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# Mindfulness 101: It Tastes Terrific, and Just Look at That Shine!

By Scott L. Rogers

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There is a *Saturday Night Live* skit from 1976 that offers us a humorous take on a serious aspect of mindfulness practice. Gilda Radner and Dan Aykroyd are arguing over whether a product “New Shimmer” is a floor wax or a dessert topping. Radner is about to apply it to the top of her mop while Ackroyd wants to squeeze it onto his parfait. As a can of New Shimmer shuffles back and forth between them, Chevy Chase appears behind them and says, “Hey, hey, hey, calm down, you two. New Shimmer is both a floor wax *and* a dessert topping!” Comically, Chase sprays some onto the mop and the dessert. Ackroyd swallows a spoonful and announces, “Mmmmm, tastes terrific!” as Radner mops the floor and raves, “And just look at that shine!”

Mindfulness is a bit like New Shimmer. It is a dessert topping in that practicing mindfulness can be a pleasant experience—relaxing, calming, serene. And it is a floor wax in that practicing can develop resilience and a capacity to cut through the grime of confusion and distraction, see things more clearly, and perform at a higher level. If this metaphor sparkles with any insight, know that we’ve just begun.



Many start practicing mindfulness to help relax, and many stop because it is not relaxing enough. A passage from James Nestor’s newly released book, *Breathe: The New Science of a Lost Art* (Riverhead, 2020), is telling in this regard. *Breathe* explores the power of breathing to alleviate a vast number of health concerns and to optimize wellness. While the topic is not new, Nestor does a terrific job packaging it for the reader. It is telling when Nestor briefly references mindfulness meditation on page 176 and asserts:

A wealth of scientific research shows that meditation can change the structure and function of critical areas of the brain, help relieve anxieties, and boost focus and compassion. It can work wonders, but few of us will ever reap these rewards because the vast majority of people who try to meditate will give up and move on.

So, imagine you have a can of New Shimmer in your hands and are interested in sweetening your dessert. After using it a few times, you put it away. Why? Without truly understanding how it can be both, the dessert topping can become confused with and taste like floor wax. After all, repeatedly mopping the floor, like sitting and concentrating attention on the breath—no matter how effective it may be—can feel like hard work.

While no one knows the secret ingredient in New Shimmer, the reason why practicing mindfulness is a source of both relaxation and resilience is no secret. And like all good natural remedies, there are just a few basic ingredients that you will find accessible wherever you may be: attention, the breath, and awareness. Below is a brief overview of how these three ingredients work their magic. Practicing mindfulness will bring them to life.

## Attention

Most mindfulness practices involve concentrating attention on an object. This calls for attention—a fickle and limited resource—which soon enough will wander from the object. New practitioners often presume that this wandering is a problem. Ironically, this tenacious belief is itself the problem and a source of frustration and stress that interferes with the inherently calming quality of a resting attention.

## The Breath

When attention is directed to an object, it begins to steady. While any object will do, the sensations of breathing are tried and true. This is why so many mindfulness exercises begin with instructions to direct attention to the breath.

*Lower or close your eyes and rest attention on the sensations of breathing.*

While pretty much everyone can direct their attention to the breath, this endeavor is inevitably short-lived. *Attention can't keep track of itself* and wanders off very quickly. While the wandering is neither a problem nor inherently stressful, resisting it can be extremely stressful. This is where awareness comes in.

*And when you notice your mind wandering, gently focus attention on the breath.*

## Awareness

While you are attending to the breath, other objects ranging from sights, sounds, smells, thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and tastes will be tugging away at your attention. Rest assured, sooner than later your attention will wander off—and you will be unaware it has until you somehow become aware. That moment of realizing that your mind has wandered is like realizing a scuff mark on the floor has disappeared. This is a teachable moment and a trainable event. Enjoy it (rather than fight the moments leading up to it) for the better it feels, the more likely it is to happen again.

## Conclusion

The practice of mindfulness can serve a variety of ends—from feeling better to being more aware and resilient in the midst of one’s experience, whatever it may entail. The grime of our life’s journey and conditioning can obscure our view of events and people, generating and interjecting biases, assumptions, and critical self-judgments into our interpretation of our experience. But just as a mopped floor becomes clean by *eliminating* grime, so, too, the act of focusing attention on the breath can lead to a feeling of calm by eliminating or limiting the extent of mind wandering—gratuitous journeys into past and future. With greater awareness of mind wandering, we mind wander less, and we begin to see things more clearly, cultivating a more stable internal environment to learn and grow from our experience. What could be sweeter?

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