

Mindfulness in Plain English
Chap 10
Dealing with Problems
Part 2

Problem 5: Inability to Concentrate

An overactive, jumping attention is something that everybody experiences from time to time. You should be informed...that there are certain external factors that contribute to this phenomenon. And these are best handled by simple adjustments in your schedule. Mental images are powerful entities. They can remain in the mind for a long time...If you have been to the best movie of the year, the meditation that follows is going to be full of those images. If you are halfway through the scariest horror novel you ever read, your meditation is going to be full of monsters. Switch the order of event. Do your meditation first. Then read or go to the movies.

Another influential factor is your own emotional state. If there is some real conflict in your life, that agitation will carry over into meditation. Try to resolve your immediate daily conflicts before meditation when you can. Your life will run more smoothly, and you won't be pondering uselessly in your practice. But don't use this advice as a way to avoid meditation. Sometimes you can't resolve every issue before you sit. Just go ahead and sit anyway. Use your meditation to let go of all the egocentric attitudes that keep you trapped within your own limited viewpoint. Your problems will resolve much more easily thereafter. And then there are the days when it seems that the mind will never rest, but you can't locate any apparent cause. Remember the cyclic alternation we spoke of earlier. Meditation goes in cycles. You have good days and you have bad days.

Vipassana meditation is primarily an exercise in awareness. Emptying the mind is not as important as being mindful of what the mind is doing. If you are frantic and you can't do a thing to stop it, just observe. It is all you. The result will be one more step forward in your journey of self-observation.

Problem 6: Boredom

It is difficult to imagine anything more inherently boring than sitting still for an hour with nothing to do but feel the air going in and out of your nose. You are going to run into boredom repeatedly in your meditation. Everybody does. Boredom is a mental state and should be treated as such. A few simple strategies will help you cope.

Tactic A: Reestablish true mindfulness

If the breath seems an exceedingly dull thing to observe over and over, you may rest assured of one thing: you have ceased to observe the process with true mindfulness. Mindfulness is never boring. Look again. Don't assume you know what the breath is. Don't take it for granted that you have already seen everything there is to see. If you do, you are conceptualizing the process. You are not observing its living reality. When you are clearly mindful of the breath or of anything else, it is never boring.

Tactic B: Observe your mental state

Look at your state of boredom mindfully. What is boredom? Where is boredom? What does it feel like? What are its mental components? Does it have any physical feeling? What does it do to your thought process? Take a fresh look at boredom, as if you have never experienced that state before.

Problem 7: Fear

States of fear sometimes arise during meditation for no discernible reason. It is a common phenomenon, and there can be a number of causes. You may be experiencing the effect of something repressed long ago. Remember, thoughts arise first in the unconscious. The emotional contents of a thought complex often leak through into your conscious awareness long before the thought itself surfaces. If you sit through the fear, the memory itself may bubble up to a point where you can endure it. Or you may be dealing directly with the fear that we all fear; “fear of the unknown.” At some point in your meditation career you will be struck with the seriousness of what you are actually doing. You are tearing down the wall of illusion you have always used to explain life to yourself and to shield yourself from the intense flame of reality. You are about to meet ultimate truth face to face. That is scary. But it has to be dealt with eventually. Go ahead and dive right in.

A third possibility: the fear that you are feeling may be self-generated. It may be arising out of unskillful concentration. You may have set up an unconscious program to “examine what comes up.” Thus, when a frightening fantasy arises, concentration locks onto it, and the fantasy feeds on the energy of your attention and grows. The real problem here is that mindfulness is weak. If mindfulness was strongly developed, it would notice this switch of attention as soon as it occurred...No matter what the source of your fear, mindfulness is the cure. Observe the fear exactly as it is. Don’t cling to it. Just watch it rising and growing. Study its effect. See how it makes you feel and how it affects your body. When you find yourself in the grip of horror fantasies, simply observe those mindfully. Watch the pictures as pictures. See memories as memories. Observe the emotional reactions that come along and know them for what they are. Stand aside from the process and don’t get involved. Treat the whole dynamic as if you were a curious bystander. Most important, don’t fight the situation. Don’t try to repress the memories or the feelings or the fantasies. Just step out of the way and let the whole mess bubble up and flow past. It can’t hurt you. It is just memory. It is only fantasy. It is nothing but fear.

When you let fear run its course in the arena of conscious attention, it won’t sink back into the unconscious. It won’t come back to haunt you. It will be gone for good.

