

Reflections on foundations for Mindful Living

Recent research has shown that mindfulness practice can be of benefit to almost all of us, including those suffering from recurrent depression (Segal 2002; Williams 2007). Mindfulness has been defined as:

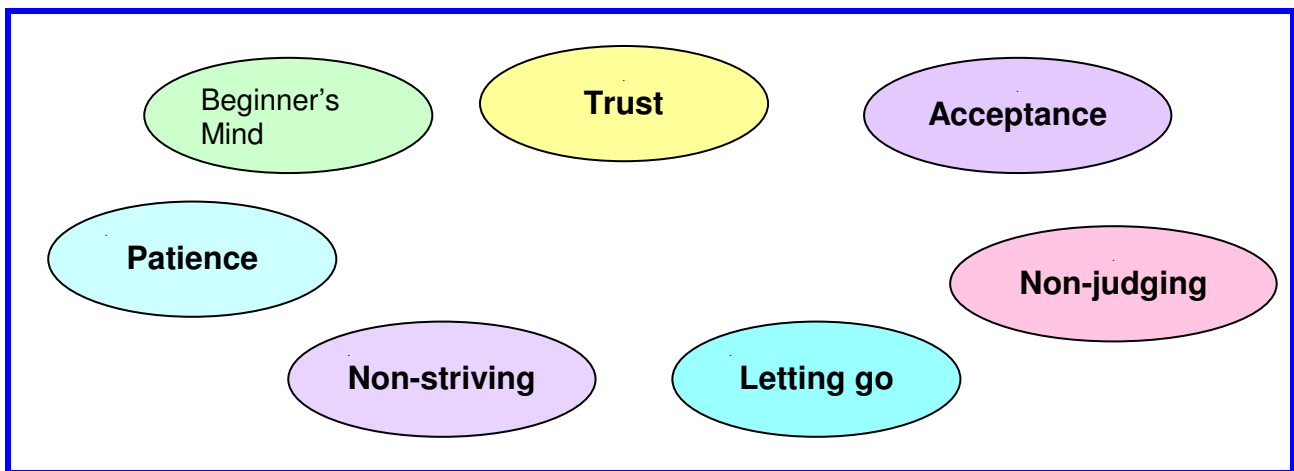
Paying attention in a particular way:

- on purpose,
- in the present moment,
- and non-judgementally.

Kabat-Zinn 1994; p 4

Meditative type practices greatly help us in developing Mindfulness¹; thus the relevance of these concepts to Autogenic Training (AT).

Jon Kabat-Zinn pays particular attention to seven concepts / attitudes which I have found of value. The Seven are:



We will look at these seven in turn, with specific reference to AT; it can also be most helpful to apply these seven concepts to life in general.

<div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 150px; height: 50px; margin: 0 auto; background-color: #f8d7da; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <p>Non-judging</p> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px; font-size: small;"> <p>See also: "The Story of a Horse"; there is a good version in: Watts 1975: p 31 (Also Zz-5.1)</p> </div>	<p>Most of the time, most of us are judging whatever is going on in our lives. This may be about ourselves or other people. For example: "I'm no good"; "He's better / worse than me"; "All politicians are greedy". While this may appear to be helpful, it can at times also get in the way of us seeing how things really are – because we are viewing everything in the light of these judgements. (We all tend to be influenced by "top down" mental judgements that arise spontaneously / unconsciously – and we may not even realise that we are making a judgement – see also B6: "Perceptions, Flowers, and Reality").</p> <p>In the context of a Standard Exercise Autogenic session, we can easily find we are judging ourselves – for example, that our attention has wandered, that we are "no good" at AT. So if a thought comes up, or if we become aware of a difficult bodily sensation, we do not judge it: rather, we simply accept that it has come up, and then re-focus on the Autogenic Sequence – for example, "It breathes me".</p> <p style="text-align: center;">In this way the Autogenic Session takes us beyond judgement.</p>
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¹ Meditative type practices are linked with specific pre-frontal cortex functions that correlate with Mindfulness (see e.g. Siegel 2007 Appendix III pp 337- 362. Siegel here also reviews the research basis for this).

Trust

It is very easy to go through life accepting some external authority for what we do – and this may be helpful.

