

Intro: To Be In The Moment

Every week in our service, we spend a short time in silence, to allow ourselves a small break from the hustle and bustle of daily life. Some of us also take time outside Sunday services to practice stillness but many of us struggle to fit that into our regular schedules. So today we are taking the time to explore mindful stillness together.

Meditation in Spiritual Practice

So, first a brief overview: there are many, many different types of meditation, and it has been around for a very long time. The first written records of meditation are over three and a half thousand years old, but most experts believe meditation has existed much longer than that. We know that oral traditions of shamanic guided meditation existed for centuries before they were ever written down, and fire gazing is a very simple meditation practice that has likely been around since humans began gathering around fires. Which means if you ever find yourself staring into a campfire kind of zoning out, you're engaging in a spiritual practice possibly as old as humanity.

And that's what people generally think of when they think of meditation: a spiritual practice. In particular, people tend to think of monks on a mountain somewhere, meditating in silence for hours in an attempt to reach enlightenment. And it's true various forms of meditation are important spiritual practices in cultures around the world. But not every form of meditation happens on mountains or in complete silence.

Meditation in Mental Health Practice

In the past decade or so, meditation practices have gotten a lot of traction in the mental health community. Initially touted to help manage stress, meditation has become a recognized way to help with a number of mental health challenges. Gratitude meditation can help combat feelings of hopelessness and depression by identifying the even tiny things that are beautiful and worth appreciating in life. Breath meditations can help people feel grounded in their bodies, which helps combat symptoms of anxiety like dissociation and panic attacks. Meditation can also help people recover from stress and burnout, by taking time to rest and listen to the warning signs of their body before they reach utter exhaustion. Mindfulness meditation can help people develop a sense of internal awareness, and emotional regulation, which can be very helpful for basically everyone.

Of all the types of meditation, mindfulness meditation has become the most popular in recent years, and as it's grown in popularity, we've seen the term "mindful" all over the place, even used by marketing firms to sell products from juice to washable diapers. And as it's used more and more, its original meaning gets a bit diluted.

Mindfulness

So what is mindfulness for our purposes today? Mindfulness is simply: to be fully in the moment; to be mindful of all the rich experience that lives within the present; to be aware. We spend a lot of time living in the world, but in order to get anything done, we have to filter out a

lot of the information coming at us. There's no way we could finish grocery shopping in an hour if we stopped to smell everything that seemed tasty, no way we could get dressed in the morning if we paused to touch and appreciate every single piece of clothing we owned. We simply have to filter some things out in order to be able to function day-to-day.

Being mindful just means taking the time to step back from that productivity, from our agendas, to create the space for us to be truly aware of the world around us, and the world within us. To turn off that automatic filter we've had to develop in order to experience the fullness of a moment.

Accessibility in Meditation

Tiny children are great at mindfulness. They're still learning how to filter out a lot of the information they encounter every day, and they have significantly shorter to-do lists than the rest of us, so they can afford get lost in new sensations and experiences. Every cloud deserves to be studied for creative shapes, every rock is an interesting treasure, every new food is either the best or worst thing they've ever had.

You'll notice that when I was describing meditation earlier, the main descriptor I used was "silent", which is not a thing small children are particularly known for. But silence is not the goal; today, mindfulness is the goal, and if children are any example, silence is not the only way we can get there. As adults, we often use silence as a tool to help us cultivate awareness, but too big a focus on silence or stillness can leave a lot of people behind. Some people can't be still due to neurological or medical reasons. Some people simply don't enjoy it. Similarly, a well-known approach to meditation involves "clearing the mind" which is a skill that takes practice to develop, but there are some people whose brains simply work in a way that means that'll never happen. How do we participate in mindfulness in a way that's accessible to as many people as possible?

The answer is: there are a bunch of different mindfulness exercises, and some are more accessible than others. Often what's accessible for some people won't be for others, and visa versa. Finding mindfulness exercises that work for each of us as individuals is a process, and one worth engaging in. So today we're going to be exploring several different ways to engage in mindfulness. As we do our exploration, I want you to keep one goal in mind: we are practicing being in the moment, whatever that moment holds. Good or bad, fun or boring, we are simply here to experience it. And we're going to begin today with the most traditional, and most familiar exercise. A moment of silence.

Reading

Necessary Stillness, by [Christine Slocum](#)

We can be many things. Friday afternoon? We were traffic. Car traffic. You usually find both of us on bicycles to commute, but work took us too far that day. My colleague lives on the way, so I offered to drive. At day's end, we were departing downtown.

Theoretically, we were heading towards his home. In practice, we lingered on the same block, advancing one car length per light change. It felt like the street was doing an award-winning performance of a parking lot. I had tried to bypass the highways by cutting through downtown, but a street was closed and the traffic lights were out of sync. It took time.

There was not a single indication of frustration in my colleague's body, words, or demeanor. I didn't have to be elsewhere for a while. Conversation came easily. I do enjoy his companionship. At the same time, I felt guilty for how long it was taking.

Reflecting on the experience, I realized that I wasn't impatient for impatience's sake. It was more that I feel almost a moral obligation towards advancement. It's all progress, improvement, efficiency, the next thing. It's capitalism, it's white supremacy, it's a deeply and viscerally internalized cultural ethic towards forward momentum. It permeates my entire perspective. My discomfort was the dissonance of failing to meet that expectation. There I am, present in necessary stillness, and my body tingles with a version of the same anxiety I feel when I sense my career is stagnating, or I'm failing to become better in all the ways our society suggests we should. Miles per hour or milestones per lifetime: it all feels the same.

When I could be present in the moment, sitting in the car, relaxing my sense of obligation towards speed? That let me recognize the true experience: good company and conversation. Connection makes life rich. This mindset towards "progress" sets me up to miss it.

What other circumstances am I failing to recognize when I don't embrace the necessary stillness? Where else am I failing to see that the need to exist in the moment is a required part of whatever journey I'm taking? When else am I failing to understand that maybe life doesn't have to be ever-upward in order to be well-lived?

A moment in this space

Beloved companions,
 Each week we take a moment to pause from life,
 to set down our cares and expectations
 to simply be in the stillness and peace together.
 But we already practiced our silence today.
 So now, I'm going to invite you to try something different,
 Something slightly to the left of our weekly quiet.
 Instead of cultivating our silence,
 Now we're going to cultivate our awareness.
 For those of us who are a fan of superheroes,
 Think of it like practicing your spidey-senses.

So start by breathing in.
 What do you smell?

Flowers from outside?
Cleaning products?
Someone's perfume?

What do you taste?
Toothpaste?
This morning's breakfast?
Your favorite coffee?

What do you feel?
The seat underneath you?
The clothes on your body?
The shoes on your feet?

What do you hear?
The sound of fans?
The birds outside?
The creaking of our building?

What do you see?
Friendly faces?
Beautiful stained glass?
A hidden raven?

This is a time for noticing, not a time for judgement.
If you're wishing you'd brushed your teeth this morning,
Or worried your creaky chair is disturbing other people,
Set that thought down and try to simply notice.
"I taste my breakfast"
"I hear my chair creak"
And practice that same approach when it's someone else's chair.

For some of us, it might be easier to focus on one sense.
What are all the things you can hear?
Or all the different things you can see?
For some of us, it might feel more grounding to focus on all our senses, one after another.
Whatever you prefer,
This time is for you.
I invite you to be fully present in the space you are in.

A moment in your body

So far, we've practiced several moments of mindfulness. We practiced silence, we practiced peace in music, and we practiced being present in the space using our 5 senses. Our story showed us a few more ways we can practice mindfulness, which was foreshadowing, because we're going to try one of those next.

Now we're going to practice being rooted within ourselves. Like most of this mindfulness stuff, you'd think this is very easy to do, after all, we always live inside our own bodies. But earlier we talked about how our brains have to filter out some of our experience just to get us through the day, and living inside our body is one of the first things we learn to filter out. Often, we only really notice our body when something feels wrong with it. When we're hungry, or achy. It's rarely something we take time to think about otherwise, so we're going to practice it today.

Since this is still Time for All Ages, I am graciously inviting everyone who has an age to participate. This is going to be several minutes, I recommend standing up if you're able, though this can certainly be done sitting as well. If at any point, you realize you'd do better sitting, I encourage you to do so without guilt.

Because this is all about listening to our bodies. So I invite you to do whatever your body calls you to. If your body wants to wiggle with joyful energy, feel free to do so. If your body calls for peace and stillness, answer it. There is no way to do this wrong. The only thing I ask is that you limit the noise you make so that everyone can participate in the way that suits them.

You are welcome to move out from between the seats, into the aisles or into the narthex if you'd like more space, or you can stay where you are if you'd like.

I'm going to give you a moment for everyone to get ready.

We're going to start by noticing our breathing.

You don't need to try to breathe deeply, or slowly.

Just notice how your body breathes when you don't give it instructions.

In and out.

In and out.

Now I want you to look at your feet.

How do they feel inside your shoes?

How do they feel against the floor?

Wiggle your toes like you're waving to yourself.

Your feet carry you through your daily journeys.

Can they carry you on their own?

Try lifting one foot up.

How does your balance change?

Feel the muscles in your leg shift.

Is it hard to keep your body in this position?

Are your muscles tense or relaxed?

Can you wiggle the foot that's in the air?

Now switch feet for me.

Feel how your body adjusts to keep you stable.

Can you wiggle the foot that's in the air this time?

Can you tap the ground with your toes?

Now put both feet on the ground.

Feel how you're balanced between them.

