

Paying Attention: On Purpose, in the Present Moment, with Interest and Care

With mindfulness training we can learn how to choose *what we pay attention to* and *how we pay attention to it*. Attention is the gateway to experience. Attention is a key skill; we use it in every aspect our life. William James, one of the first modern psychologists put it this way, “without selective interest, experience is utter chaos.” If we allow our attention to wander without any sense of purpose, it is not only chaos, but can also make us hostage to whatever in the world is up, most able to capture our attention. If this is 24/7 news it creates a heightened and exhausting state of unease and anxiety. If its social media, we absorb the narratives of whatever we are reading in our media streams, be that how success, attractiveness, or worth are defined. If our minds are left to wander, habit will take over, we’ll attend to what we’ve always attended to.

Standing back to see what is grabbing our attention is the first step to exercising “selective interest.” Attention is sometimes described as being like a flashlight. We can choose what we shine the flashlight’s beam on; the focal point makes things brightest. Everything outside that focal point moves from shade to darkness. We can also use different lenses. We can use each of our different senses; for example, seeing, hearing, touching, sensing in our bodies. Or we can think about, imagine or describe things with words.

It can be tremendously empowering to know that we can, at least to an extent, choose what we attend to. For example, we can choose to update on the news just once a day. We can turn off the notifications on our phone. We can choose to appreciate aspects of our lives, such as our loved ones, the natural world around us and people who inspire us. The exercise below is an exercise in taking the flashlight of your attention and choosing where to shine it.

Box. The Flashlight of Our Attention

1. Notice where your attention is right now, where is the flashlight shining?

Now, **making a deliberate choice to take hold of the flashlight and moving it to ...**

3. The soles of your feet – what do you notice, what sensations are in the flashlight beam, which sensations are most vivid?

4. Your hands, what are you aware of in your hands. Maybe rubbing your hands together and see what this feels like, where the hands are in contact with one another and where there is movement.

5. How about your belly, sensing the movement of the belly as you breathe, keeping the flashlight beam here through a few breaths.

6. Now we're going to move from the body to the mind. Taking your attention, and turning to something or someone in your life that you're a bit worried about, not a big thing, something minor or small. Allowing your attention to hold this person or thing in awareness. What are you feeling right now?

7. Now taking your attention and bringing into awareness something or someone in your life that you appreciate, that you're grateful for, perhaps a specific recent event that you enjoyed or felt good about, allowing your attention to hold this person or event in awareness. What are you feeling right now?

8. Now come back to your feet, hands, belly, the whole of your body sitting here breathing, just as it.

Key points

What do we learn from this? That we can take our attention, intentionally, and move it around, bringing into the foreground, into the center of the flashlight beam, different stimuli in our bodies and in our mind. Instead of our experience being “utter chaos,” as William James put it, we are taking hold of the flashlight and choosing where we place our attention. The more we do this and feel a sense of confidence, the more we start to have a sense that we can choose where we place our attention. We start to see the effects of these choices. What happens if I read news 24/7, what happens if when I go for a walk I choose to really tune into the world around me, what happens when if someone I care about is talking I choose to really pay attention to what they’re saying, how they’re saying it and how its landing with me, rather than planning what I am going to say next?

What does it mean to pay attention in a particular way, non-judgmentally? It means our attitude, the way we pay attention. To use the flashlight analogy again, we can choose different lens filters; for example, we can choose to be curious, and even develop attitudes of kindness, friendliness care and balance in our attention. It is really hard to be curious and judgmental at the same time. It is really hard to be caring and harsh at the same time. By developing these attitudes we can change the whole landscape of our minds. Consider the exercise we did just now. How would it be to have a lens of interest and friendliness? What about a lens of judgment.

