different in the day than it is in the night?

Does where you sleep affect your sleep?

Did you look forward to sleep or not?

Was sleeping easy or difficult?

Your Bones

This week, notice your bones. How do they feel? How do they work? How do they look when they are resting and when they are in motion? Do you have bones that you can't see? Do your bones make noise?

Questions

What did you notice about your bones?

Have your bones changed recently? When? How?

Do your bones make noise?

Do your bones hurt or feel good?

Think about your bones with no skin or soft tissue on them. Is it you?

Light and Darkness

This week, notice light and darkness in your life. Do you have a preference? Do you feel more comfortable in one than the other? Has it been this way a long time, or is this new? Do you react to them differently? Do you seek one out? Do you need or want both? Where do you experience light and darkness?

Questions

What did you notice about your experience of light and darkness?

If you have a preference, where did that come from?

Does your body react to light and darkness? If so, how?

Where did you notice light the most? Darkness?

Is there a quality of light that is neither light nor dark, but something else?

Did light and dark affect your emotional states?

There are things you can't see in the dark. Are there things you can't see in the light?

Endings

This week, notice endings. Where do you find them? How do you react to endings? Is there a difference in your reaction depending on whether you intended to end something and whether it ended on its own? How do you know when something has ended?

Questions

What kind of endings did you notice?

What did you notice about endings?

Were some endings positive and some negative and some neutral?

Is the end of some things the beginning of something else?

Your Skin

This week, notice your skin. How does it look and feel? What do you do to your skin? What does your skin do for you? Is your skin changing? How? Do you have a reaction to the way your skin looks or feels? Is the skin on different parts of your body different than in other places? How long have you had the skin you have now? Where did your old skin go?

Questions

What did you notice about your skin?

Do you have reactions to your skin when you see or feel it?

What's changed about your skin in the last 5 years, if anything?

Does your skin feel alive to you?

Does how you feel about your skin seem to have anything to do with how you feel about yourself as a person?

Does your skin seem to have sensations? Does it seem to sense light?

Does your skin have a smell?

Does your skin sleep?

Adapting a Mindfulness Exercise for Different Ages

Pick one of the mindfulness exercises and adapt it for a different age group. Decide the age before you start. Try one sometime for older people, and for younger ones.

What would you change about the exercise itself?

Do any of the questions need to be re-written? Excluded? Added?

Helping People Remember to do a Mindfulness Exercise

One of the biggest impediments to doing a mindfulness exercise is to actually remember to do it. Pick one of the mindfulness exercises and design a way for people to remember to do it.

For example, in the mindfulness exercise about noticing water in your life, a person could wear a blue rubber band on their wrist for the week. Easy and effective!

Creating Your Own Mindfulness Exercise

First, pick something that one can do pretty much anytime, anyplace. This will provide the most opportunity for training the mind in mindfulness. For most people it will be best to create a period of mindfulness that is proscribed - short time spans are easier in the beginning than long ones.

A good mindfulness exercise is one that causes you to notice where you are and what you are doing. (We could also say that mindfulness usually includes a “passive” memory of the past, and could include a sense of the future in that one knows where one is going, *as a context* for what one is doing in this moment. But the bulk of the attention is paid to the experience of the present moment.)

If we are mindful, then, we are present to experience unfolding, moment by moment. So the exercise should help one notice, and stay with the act of noticing, for some defined period of time (while walking through a door way, for example) or for some articulated activity (while scratching your head) or while noticing some pre-determined action, thing or quality (noticing the color blue, for example).

A mindfulness exercise may also help you see how you are NOT mindful of the object of the exercise. That’s useful, too. Celebrate both kinds of learning.

Evaluating Your Own Mindfulness Exercise

First try the exercise. Have some friends try it, too. Ask these questions:

Did the exercise help me remember to notice where I was and what I was doing, **while it was happening?**

Did the exercise help me notice when I was not mindful?

Was the exercise free of judgement or blame about myself and others, and focused instead on “just noticing”?

Was the activity simple enough that someone could do it in many kinds of environments?

Creating Debrief Questions for Your Own Mindfulness Exercise

In addition to the exercise itself, it’s helpful to write a few debrief questions to get a discussion going. Discussion can help people see all the things they discovered, and even sometimes what they missed. Discussion helps people learn from each other, too, and helps us all see that everyone’s experience is different, even though we share some things.

Start with a wide-open question. Something like this:

What did you learn (notice, feel, see) when you (noticed blue in your day)?

Then, if you need to stimulate the discussion, add some questions to evoke memory or to bring learning into focus:

How did it (feel, seem, look, work) to (be aware of going through a doorway)?

Engage more than one way of sensing:

What (smells, sounds) did you notice?

How did that feel?

Sometimes you can create new thinking and a little fun by adding a question that approaches the learning from a novel point of view. Questions like these can catapult you out of sleepy thinking into more wakeful curiosity:

How did the orange taste? What was its texture? **Did it have a sound?**

Always end with another wide-open question that will draw out a last little bit of good thinking. Be sure to leave plenty of space for shy or reflective learners to respond. Try questions like:

- “Anything else?”
- “That’s it?”
- “More?”
- “Have we got everything?”
- “Did I miss anyone?”
- “Are we done?”

When you write questions, be careful not to build the answer into the question. See if you can strip assumptive language from your questions. This leaves more room for individual experience.

Creating Auxiliary Exercises

In addition to the mindfulness exercises and discussions, you might like to enrich the experience of practicing mindfulness by creating auxiliary activities. For example:

- 🧘 Create a related art project
- 🧘 Write a poem about the experience of being mindful in a particular exercise
- 🧘 Do a mindfulness exercise blindfolded or in the dark
- 🧘 Do a family (or class, or community) weekly mindfulness exercise
- 🧘 Share examples and funny stories about what happened when you were NOT mindful
- 🧘 Set a vow of mindfulness. Vow to do one certain thing mindfully for a specified number of days.
- 🧘 Convene a discussion among adults about how mindfulness is related to “calm abiding” or “zhinay meditation,” and visa versa.
- 🧘 Create new ways to remember to be mindful about some particular thing

Now you create some ideas for auxiliary exercises:
