



Meditation and the Multi-Tasker

By Kate Spencer

I'm sitting on the floor in a roomful of people with my eyes closed imagining that I'm a mountain. Well, at least that's what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm actually wondering if there's enough peanut butter left at home for a sandwich later, if I put my socks on wrong side out and why my left foot is tingling. Oh, and yes, imagining that I am a mountain, solid and strong.

This flittering of thoughts is normal, our instructor tells us, and if the mind wanders one hundred times, we bring it back, gently, one hundred times, anchoring ourselves in the present moment with our breath. It's part of the process of becoming mindfully aware. One of the first things I'm becoming aware of is all the endless chatter going on in my head. Maybe it's the multi-tasker in me, the part that wants to do more and more, faster and faster and sometimes all at once. This makes for a whole lot of chatter. The tricky thing is not to get too attached to the chatter, to watch the thoughts, feelings and sensations drift through my mind without wanting to lasso a bunch of them and bring them home for dinner.

This is Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, an eight week meditation program based on the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. I signed up for the class in hopes of finding an inlet of calm after a four-year sea of loss, grief and mega stress (both the good kind and the bad). I needed a way out from under that didn't require a white-robed guru. Jon Kabat-Zinn fit the bill perfectly.

Professor of Medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and former director of its Stress Reduction Clinic, Kabat-Zinn has devoted his professional life to bringing the principles of mindfulness meditation into the mainstream of Western medicine. He has worked with chronic pain sufferers, cardiac and cancer patients, stressed-out executives and prison inmates. Hundreds of medical centers and clinics use his mindfulness meditation model and teachers trained in his program are available worldwide. Mine is one of them.

Her name is Carey Charyk and she's a wonderful blend of high energy and deep calm. Like a master fly fisherman, she casts us long, graceful lines of new ideas, then reels us back in before we get too far downstream. She laughs easily and often, and often at herself, making it easier for the rest of us to do the same.

"I suck at this," one of my classmates says, recounting her struggles with last week's homework. There's lots of homework in this class—reading, short writing assignments, visualization exercises (like the mountain) and yoga. But the bulk of the homework consists of sitting quietly, becoming aware of our breathing without trying to manipulate it, and using the breath as a touchstone for becoming an impartial observer of the present moment. Some days, advanced physics would be easier.

It's amazing how difficult it is to set aside time in the day to be with oneself in such a deliberate and non-doing way. And the times it seems hardest to fit it in—a million things to do and only a few hours to do them, a dozen people needing you and only one of you to go around—is the time it's needed most.

That's just one of the paradoxes of this practice. Another is how such a quiet, seemingly small shift can make such a subtle, enormously powerful difference in the way we attune to life. Like pretty much everything else that's worthwhile, mindfulness meditation takes time, commitment and patience to work its way through to our bones. But as my classmates and I progress through the course, we each come to our own version of the same conclusion: What we're doing isn't about escape, it's about presence. It's about showing up for what Kabat-Zinn describes as "the full catastrophe" of life. And like life, meditation itself isn't static.

In fact, as Kabat-Zinn writes in his book, *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, "meditation practice can be fraught with thought and worry and desire, and every other mental state and affliction known to frequent human beings. It is not the content of our experience that is important. What is important is our ability to be aware of that content, and even more, of the factors that drive its unfolding and the ways in which those factors either liberate us or imprison us, moment by moment and year in, year out."

For me, the problems and challenges I face today are the same as the day I signed up for class. But the state of mind that I bring to those circumstances is different. Instead of reacting automatically, as I have year after year, I'm responding mindfully, moment by moment. Not always, or even at this point, consistently, but enough to make a difference, enough to make me want to continue to practice: Enough to give me glimpses of becoming more completely and compassionately myself in this moment, and the next, and the next.

Sometimes all I can think about is the peanut butter sandwich, the socks, the endless parade of mind chatter. But sometimes, I can see that mountain so clearly, its base fully grounded, its peak bathed in sun or rain or flowers or fog, that for a moment, I *am* that mountain, solid and strong.

—Kate Spencer is a Spokane-based writer and the editor of Imagine Magazine.

For more information on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction check out the following resources:

Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness, by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Delta Books, 1990.

Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Hyperion, 2005

A series of meditation Kabat-Zinn's CD's are available at <http://www.mindfulnessstapes.com/index.html>.

Two free downloadable and printable articles by Kabat-Zinn—one on beginning or deepening a meditation practice and the other on bringing mindfulness practice into your daily life—are available at http://www.oprah.com/presents/2007/spa/well/well_meditate.jhtml.

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