Starting out learning these skills in attention can seem like a big ask. It is, but we know from both ancient wisdom and modern psychology that our attention can be trained and that it’s worth it, we can feel more in control and happier when we’re choosing where and how we place our attention. It can help us see our experiences in any moment more clearly (sensations, impulses, moods and thoughts). In each moment we can take stock and notice

where we're at; for example, are we energized or tired, excited or scared, distracted or focused? It can reveal the richness of our experiences. Eating good food, drinking tea or coffee, being with a loved one, these can all be enriched if we're fully present. It can slow everything down, so we can see our experience unfolding in real time. We can see the moment our attention is hijacked, what happens in reaction to a pleasant or unpleasant experience, how we tend to react to criticism, praise, boredom, adrenaline surges, and so on.

Each time our attention wanders is a chance to do something radically different. We can recognize and get curious by asking, "At what point did my mind wander, where did it go, what was so captivating about this?" Mind wandering is normal, it can even be creative, relaxing and helpful. For example poets talk about reverie and many contemplative traditions suggest quiet contemplation, prayer and meditation.

When our mind is hijacked this too can be highly functional, even life-saving. If there is an immediate external threat, we're hard-wired to turn to and deal with the threat.

Box. The Scientist: Attention is Foundational

Training our attention is not easy, but as a foundational skill it changes everything. We're beginning to choose what we attend to. The "the faculty of bringing back a wandering mind, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will."

William James - in one of the first really good psychological descriptions of attention.

So how can we train our attention? We'll start by offering a practice that gathers our attention and grounds our attention in our bodies. You can either follow the guidance here or go to the Mindfulness for Life website where there are guided mindfulness practices: I'd recommend starting with the 10-minute Body Scan practice. Ideally this is a practice you do every day, at least for a period of time. Perhaps one of the easiest ways of integrating into

your day is to do it in bed just before going to sleep, or first thing in the morning, before starting the rest of your day.

Box. Mindfulness Practice. Body Scan: Paying Attention to Our Bodies, On Purpose, With Interest and Care

Ideally this practice is done lying down, but you can also do it sitting or standing – whatever feels comfortable for your body. You can also do this practice at different times. If you don't have much time, one possibility is in bed before you go to sleep to help you switch your mind off for the day. ***Set an intention to bring interest and care to sensations in each part of the body.***

Each time you notice that the mind wanders, and it will that's minds do ... may be noticing where it went to ... and then gently returning attention to sensations of touch or temperature, aches or itches, warmth or coolness ... Remembering that there is no special way to feel ... simply feeling sensations in body as you scan through the body.

Scanning through your body

So, now, feeling the points of contact of the body with whatever is supporting you.

Connecting with these parts of the body to feel steady ... and grounded ...

And having a sense of the body as a whole ... the space the body takes up ...

Noticing what's here in the body now ... itches, tingles, or aches ... softness, warmth, or comfort ... places of tension ... or places of ease ... investigating with friendly interest and care ... what's here now in the body?

And when you're ready, narrowing the focus of your attention to the head area. Getting a sense of the head as a whole ... the space it takes up ...

And then narrowing attention still further to explore different areas of the face ... the forehead ... the eyes ... the eyebrows ... the muscles around the eyes ... the eye sockets ...

the eyes themselves ... bringing a gentle attention to sensations around the eyes ...the nose ... perhaps aware of the movement of air as you breathe ... warmth or coolness ... dryness or moisture ... the cheeks ... the jaw, mouth and chin and the chin ...

On an out-breath, letting go ... and moving attention to the neck and throat area.

The shoulders, and down to the arms, both arms together

The hands ... moving attention all the way out to fingertips and thumb-tips ... perhaps playfully exploring the sensations of contact, touch, temperature ... the whole hand ... palm of hand ... back of hand ... both hands together.

Moving attention into the torso ... Perhaps tuning into a sense of the shape of the torso ... and sensations as the torso moves ... the rise and fall of the chest ... and the stretching and releasing of the belly as you breathe ... aware of sensations of breathing here ...

... and moving attention into the lower back ... and expanding attention to take in the whole of the torso once more ...

Then moving attention to the pelvis. Aware of the bony structure of the pelvic girdle ... the hips and hip joints ... and the soft tissue housed inside ... aches, itches, gurgles or rumbles ... aware of sensations in the pelvic region ... Or perhaps simply noticing the points of contact of the buttocks with the floor, bed or chair ... experiencing what is here... on the surface and within.