However, this can result in us becoming non-authentic. At the end of the day it is important that we trust ourselves, what our body is saying to us, what our feelings are saying to us – rather than, for example, trying to imitate someone we may respect. We can only be the unique person we are – thus imitation can lead to non-authenticity.

“It is far better to trust your own intuition and your own authority, even if you make some ‘mistakes’ along the way, than always to look outside yourself for guidance. If at any time something does not feel right for you, why not honour your feelings? Why should you discount them or write them off as invalid because some authority or group of people think or say differently?”

Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p 36

Beginner's Mind

There is a wonderful introduction to the concept of the beginner's mind in “Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind”:

“In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; but in the expert's there are few. The goal of practice is always to keep our beginner's mind....”

Suzuki 1970

Beginner's Mind is, I think, a function of the Right Hemisphere which embraces what is present in this moment; in this now. If we think we already know something, or what we are looking at, we will not look at it freshly; in effect, it is *re-presented* to the Left Hemisphere where its uniqueness becomes lost. (See also McGilchrist 2009)

So in AT practice, and in life as well, it is helpful to keep our “beginner's mind”, and this can allow us to see things with the freshness that we experienced as a child, and without the accumulated (and at times unconscious) baggage that we can so easily become attached to with the passage of time. So with our beginner's mind we can see the wonder and richness of this moment: this very moment. (This can be with the freshness and un-encumberedness of a child's view of the world. See also B6)

“An open, ‘beginner's mind’ allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in the rut of our own expertise, which often thinks it knows more than it does**. No moment is the same as any other. Each is unique and contains unique possibilities. Beginner's mind reminds us of this simple truth.”

Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p 35

**This is partly because expertise tends to be associated with language and linear thinking: the danger is that it only deals with matters that are not original, but have been “re-presented” to the left hemisphere (from the right hemisphere): representation is not the same as being present in this moment (McGilchrist 2009).

Non-striving

In everyday life we are often striving to get things done; to pass exams; to meet deadlines. This over time can be very stressful. Striving can become quite dysfunctional, and prevent us from experiencing the here and now. We may sometimes imagine we would be happy if only....

“If I were only more calm, or more intelligent, or a harder worker, or more this or more that, if only my heart were healthier or my knees were better, then I would be okay. But right now, I am not okay.

Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p 37

These are all judgements of one sort or another (see Non-Judgement above). In an AT session we develop Mindful Attention (*Passive focused concentration*) in which we are not striving or trying to do anything: rather, we are simply focusing on this present moment: e.g. “Arms and Legs Heavy”; “Solar Plexus Flowingly Warm”.

This non-striving attitude is important for our health and well being (see A3): and can bring about rest, repair, and recuperation – as occurs also when we are in deep restful sleep.

Patience

We cannot expect to change habits of a lifetime overnight. However, even after only a few weeks of regular AT practice we often find that subtle changes are coming about.

If we are to keep physically fit, we know that we have to exercise regularly – not just once a month. The same is true with Mental Training / Autogenic Training: to keep our mind mentally and emotionally healthy, we need to practice on a daily basis.

“Patience is a form of wisdom. It demonstrates that we understand and accept the fact that some things must unfold in their own time.”

Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p 34

So we can gradually adopt a patient attitude to life and ourselves².

If we are patient, we can experience being. “The challenge for all of us is to see life as a verb, not a noun” (Siegel 2007 p 326). Thus for a tree, the essence of life is “tree-ing”.

² A good metaphor for patience is that of the latent butterfly struggling to get out of its cocoon: the very struggle of getting out enables the wings to become strong and unfold – and so the butterfly can emerge and fly away. If we try to help the butterfly out, it will not make this struggle itself, and so the wings will not be strong enough to fly; and so it dies.

Acceptance

Note: the word 'acknowledge' may sometimes better express this concept.

The Three Minute exercise as described by Williams et al (Williams 2007 e.g. pp 182-185); & Segal et al (Segal 2001 pp 184; 226; 241) can be a helpful way of developing Acceptance.

Life is as it is; not as we would sometimes like it to be. If we are always wishing things were other than they are, we can very easily expend energy unproductively – and we may end up feeling worse.

For example, if one morning I wake up feeling a bit low, and compare that to how I felt say a month ago when I was feeling great, this comparison between how I was then and how I am now can make me feel even worse. So it is important that we accept how we are right now; this does not mean that we cannot change things, but it does mean that we are not struggling to make things other than what they are.

