

# Relaxing into the Present: The Gift of Mindfulness

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*“If you are able to relax—relax to a cloud by looking at it, relax to a drop of rain and experience its genuineness—you can see the unconditionality of reality, which remains very simply in things as they are.”*

—Chogyam Trungpa

**T**he notion of relaxation is highly valued in our society, and we work hard at it—when we have time! Relaxing at the beach, in the mountains, or in recreational pursuits, are treasured and perhaps rarely achieved ideals for which we yearn, and for which we are willing to exchange our hard earned money. Those of us who have reflected, however, are willing to admit that even the most highly touted haven of relaxation can be stressful if our mind is stressed. Yes, relaxation is largely a state of mind, and the good news is that it can be cultivated with relatively little cost or effort. Mindfulness—paying attention on purpose, in the present, nonjudgmentally—is a simple practice that can lead to deep relaxation, not just because we are slowing down, but because we are truly resting.

## CULTIVATING MINDFULNESS

Cultivating mindfulness does require discipline. Our minds naturally wander and often get caught up in thoughts and emotions that lead us away from the simple experience of being present. When disconnected from our present experience, which happens in an instant, and often habitually, we concoct a little fantasy, a conceptual unreality in which we are temporarily absorbed and accept as fact. Once we have made this mental shift,



no matter how slight, our minds and bodies are no longer synchronized, and we may experience anxiety or bodily discomfort, and feel unsettled. If the discipline of mindfulness is not applied at this point, our next step may be an attempt to fix that uncomfortable, disconnected state of being by applying various strategies that don't fully help, with which we're all familiar.

With mindfulness practice, we train ourselves to notice when we have become distracted, let go of this fixation, and gently bring ourselves back to present-moment experience, often using the breath as a reference point. Immediately, upon noticing and letting go of our fantasy world, our mind experiences a moment of relaxation as we automatically shift back to present-moment awareness. Similar to awakening from a dream, we find the state in which we were completely absorbed is ephemeral and unreal. Through regularly applying the discipline of mindfulness training, we “wake up” over and over to the spaciousness of present-centered awareness. In this relaxed state of being, which naturally arises, we can connect more fully and genuinely with our hearts and with

the world around us. We may notice that our senses are sharper, and our perceptions and actions more precise and less biased towards self-centeredness. This open, spacious present creates room for immense relaxation and playfulness, in which we can truly enjoy our lives and benefit others.

## MINDFULNESS TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

We are fortunate to have multiple opportunities to learn and practice mindfulness in the Triangle, both in the community and through health-care programs. The Mindfulness-based Stress and Pain Management Program, sponsored by the Program on Integrative Medicine in the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, provides one array of opportunities. These include mindfulness training programs for adults and teens, as well as specialized programs on mindful parenting, mindfulness for changing one's relationship with food, and mindful self-compassion training. See our website for information and registration: <http://pim.med.unc.edu>. So, give yourself the gift of mindfulness, and relax into the present! ❧❧

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