Moving awareness to the legs, both legs together ... lower legs ankles ...

And letting go here ... bringing attention to feet.

Now coming back to a sense of the body as a whole... just lying here, breathing, experiencing ... resting in awareness ... as best you can, allowing yourself to be exactly as you are, allowing your body to be exactly as you find it ... right here ... right now.

As we bring this practice to a close, ask yourself, is there a part of the body you felt most able to anchor your awareness in, your hands, feet or belly maybe, this can be something you can return to in any moment to anchor and steady yourself.

Thank you.

Key points

What is learned when we do this practice? At its very simplest our experience is made up of stimuli and reactions. Stimuli can be internal (e.g., sensations or thoughts) or external (e.g., sounds). Our reactions are the ways in which our bodies and minds register, make sense of and adjust and/or take action to the constant flow of stimuli.

We can become more aware of different aspects of our experience, bodily sensations; moods; thoughts, images and cognitive processes (planning, remembering, mind wandering), and impulses and the context within which they arise.

We continue to learn that can pay attention on purpose, and each time our mind wanders we can notice this and bring it back, training our attention.

Finally, we start to develop a greater awareness of our bodies, something that is key to using mindfulness skillfully to navigate through our days; something we'll return to.

Velcro and Teflon mind. As you do this practice you'll notice something that all minds do, which has been referred to as Velcro and Teflon mind. Like Velcro, our mind can clasp onto unpleasant things. Like Teflon, our mind can move over pleasant experiences without making direct contact with them. Mindfulness practices can reveal how easy it is for our attention to orient to difficult things and get preoccupied with body and mind states such as agitation, sleepiness, aches and pains. They get caught up in difficulties like Velcro. We can also see how it glosses over all that is right in any moment, as though it were covered in smooth Teflon.

Protective awareness. Our minds can be very wise, making good choices about what to pay attention. Perhaps the most obvious example is in the midst of danger, our minds automatically orient to the threat and give it full attention so we can react to stay safe. For example yesterday I was about to cross the road, and out of nowhere a car veered dangerously towards me. I grabbed the person I was with, and we stepped back very automatically and quickly onto the sidewalk. Everything else became irrelevant, the conversation we were having, all the surroundings, my attention was solely focused on the car's direction of travel and pulling back onto the sidewalk. In the same way, when there is too much going on, and we feel over-whelmed, our minds can shut down or at least shut out what it can't manage. Immediately after a major loss or bereavement, we can be quite numb for example, unable to process all that's happened and is happening. Mindfulness training starts to become more familiar with these tendencies of the mind to know when to open and when to close, and perhaps even begin to use them more adaptively, knowing when it is helpful to open and when to close. The idea of anchoring our attention, choosing a place in the body to gather and steady ourselves is also a form of protective awareness. We're learning that whatever conditions we find ourselves in we can always anchor our attention. It may sometimes be much harder than others, in the midst of a storm for example, but we can also learn that different conditions require different anchors. We'll return to this, but first, it is good to recognize our natural protective awareness and start to trust it. This is the start of a lifelong journey.

Mindfulness of Everyday Activities

How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.

Annie Dillard

There is a very simple way to become more mindful. We don't have to look very far – our everyday life is already here waiting for us to pay attention to it. It simply involves making an adjustment in how we approach our day, choosing to pay attention, on purpose with qualities of interest and care. This is sometimes called beginner's mind. When infants and toddlers encounter something for the first time they have a sense of awe and wonder. Beginner's mind is recapturing this sense of seeing things as if for the first time.

Sophia was taking care of her grandson Noah. She' brought some fresh strawberries and handed one to Noah in his high chair. He squashed it in his hands, with delight at its softness and the way, as he crushed it, he texture changed to mush. Then he put his hands and the strawberry to his mouth. His eyes lit up and his whole face creased with the sweetness of the strawberry first on his lips, and then when he realized he really liked it, into his mouth. In that moment he looked like he'd discovered something amazing, which he had, the feel and taste of a fresh strawberry. Sophia passed Noah a second strawberry and took one herself, mirroring his every move as they both enjoyed the feel, smell and taste of the fresh strawberries. It was just the two of them, and Sophia loved abandoning convention about how to eat, choosing instead to eat the strawberry exactly as Noah did.