We may find that by simply accepting things as they are right now, this will itself give us a sort of inner energy – and perhaps the motivation to change.

“Acceptance does not mean that you have to like everything or that you have to take a passive attitude toward everything and abandon your principles and values. It does not mean that you are satisfied with things as they are or that you are resigned to tolerating things as they ‘have to be.’ It does not mean that you should stop trying to break free of your own self-destructive habits or to give up your desire to change and grow, or that you should tolerate injustice, for instance, or avoid getting involved in changing the world around you..... Acceptance as we are speaking of it simply means that you have come around to a willingness to see things as they are. This attitude sets the stage for acting appropriately in your life, no matter what is happening.”

Kabat-Zinn, 1990, pp 38 - 39

In the context of an AT sequence, if our mind wanders, for example, we simply accept that it has wandered (non-judgementally), and then gently bring our attention back to where we were in the AT sequence – e.g. “Forehead cool and clear”.

Letting go /

Letting go

Equanimity

Compare with:
 "The King &
 the Ring"
 [Tolle 2005 (pp199-
 200; also Zz-5.3)]

It is very easy for us to keep on going over things from the past and / or what may or may not happen in the future. This can be emotionally draining and quite unproductive. Hanh has described this in terms of "pursuing the past" and "losing ourselves in the future" (Hanh 1990). So we need to develop our abilities and skills in letting go.

It is said that in India there was a very clever way to catch a monkey. A hole is made in a coconut, which allows the flat hand of the monkey to go in: two very small holes are also made at the other end, through which is threaded a wire. A banana is then placed inside the coconut, which is fixed to a tree.

In due course the monkey arrives and puts the flat hand in through the small rectangular hole – and grasps the banana. The banana within the grasped hand is now too big for the hole – the monkey struggles to get the banana out – and during this struggle the waiting monkey catchers capture the monkey.

If we are not careful, we may become like the monkey and get caught in the web of our lives because we are unable to let go.

Adapted from Kabat-Zinn 1990; p 39

Such inability to let go can harm us. Say we have decided never to forgive an ex partner: the question is, whom will this harm most? We become trapped, like the monkey.

If we are not able or willing to let go of the hurt, the anger, the resentment, it is ourselves that we will be damaging.....Such a situation indicates that we have become attached to our anger, hurt, and resentment: and we will not become whole again until we allow ourselves to become free from that attachment. Thus to become whole, letting go of past hurts / negativities is of great importance..... Meditative-type practices can be of great assistance in these matters, as they stimulate crucial pre-frontal cortex functions (Siegel 2007; 2010; and see also C2).

In day to day living, to be in each moment also means that as each moment goes we let it go, and so can focus and be in the *new* present moment. The process of letting go is sometimes related to, and equated with, the state of equanimity (Hanh 1998). If we cannot let go of the past and painful memories, including loss, how can we reach equanimity?

After-word /

After-word:

The concept of mindfulness has its origins in Buddhist philosophy: the Sanskrit word for mindfulness is *smriti*. This literally means “remember” or “remembering”. Thich Nhat Hanh says:

Mindfulness is remembering to come back to the present moment. The character the Chinese use for ‘mindfulness’³ has two parts: the upper part means ‘now,’ and the lower part means ‘mind’ or ‘heart’.

- The first miracle of Mindfulness is to be present and able to touch deeply the blue sky, the flower, and the smile of our children.”

Hanh 1998 p 64-65⁴
(Bullet point added)

So our western translation of *smriti* gives it a misleading cognitive and left hemisphere bias: mindfulness that is not heartfelt is not mindfulness. The term would perhaps be better rendered as “Mind-Heart-Fullness” – or left untranslated.

References and sources

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Linked themes in this Autogenic Dynamics section

A3	Towards a concept of happiness and well-being
B6	Perceptions, flowers, and reality
C2	Mindsight – our seventh sense and associated pre-frontal cortex functions
C7	Being in touch with our feelings – Hemispheric Integration (includes the concept of Affect Labelling)
D5	Reflections on Mindfulness (after Thich Nhat Hanh)

Mindfulness that is not heartfelt
is not mindfulness

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⁴ Hanh then goes on to describe the other aspects of Mindfulness in his chapter on “Right Mindfulness” (pp 64-83)