

pause
breathe
smile

awakening mindfulness
when meditation is not enough

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SOUNDS TRUE
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WHAT'S HAPPENING? PAUSE AND LOOK AROUND.

Addiction, political scandal, economic crime, environmental degradation, sexual slavery, teen suicide, ethnic cleansing, radical poverty, mindless violence, and the list goes on. One might think our world is devoid of moral values. Yet we all know what moral values are; putting them into action is where we can use further training. Such ethical training is integral to an awakened way of living, a mindful lifestyle. And learning to pause is at its heart.

Pause and look within. Is our goal in life only to satisfy our immediate desires? Is it all just entertainment? Are we here only to cultivate an image? Are we only sleepwalking through it all, or are we awake? Many of us have at least tasted our capacity for dignity and beauty, our ability to be totally aligned with our highest potential. But glimpses come and go. For them to become commonplace, we need to learn self-discipline. And we can master that well — through pausing.

This isn't rocket science. When we take a conscious breath, we're already pausing. And we're grounding ourselves in the here and now. We can listen to our heart, and set clear intentions. Considering the potential impact of our thoughts, our words, our deeds, we might choose inhibition or direction. The door is always open. It's up to us. With a smile, breathing easy, we get better at being human. We become good people. The universe opens up in silent applause when we take the leap to learn to pause.

discipline and mastery, growth and freedom

Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and our freedom.
UNKNOWN (commonly misattributed to Viktor Frankl)

Pausing opens up space, within. Given space, we can incline toward intentionality, an intention-based lifestyle, establishing how we want to live in the world. Here are four practical avenues for bringing intentionality to any lifestyle:

- 1 Mindfulness bells
- 2 Mindfulness blessings
- 3 Mindfulness trainings
- 4 Studying. Observing. Practicing.

Mindfulness bells train us to pause, breathe, and calm, letting go of all else. Following an introduction to that marvelous discipline, we'll consider our moral perspective and intentionality. That will, in turn, lead us to mindfulness blessings. These are innovative ways to pause and set intention throughout our everyday lives. Then, we turn toward broader mindfulness trainings. We'll explore

five bedrock trainings that can add indispensable relationality and responsibility to our lifestyle. In time, their guidelines can be seen not as a constraint of our heart but, rather, as a platform for our freedom.

In addition, I'll open up a game-changing view of motivation, then share a dynamic strategy for incorporating mindfulness trainings into daily life so you may continually grow and thrive. It's a method that can be equally applied to meditation and insight as well as conduct. All in all, these various forms of pausing nurture a space of growth and freedom, for our benefit and that of those close to us.

mindfulness bells

Bells break in on our cares in order to remind us that all things pass away and that our preoccupations are not important. They speak to us of our freedom.

THOMAS MERTON

If you visit a mindfulness retreat center in the Plum Village tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, you'll discover handwritten signs along the road, in the parking lot, at a trailhead, or around a bend. A speed bump may be marked with a handwritten sign such as "Mindful Bump" or "Stop and Breathe." A plank hung up on a tree trunk

may be engraved with calligraphy that reads, “Breathe, you are alive” or “Enjoy breathing.” And visitors grow accustomed to the bells that announce the dawn chant, a morning talk, meals, and other daily events. Bells often find any of us reviewing the past or rehearsing the future, even if by only a few moments. When we hear a mindfulness bell, we relax, stop, and return to our conscious breathing. We consider the sound of a bell as the voice of the present moment reminding us to return to our true home in the here and now.

Thanks to mindfulness bell practice, learning to pause has become a daily habit for me. When I hear a bell, I stop what I’m saying, thinking, or doing. I let my muscles and nerves totally relax. I pay full attention to my in-breath and out-breath. I smile and simply *be*. Nothing else. (Instant nirvana.) Being mindful of three breaths can restore me to a cool and clear state of calm. Whatever or whoever is front of me is more real. My work is pleasurable. My relaxation is more fulfilling. My attentiveness is awakened. My mindfulness blooms.

Mindfulness teacher Sylvia Boorstein first introduced me to the use of a pair of thick brass cymbals joined by a leather thong, which I can carry in a pocket. They’re called *tingsha*. Other people I know keep a small bowl bell in their backpack or purse. There are also apps that can play meditation bells for us at designated intervals. This is particularly apt when at a computer. Without an occasional reminder, I can lose all sense of time, and become disconnected from my environment.

Another form of the mindfulness bell is the Red Dot Practice. To prepare, buy some small, red, circular stickers from an office supply store. Then place a red dot at various strategic spots in your home or workplace — on the inside of a door, by a desk, or on a wall. Whenever you look at one of your red dots, consider it as a tiny stop sign. Pause, and enjoy a few conscious breaths. Mind the gap between breaths. Smile to contact your still point. Simply be.

Ultimately, you don't need a literal bell. Bells are everything and everyone we connect with! So we are always spontaneously reminded to be mindful all the time, if we heed the call. It could be the sound of a bird . . . a truck . . . or the wind through the trees. Even an unpleasant sound. It might be the sight of a cloud drifting, or a baby smiling . . . the fragrance of flowers, or warm sunlight on our bare skin. The stirring of a new feeling, or the recognition that our mind is hatching a plot. Simply stopping to breathe, consciously, three times, and coming home to our bodies in the present moment, is, itself, a mindfulness bell.

Mindfulness bell practice can hold delicious surprises. Once, I was teaching qigong (pronounced “chee goong”) on the beach at Aquatic Park in San Francisco, and — *ding ding!* I heard a bicycle bell. Well, I couldn't stop. I was responsible to a class closely following my moves. So I dropped whatever images I'd had about teaching, or qigong, and more fully merged with my movement in

that moment. I still recall the flowing freshness of the ocean breeze.

