



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

finding stillness within

I am thinking of you now, sitting someplace and reading this column. You might be in a doctor's office, at a restaurant, or maybe in your own home. You might pick it up before Christmas, when you are happily rushing around with holiday activities or perhaps feeling upset by the commercialism or lonely because you do not have somewhere to go. You might pick it up after Christmas when you are facing the clean-up, perhaps a bit of let-down or the effects of having eaten too much, or spent too much. No matter what the circumstances, it is always the right time to take a moment to pause, relax, and reflect. Here is a simple mindfulness exercise for you to try if you are so inclined.

Take a deep breath, actually take several deep breaths. Let your stomach relax and rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale. Let your exhale be just a bit longer than the inhale. Let there be a brief pause between your in and out breaths.

Be aware of your surroundings. What noises are present? What is the temperature? Are there others in the space? Do you feel comfortable or do you notice things that make you uncomfortable? Just notice whatever is, don't try to fix or change it (unless it is just a matter of shifting position to be more comfortable.) We rarely stop to notice the noise and intrusions that can be going on around us. Just notice and accept; you don't have to like them, but accept what is.

Now focus on your body. What sensations are you experiencing? Are you warm or cold? Are you feeling supported by your chair? Are you able to relax and let the chair, sofa, or bed support you and do the work of holding you? Do a scan of your body, beginning with your toes, and slowly traveling up your feet, ankles, calves, knees, thighs, hips, abdomen, chest, back, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, neck, head and scalp, forehead, cheeks, mouth. Are there areas that feel tight? That are painful? Are there areas that are warm, relaxed, and at ease? If you want you can imagine your breath being warm soothing energy and send the breath into the areas that are tight or in pain. Bathe those areas in healing energy and allow them to relax and let go. Do not try to force anything, accept what is and just send warm, compassionate breath to them.

Next focus on your emotions. Sometimes it is helpful to breathe into your heart space and see what emotions are present. Are you feeling calm, relaxed, peaceful? Do you notice anxiety, fear, grief, or sadness? Just notice whatever emotions are present and hold them with compassion.

Now focus on your thoughts. Are your thoughts racing or slow? Are they worried thoughts? Pleasant thoughts? Anxious thoughts? Are you busy planning your next actions? See if you can just watch your thoughts float by like clouds in the sky, noticing them but not getting caught up in them. Just let them be as they are.

Now, as you are quietly noticing and aware, ask yourself, who is aware of all this? Who is paying attention to these thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, surroundings? The answer is always "I AM." We are more than any of those perceptions; we are the awareness behind them. Take some time to rest in this place of relaxed, peaceful awareness. When it is time to move on with the activities of your day, remember this place that is always there within you. A regular practice of meditation will help us remember.

We easily get caught up in our thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations, but when we realize that we are more than our immediate thoughts and perceptions, we can see and act with clear and calm wisdom. Some would call this "wise mind." Some might feel a spiritual connection from that place . . . a feeling of wholeness, oneness, and compassion for ourselves and all beings. My wish for all of us, during this holiday season and always is an ability to make our way to this safe harbor of stillness, wholeness, compassion and connection. ❧❧

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