

# Awareness Through Meditation



By Gary Powell

One of my favorite sayings is, “If you want to see God laugh, tell Him what your plans are.” This saying obviously does not mean you should not plan, just that you should understand that things often happen to disrupt those plans. Through my practice of mindfulness meditation, I have come to realize that I cannot control everything that happens in my working day, much less in my life. However, with mindful awareness, I can better control my reactions to those inevitable changes to my plans. With that awareness comes a reduction in stress and access to more happiness.

Mindfulness meditation typically involves sitting quietly and paying attention to your breath. Imagine you are in your first meditation class. You would be asked to follow the air as you breathe in, and to feel the air move through your nostrils, and eventually into your lungs. You would then be asked to follow the air as it moves out of your lungs and to feel the warmer air move back out of your body. Often, you are asked to visualize the stress of the day moving out of your body with the air. You are told that if your mind wanders, which it will, to be aware of this wandering, but then to bring your mind back to following the breath, without judging your wandering mind.

This whole process is meant to help you, among other things, become aware of how your thoughts can so easily come and go, how they frequently interrupt what you are intending to do or

think about, and how easily distracted you can be because of the multitude of thoughts that enter your mind despite your best intentions. The mind can also get us into thinking that the worst will happen whenever anything unexpected comes up during the day.

The mind is a funny thing. We think we are in charge and that we control our thoughts, and thought processes. By spending time in meditation observing your thoughts, you come to realize how much we are not in control of our thoughts, or even our reactions to those thoughts. Some would say, our thoughts too often control us. As part of the mindfulness meditation process, you realize your mind has a mind of its own, and it's not always helpful to you.

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The goal of meditation isn't to control your thoughts;  
it's to stop letting them control you.

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Stop and think about this.

When the phone rings, or when you get an email from

a particular attorney you're having a discovery fight with, you react automatically. You likely don't plan for your heart to start beating faster, or to clench your jaw, or any of the other Pavlovian reactions you might have felt. Without consciously thinking, your body reacts. That is how the primitive part of your brain has taught your body to react in certain, stress-inducing situations. It's part of the human “fight or flight” response and it happens before you even think about it.

What is your first thought when you are told that your boss or a big client needs to speak with you immediately? Is your first

thought that they want to thank you for your wonderful work, or that you've likely done something wrong or that there is a major problem? For too many of us, it is likely the negative thoughts and we start "catastrophizing" or running through all the negative scenarios that could have happened and wondering what negative impact it will have.

Research shows that, on average, people spend 46.9 percent of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they are doing, and this mind-wandering typically makes them unhappy.<sup>1</sup>

The point of meditation is often expressed as helping you to be aware of living in the moment, the now. It's being aware of your moment-to-moment thoughts, reactions and choices.

For me, the purpose behind my meditation practice is not to quiet my mind to find the blissful silence, although that is a very nice state. I use meditation to help me understand and better control the typical chatter in my brain to allow me to focus on one train of thought at a time. The more aware you are of this chatter, the

better you can be at quieting the chatter, and the longer you will be able to focus on a particular, productive train of thought.

As part of a meditation practice, you can start to observe your distracting thoughts and learn to allow those unwanted thoughts to come and go through your mind without judging them or you. Once you gain the awareness of how pervasive your distracting thoughts are, those unwanted thoughts become less frequent and you become aware of the silence in your mind that is available to you between those thoughts. You become able to be aware of the space between a stimulus and an automatic reaction. Once you are aware of that space, you understand you can choose how you react to an external stimulus. Your negative thoughts and reactions become less automatic.

The more you observe yourself reacting in a certain predictable but negative way, the better you understand that your reaction is unconscious. Don't beat yourself up about it, but start to understand that you can find that space between the stimulus and your reaction and choose to react differently. Sometimes, just a con-

scious breath between the stimulus and your reaction is all it takes to give you that momentary nudge to react consciously.

And, it's not just about the stress you create for yourself from the unconscious reaction, although that is important. You can now choose to react differently, which lowers your stress level, but you also are making a conscious decision to replace the unconscious reaction with a different, conscious reaction. Instead of devoting your time to catastrophizing, you can devote it to being more productive, listening better, and reacting in a calmer, more controlled fashion.

This benefits you and your long-term health and also your clients or business.

*Powell is general counsel at Emery Oleochemicals after spending over 20 years involved in litigation in private practice. This is his second Report article on meditation. His first article appeared in the October 2016 CBA Report. He is also creating a series of meditation exercises for attorneys under the name, Legally Mindful, which will be introduced this summer.*

<sup>1</sup> Killingsworth and Gilbert, Harvard University, A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind, Science, Nov 2010: Vol. 330, Issue 6006, pp. 932.

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