Try pushing one of your feet into the ground.

Do you feel your muscles tense?

Do you feel like you could go run a race?

Let's go back to standing like normal.

Do you still feel like you're ready to run or jump or dance?

Try pushing the other foot into the ground.

Feel all your muscles tense

Like you're a leopard who could jump to the rafters.

And then let your legs relax,

Going back to standing like normal.

Let's sway from side to side a bit,

letting all the tension from using our muscles fade away.

I want you to notice,

Does moving like this make you feel embarrassed?

Does it make you smile?

Now that we're all loose, I want you to try to touch your toes.

If you can't touch your fingers and toes together, no worries.

The important part is the reaching.

Do you feel your muscles stretch?

If you make all your muscles loose and gooey,

If you let your top half just hang in the air,

does that change how the stretch feels?

Now without moving, I want you to shift your focus from your feet to your hands

And keep your focus there while you straighten up.

Look at your fingers, all (probably) ten of them.

Wiggle them like tiny worms digging in the dirt.

Now shake your hands like they're a wet dog, trying to dry off.

Good, now take your hands and stretch them out.

See how wide your fingers go,

And how it feels with them spread so far apart.

Now take those stretching fingers, and stretch them to the ceiling.

Reach reach reach as far as you can.

Feel your muscles stretch to let you reach higher,

Feel the way your breath changes as you move.

Now keep reaching...

A little farther...

And release, letting your arms fall to your sides.

Letting go of all that tension we just built up.
Shake your shoulders a bit to feel your arms all loose and floppy.

Notice how your breath moves through your body now.
Put your hands on your belly and see if you feel your breath there.
If you don't, try putting a hand on your chest.

When you find it,
take a moment to just feel your body move under your hands,
Feel your breath move in and out.
Your body might need more air, now that we did some moving.
It might breathe easier now that we stretched.
See if you notice any changes from when we started.

And then I want everybody to take their hands,
And give their body a nice big hug.
Because we might not always get along,
But our bodies are always there for us.
And when we take the time to notice them so clearly,
It's always good to say a little thank you.

So I invite you all to take a moment on your own
to keep that awareness of your body,
whether that's focusing on your breathing, or watching and feeling your hands, wiggling your
toes, stretching.

You have a minute or two to focus on just your body, to see if it's trying to tell you anything,
and to see if you can truly listen.

Once the music starts again, that will be the call to return to your seats.

Reading

Here. Now. You.

By [Kat Liu](#)

“Breathing in, there is only the present moment. Breathing out, it is a wonderful moment.”
—Thich Nhat Hanh

When I heard the Venerable's robes rustle at what I estimated to be about forty minutes and yet she did not give the signal that our sitting meditation had ended, that's when I knew she would take us to the full hour. But my knees were complaining and my mind was bored with counting breaths. What to do in the time remaining? Suddenly a stray thought entered: *What if this were your last breath?*

Funny thing, I immediately began to breathe slower. Drawing in the air to fill every crevice of my lungs and then slowly pushing it out until there was nothing left to expel. “Well,” I thought, “I must want to live.”

Of course, when I got to the end of that “last” breath I was still there. So I began another breath, still asking, *What if this were your last breath?* There were flashes of regret—unfinished projects, loved ones grieving—but one breath isn’t enough time to do anything about regrets. There was only enough time to experience the moment, to know that I was there, breathing.

Inhalation. Exhalation. When the moment passed, there was the next moment, and the next. In this way, I spent the remaining twenty minutes entirely in the present.

Outside of the meditation hall, we still plan for the future and think of the past. But so often we replay past regrets and worry about future events to the point where we’re no longer present in the present. As the Venerable says, “We forget that we are breathing.”

When stuck in traffic, waiting in line, or anytime there’s nothing to do other than be present, find a comfortable position in which you can breathe freely.

What if this were your last breath?

Just for this moment, believe that this is all you have. No time to worry about the future or the past. Just enough time to know that you are breathing.

Draw it in.

Savor the sensation of your lungs filling.

Savor your heart beating.

Savor the sensation of your chest relaxing as you exhale.

Inhalation.

Exhalation.

Here. Now. You.

A moment in reflection

If you’ve been following along with the order of service today, you know we’re coming to the end of our mindfulness practices. I’d like you to take this moment and listen to your body and your mind.

How do you feel right now? Are you happy? Anxious? Excited for lunchtime?

Is it any different from how you felt when you arrived here today?

The final piece of mindfulness we’re going to practice today is interoception, an awareness of our internal states of being.

This also came up in our Time for All Ages story today. The main character in I Am Peace could say how they were feeling inside out loud, and that is the heart of interoception: noticing and naming our internal experiences.

Several times during our mindfulness exercises today, we've mentioned that it's simply a time for noticing, and not a time for judgement. This is especially important for this one, because this is the time it's easiest for our brains to get in their own way.