One time, halfway through a five-day retreat, after lunch, I entered the big hall, found my cushion, and sat down on the floor among my friends. At the sound of the bell, I joined my palms, made a half-bow, and enjoyed my breathing, waiting for the inevitable announcement of that day's unfolding events. I was flexible for a possible change of plans. Maybe our speaker was late, that sometimes happens. A few moments went by and still nobody said a thing. I looked across the aisle and saw my friend Chinh, looking at nothing in particular, with a gaze that said to me, "Ho hum, what's next, let's see." So I figured I was joining everyone in waiting to find out what would be next.

It wasn't until twenty breaths later that I realized there is no next. This is it. We're all just sitting here. And here I am, not "practicing" anything at all — just sitting and continuing to do so for thirty or forty minutes with nothing to gain, nothing to attain. No Zen to find in the Zen center except what I brought there. I felt tranquil, attentive, grateful just being still, and quietly happy to be so. Such a level of meditation is without need of "meditation."

It's good to be reminded to practice *nonpractice*. Letting be. When I'm sitting in formal meditation at home, I sometimes hear a church bell. I'm already doing nothing. So I let go of any idea of meditating, to be more vulnerable, fully aware of what's alive in the inexhaustible

present moment while also growing more aware of awareness itself. As empty as a bell.

And when I'm arriving at my front porch — *ding ding ding!* — I often hear a passing cable car bell. Then I find myself coming home to coming home. As the Jamaican poet Derek Walcott says, "Greet yourself arriving at your own door."

When I first began my mindfulness-bell practice, I remember falling in love with the sound of the bell. I wanted to embrace its deep sound and hug it to my heart. Later, I came to appreciate the bell as echoing my own human condition. A bell has a physical body, yet with an intangible resonance extending beyond. As such, I've come to consider the mindfulness bell my good friend. Sometimes, I can't help but smile in grateful appreciation at how the ringing of a meditation bell can last for a full three breaths — a neat, adequate measure for emptying out, connecting, and beginning anew. Over the years, I've come to enjoy mindfulness bells as both a discipline and a release. As such, this epitomizes how the practice of awakening mindfulness is for me both commitment and surrender.

Or, in a word: *ding!*

a moral perspective

A moral perspective is not the dessert course, added to the end of the meal and optional. We can't be too rich or too poor to have one; it is the very core of how we live, how we get along with others, feel empathy for the plights of our fellow travelers, and try to shape our own lives and that of our children, loved ones, friends, and communities.

MAXINE CHERNOFF

Life is here and now. The past is history. The future is still a mystery. But today is a gift — that's why they call it the present. And yet, dwelling in the here and now may not always be enough. An Irish setter and a jewel thief are really great at being in the here and now. For a jewel thief, alertness is very much part of the job description. It comes with the terrain of a criminal lifestyle. And let's consider my neighbor Dave's big, red Irish setter, who he's been walking in Washington Square Park every afternoon since the dawn of time. One fine afternoon, after chatting with a friend, he looked around and saw his dear hound, true to the unwritten code of a happy animal lifestyle, trotting away with a total stranger, perfectly delighted to follow whomever showered him with attention and affection.

What's lacking for an Irish setter and a jewel thief is moral responsibility.

Relationality.

Spiritual teacher Rev. angel Kyodo williams tells us that if we were to just add the words *and others* to our attention to self, it would dramatically alter perception and outcome. This wise worldview awakens us to ourselves and the world at the same time. Taking responsibility for our intentions *and* their impact — along with regaining the power to choose our responses, instead of reacting from impulse — opens our space of growth and freedom.

Being a good person — leading a life styled around core values, nourishing what's wholesome and avoiding what's harmful — can be one of the most valuable gifts we can offer ourselves and others. We can nurture this gift through meditation: being aware of our inner experience and our outer experience, and also the relationships between the two. This is an important part of meditation; still, such meditation alone is not enough.

A fulfilling life that includes moral responsibility takes training, the way an athlete trains. To become a better swimmer, you'd look at your stroke, kick, and breathing, but also your diet and sleep habits, stamina, and ability to concentrate — in a word, your *lifestyle*. And it's a practice, the way a musician, no matter how famous, practices basics like scales, over and over. A moral lifestyle doesn't just fall from the sky on a shimmering silver platter, wrapped up neatly in elegant gift paper, and bound by a shiny red ribbon tied off in a fancy bow. It takes compassionate aspiration and powerful motivation, good guidelines and wholesome habits,

as well as checking in on ourselves to see how we're doing. It requires, in a word, *intentionality*.

what is intentionality?

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

At birth, you're given a one-way ticket to this thing called "life." Don't waste it. Don't fall asleep. Make your conduct conscious. Intentional. Intention gives direction to our action, like threading a needle before sewing, or giving thanks before enjoying a meal. Have you ever encountered people lacking direction in life? They may appear solid in 3D, but seem "lost in space" somehow. They might also be adrift in terms of the fourth dimension, or their orientation in time. They're like a cork bobbing on the surface of the water hither and thither, following every little shift in the currents. In extreme cases, the "lost ones" are like sticks drowning in the ocean's depths, no longer knowing which way is up.

Intentionality points us where we need to go. Other species innately understand direction, literally. Almost half of all birds migrate annually, some even flying thousands of miles nonstop, without GPS. Our need for a sense of direction goes beyond points on a compass.