Problem 8: Agitation

Restlessness is often a cover-up for some deeper experience taking place in the unconscious. We humans are great at repressing things. Rather than confronting some unpleasant thought we experience, we try to bury it so we won’t have to deal with the issue. Unfortunately, we usually don’t succeed, at least not fully. We hide the thought, but the mental energy we use to cover it up sits there and boils. The result is that sense of unease we call agitation or restlessness. There is nothing you can put your finger on. But you don’t feel at ease. When this uncomfortable state arises in meditation, just observe it. Don’t let it rule you...Just let it be there and watch it closely.

The unpleasant experience that you have been trying to avoid could be almost anything: guilt, greed, or other problems. It could be low-grade pain or subtle sickness or approaching illness. Whatever it is, let it arise and look at it mindfully. If you just sit still and observe your agitation, it will eventually pass.

Problem 9: Trying too hard

Advanced meditators are generally found to be pretty jovial people. They possess one of the most valuable of all human treasures, a sense of humor. It is not the superficial witty repartee of the talk show host. It is a real sense of humor. They can laugh at their own human failure. They can chuckle at personal disasters. Beginners in meditation are often much too serious for their own good. You need to learn to watch objectively whatever happens. You can't do that if you're tensed and striving, taking it all so very, very seriously.

New meditators are often overly eager for results...They jump right in and expect incredible results in no time flat. They sweat and strain, and it is all so terribly grim and solemn. This state of tension is the antithesis of mindfulness.

The novice's expectation is naturally unrealistic and uninformed. Newcomers to meditation expect all the wrong things...Trying too hard leads to rigidity and unhappiness, to guilt and self-condemnation. When you are trying too hard, your effort becomes mechanical, and that defeats mindfulness before it even gets started. You are well advised to drop all that. Drop your expectations and straining. Simply meditate with a steady and balanced effort. Enjoy your meditation....

Problem 10: Discouragement

The upshot of pushing too hard is frustration. You are in a state of tension. You get nowhere. You realize that you are not making the progress you expected, so you get discouraged...It is all a very natural cycle...striving after unrealistic expectations is the source. There is a solution. If you find yourself discouraged, observe your state of mind clearly. Don't add anything. Just watch it. A sense of failure is just another ephemeral emotional reaction...If you simply stand aside and watch it, it passes away.

If you are discouraged over your perceived failure in meditation, that is especially easy to deal with. You have failed to be mindful. Simply become mindful of that sense of failure. You have reestablished your mindfulness with that step. There is no such thing as failure in meditation. There are setbacks and difficulties. But there is no failure unless you give up entirely. Regretting is only one more way of being unmindful.

Problem 11: Resistance to Meditation

There are times when you don't feel like meditating. The very idea seems obnoxious. Missing a single session is scarcely important, but it very easily becomes a habit. It is wiser to push through resistance. Go sit anyway. Observe this feeling of aversion. In most cases, it is a passing emotion....Five minutes after you sit down it is gone. In other cases, it is due to some sour mood that day, and it lasts longer. Still, it does pass. At other times, resistance may be due to some difficulty you are having with the practice itself. You may or may not know what the difficulty is. Once the problem is gone, resistance will be gone. If the problem is unknown, then you are going to have to tough it out. Just sit through the resistance and observe it mindfully. It will pass. The problem causing it will probably bubble up in its wake, and you can deal with that.

If resistance to meditation is a common feature of your practice, then you should suspect some subtle error in your basic attitude. Meditation is not a ritual conducted in a particular posture. It is not a painful exercise, or period of enforced boredom. And it is not a grim solemn obligation. Meditation is mindfulness. Meditation is your friend.

Problem 12: Stupor or Dullness

We have already discussed the sinking mind phenomenon. But there is a special route to that state you should watch out for. Mental dullness can result as an unwanted byproduct of deepening concentration. As your relaxation deepens, muscles loosen and nerve transmissions change. This produces a very calm and light feeling in the body. You feel very still and somewhat divorced from the body. This is a very pleasant state, and at first your concentration is quite good, nicely centered on the breath. As it continues, however, the pleasant feelings intensify and they distract your attention from the breath. You start to really the state your mindfulness goes way down. Your attention winds up scattered, drifting listlessly through vague clouds of bliss. The result is a very unmindful state, sort of an ecstatic stupor. The cure, of course, is mindfulness. Mindfully observe these phenomena and they will dissipate. When blissful feelings arise accept them. There is no need to avoid them, but don't get wrapped up in them. They are physical feelings, so treat them as such. Observe feelings as feelings. Observe dullness as dullness. Watch them rise and watch them pass. Don't get involved.

You will have problems in meditation. Everybody does. You can treat them as terrible torments or as challenges to be overcome. If you regard them as burdens, your suffering will only increase. If you regard them as opportunities to learn and grow, your spiritual prospects are unlimited.