Say I decide to look inward to see how I'm feeling and I discover I'm sad, but I don't like feeling sad, and what do I have to feel sad about anyway, it's a beautiful bright morning and other people have worse things happening in their lives than I do and I should be grateful actually for all the good things in my life right now, so I can't be feeling sad, I must be feeling fine, good even. I don't even know why I thought I felt sad in the first place. And now, even though I looked inward to discover how I was feeling, I got in my own way and I came out with the wrong answer. I got caught up in how I **thought** I should feel, and whether or not I **wanted** to be feeling the way I was feeling, instead of just noticing. And when this happens inside our own head, with nothing outside to ground us in the experience, it can happen so fast and so sneaky that we don't even notice it. We can walk around for hours, days, or even longer, thinking we're just fine, and not realizing that we've been missing something important the whole time.

So before we listen,
we need to set aside the idea of "should"
set aside any judgements on right or wrong feelings
set aside all our expectations.

And get ready to simply notice,
to name what we feel,
and nothing else.

So much about mindfulness meditation calls us to think about our breathing, to slow it down so our heart rate slows in turn, and our emotions calm. But this exercise is not about change. It's not about peace. This exercise is about noticing.

The trickiest thing is that noticing how we feel inside without judgement or shame can be calming, and in acceptance of what is, we can find peace. But noticing with an open heart must always come first, so that we're not forcing ourselves into stillness. If we come upon peace, we want it to come to us rather than chasing it down.

So I want you to imagine a creek,
a little stream of moving water,
large enough for a few fish,
maybe some frogs and some insects.
Maybe a deer comes around to drink every so often,
or a fox.

There's a bunny rabbit in the grass on the side,
and maybe a coyote who's eyeing it for lunch.

It's a small ecosystem, everything doing the job it should.
Whether or not we like each piece,
They're all there, each a necessary part of the whole.

Now imagine that stream is you.
Each piece of that small ecosystem is a part of you.
Shiny fish darting through the water are moments of excitement through your day.
That frog is your hunger at lunchtime
The dragonfly your worry about an upcoming deadline.

Together it all makes you, and you need every part of that in order to function.

Bunnies are cute,
and coyotes need something to eat.
People need excitement and worry,
life is about both, and;
not either, or.

So looking inward, we can notice "I feel happy and impatient," "I feel worried and excited," or even "I just feel sad right now" and knowing that's okay because it needs to be felt, and nothing we feel will last forever.

This looking inward is about noticing and allowing ourselves to experience the fleeting, beautiful, painful moments, without trying to run from them. And this is the mindfulness that so often happens in silence, because it's a bit easier to catch our mind playing tricks when we can hear it.

And since I am not in each of your heads, and I don't know what you're all thinking or feeling, our final mindfulness practice is a moment of silent reflection, unguided. It brings us back to where we started but hopefully a little changed through the course of our experiences, even in some tiny way. Whether you're feeling calmer, happier, more bored, or anything else, I invite you to take this moment to name for yourself each thing you are feeling, whatever that is. And try to focus only on that.

[Moment of silence]

And now I call us back to this space together.

That was a lot of work we just did, and hopefully you learned something from it, even if it was just that you'd rather not do this more than once a year.

I know that interoception, this awareness of our internal states of being, can feel incredibly passive the way that we approached it, but I don't want to leave you with the message that people shouldn't be trying to regulate their emotions in a responsible way, or that we just have

to be bystanders to our own feelings. The key to interoception is honesty with oneself, and that can be an incredibly difficult thing to practice for a lot of people, so we approach it carefully.

The beautiful thing that comes from this acceptance of ourselves in the current moment, whatever that looks like, is that we can work with where we are honestly, and productively, to move toward where we'd like to be. Approaching ourselves with an open curiosity, instead of judgment or discomfort, can open up many paths we wouldn't have considered before.

It's the difference between "I wish I was happy right now," and "I'm sad, but that's okay. What would make me happy right now?"

It's the willingness to entertain the real answer even if it's inconvenient. "Quitting my job would make me happy? Wow, I hadn't realized it'd gotten so bad, but okay, I guess I'll start updating my resume." or "Dancing to this song would make me happy? I'm in the middle of a grocery store right now, but... okay, that seems worth it to me."

Only by really listening to what we're feeling can we find where we want to be going next. Just like google maps, even if you know where you want to go, nothing's going to work until you know where you are first.

So idea I want to leave you with today is this: mindfulness is about knowing where you are in the moment, in a space, in your body, in your mind. It can be a beautiful practice that teaches us a lot, if we are willing to experience a moment unfiltered and approach ourselves honestly. But mindfulness can't end when the moment ends. The real magic happens, when we take that radical honesty we practice, and carry it forward into the day-to-day. When we can take that clarity of where we are, and let it show us the way, even if it's not where we thought we were going.