

Legally Mindful



By Gary Powell

In our fast-paced society, with everyone being connected to some form of technology during our waking hours, it is much harder to escape from the stress inherent in the legal profession than ever before. Because of this seeming 24/7 connection to the world, it is also more difficult to find time just to be with our thoughts, whether it is thinking about drafting a pleading or negotiating a resolution to a problem. As lawyers, we also too often let our professional lives intrude upon the quality time we should be spending with our family and friends. The path I have found that has been so helpful to me in the midst of this ever-demanding world is a form of mindfulness meditation. Through my mindfulness practice, I find I am better able to focus my thoughts on one issue at a time, or if I'm interrupted by a call on another matter, to quickly bring those thoughts back to the issue at hand.

Mindfulness Meditation

Too often, we spend our time thinking about what happened earlier in the day with our co-worker, or what will likely happen in tomorrow's meeting, or what we need to pick up on the way home from work. Very often, we have all of these types of thoughts intermixed with each other, along with thoughts like, "I'll never get all of this done", or "I'm not good enough", or "Why does my boss hate me?" Our world is generally so fast-paced that we are used to multi-tasking, trying to accomplish, or think about, several things at once.

Meditation, in general, is the art of observing the incessant chatter in your head, and letting all of the extraneous thoughts that seem to dominate our minds just pass on through without judging or analyzing those thoughts. Some forms of traditional meditation use a mantra to focus your attention away from the mental chatter that we all typically experience. As you quietly

repeat the mantra over and over, your mind becomes free of extraneous thoughts. Whenever a thought comes into your mind, you gently let that thought go without judging it, and return to repeating your mantra. This sustained focus on a mantra can be very relaxing and is a great way to release stress.

While relaxing and releasing stress is good, I wanted to work with a method that I can use in real-life situations where going back to a mantra would get in the way. With my own style of mindfulness meditation, I think I have done that. Mindfulness meditation is broadly defined as the focused, non-judgmental attention on observing what is happening in the present moment, the Now. While mindfulness meditation also involves quieting the incessant self-talk that typically runs through our brains at any given time, it is also a tool that helps you focus on what is happening now, whether you are in a quiet, meditative state, or, with practice, in the midst of a contentious meeting or appellate argument.

My Use of Meditation

While this article is not intended to show you how to meditate, I do want to explore some of the ways I've used meditation in my professional and personal life. I started meditating in a limited way about 10 years ago and really enjoyed the release of stress I felt whenever I took the time to meditate, sporadic as it was.

As I started to see the benefits to me in my practice and dealing with going from a firm into a solo practice for awhile, I started to practice more and adopt my own style of mindfulness. Mindfulness meditation typically involves focusing on your breath, thereby allowing the "viewing" of the inhale and exhale function to bring your focus into your body. By focusing on your breath, you have to relax, as other thoughts are allowed to

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Dr. Tow Yee Yau has extensive training and experience working with diverse populations (e.g., children, adolescents, and adults) in college counseling centers, community mental health centers, medical hospitals/centers, and corporate organizations in the USA and Singapore. Over the years, he has provided individual, couples, and group counseling and psychotherapy with issues such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, stress-related disorders, career decision, and multicultural issues. He has facilitated a popular Mindfulness Meditation group called "Relieve Your Monkey Mind" for college students to deal with their anxiety through Pure Land School of Buddhism meditation "Namo Amitufo" (Refuge in

Your Infinite Wisdom), and yoga exercises. His professional interests include Mindfulness Training for Leaders, Mindfulness Therapy, Mindfulness Meditation, Buddhist Psychology, Corporate Coaching, Clinical Supervision & Training, College Students Mental Health, Couples Counseling, and Multicultural Counseling.

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just pass through your awareness.

One of the excuses I've heard from a lot of people is that it takes too much time to get any real benefit out of a meditation practice, and that most of us want to see almost immediate results. My response is typically two-fold. First, any time spent focusing on your breathing, or otherwise focusing on the present moment, has benefit. Second, it's not that hard.

Try it right now. Sit in a chair with your back straight and concentrate on your breath going into your lungs and then out of your nose. Feel the coolness of the air going in and the warmth of the air going out. Close your eyes and continue to do this for ten breaths. If your mind loses focus on the air coming and going from your nose because of other thoughts (such as why am I doing this when I could be making a phone call), simply re-focus your attention on your breath. I have never met anyone who has done this with an open mind that hasn't felt some definite relaxation in only about 20 or 30 seconds.

One of the most difficult things for me was not understanding the benefit from even a short time spent focusing on my breath. I would get so caught up in my stressful activities, that I wouldn't

remember to take a few seconds here and there throughout the day, especially in a tense situation, to follow my breath in and out of my body. With awareness, I find I am able to focus on my breathing in a meeting while listening to what is going on around me. I am now able to take one good, focused breath and I'm back to a relatively calm state. That's still multi-tasking, but it's a lot better than trying to do two stressful things at once!

Finally, in this fast-paced, dog-eat-dog profession, I've had people tell me they don't want to lose their "competitive edge" that requires them to be hard-charging and aggressive. I typically ask if they think the World Champion Chicago Bulls with Michael Jordan, and the LA Lakers with Kobe, lost their edge in their championship runs. Their coach, the Zen Master Phil Jackson, used mindfulness techniques to help the players focus on the now; not what happened two plays ago, or what might happen the next time down the court. I have noticed the same thing in my practice. Mindfulness has helped me to be more aware, and sharper in meetings, arguments, and even when I'm writing. But more on that later ...

Powell is General Counsel at Emery Oleochemicals after spending over twenty years involved in litigation in private practice.

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