Beginner's mind means approaching our everyday experience with this sense of openness to the fullness and richness of it, not assuming we know how something will taste, what someone will say, how we'll feel in a particular situation. We may put a strawberry in our mouth with an expectation of how it will be and not actually pause and experience how it is in reality.

Our days are full of activities that we tend to do quite automatically, for very good reason, so can pay attention to other things while we do it. The classic example is driving on the highway, while also talking to a friend. But our everyday activities provide so many

chances throughout the day to pay attention, to come back to the present moment, and realize that these everyday moments are not distractions on the way to doing something else, they are our lives.

When we pay attention to small moments it can add depth and vibrancy to our lives. The moment someone shows us a kindness, a cherry tree in blossom, greeting someone we care about who we haven't seen for a while, eating, the first cup of coffee or tea of the day, and so on. If we can be more fully present to these moments in our day, we can more fully experience the joy, beauty, connection, pleasures and rewards of our lives. It is a simple effect; paying attention to these moments more than likely enriches our life. There are also many moments in the day we perhaps write off as "dead space;" getting dressed, brushing our hair, commuting, dropping kids off at school, waiting for a bus or train to arrive, or an elevator to get to our floor,.... These are all moments we can take a breath and connect with ourselves, how am I doing right now, how is my mind (e.g., calm, agitated), how is my body (e.g., energized, tired)? These can be moments to come back to ourselves and make adjustments throughout our day.

Box 1.4. Mindfulness of Everyday Activities.

Consider all the everyday things we do: washing our hands; showering; brushing our hair; walking from place to place; eating; drinking tea/coffee; natural pauses/gaps in the day; commuting; waiting for people; attending to the notifications on our cell phone; talking to people; the moment we wake up; the moments before we fall asleep Each of these provide an opportunity pay attention to our sensations, moods, impulses and thoughts. For example, as we wash our hands, can we come back to the direct experience of the water, soap, and our hands moving across each other? As we eat, can we really taste, smell and

savor our food? In the shower you might bring your attention to the sensations of the water on your skin, or if you're eating your breakfast, the smell and taste of the food.

Mindfulness of everyday activities can become more advanced. As we interact with others, can we be more aware of how our bodies, moods, impulses and thoughts are changing through the interaction? Can we really pay attention to what they're saying, verbally and non-verbally?

What about in more charged situations? Can we tune in to how the charge is registering in our bodies? What is it triggering for us in terms of moods, impulses and thoughts?

Throughout the day, lift and broaden your gaze, both literally and metaphorically. What do you see? Are there things you're missing because you're either not looking or you've made up your mind very quickly what is there. Can you see it with it beginner's mind? What's that like?

Key points

- Throughout the day, pay attention to everyday activities, with a sense of curiosity and interest – beginner's mind.
- Raise and broaden your gaze to see more of the world, perhaps noticing things you might not normally see.
- As you become more familiar with this, see if you can stay aware during more charged moments, to see how your mind and body register these moments.

Box 1.4. The Scientist.

Studies have shown that *how people approach their day* can impact more on well-being than what they are doing throughout their day. These studies show that bringing moments of mindfulness and appreciation to our day predicts our downstream well-being. The

implication is that it can really pay off to try, as best we can, to approach our day with a sense of intentionality and awareness. Of course, our basic temperament and life circumstances are important, but how we relate to each moment and each day is something we can change – these are skills that we can learn. The implication is clear, choosing to bring a sense of appreciation into our day can improve our well-being.

Key points

Training our attention is a key foundational skill. As we step back we see how much our mind wanders. We learn about how we relate to pleasant and unpleasant experiences. We start to have a sense of being able to choose what we attend to and how we attend to it. Realizing we have this choice can create a sense of great freedom – we don't have to be held captive by external pulls and pushes on our attention. We can start paying attention in ways that serve us best.