

The Freedom to Choose

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Being mindful means being aware of inner and outer processes as they present themselves in the moment. The main inner observations are the observations of thoughts, emotions and body sensations.

One of the instructions that I give while introducing the basic mindfulness meditation is: “The moment that you notice that you are thinking (rather than being involved in the thinking) is a moment of choice. You may choose to shift awareness from the thought and come back to the breath or you may choose to go on thinking, developing the thoughts, following them, and so on”. During the formal practice of mindfulness meditation, the initial intention is to shift awareness from the thought or to just observe it, but sometimes one chooses to stay with “thinking”. It can be because the thought is too luring, because it’s a habit to follow such a thought, because a new idea emerges and the person wants to develop it and implement it, or any other reason. No matter what one chooses, realizing that there is a choice is the point I’d like to emphasize in this article.

When I say “there is a choice” I don’t mean that one can willingly stop a certain thought, emotion or sensation. Thoughts have their own energy. The brain is trained to provide warnings, safety measures, reminders and so on with its constant efforts to protect us. The choice therefore is whether one dwells in the thought or feeling, encourages them or believes in them, or rather notices them without getting engaged or reactive. The acknowledgement of thinking, feeling, sensing is itself important. It’s like a wave coming at you when you swim - first you have to notice that it’s coming, then you may ride it or dive underneath it, and usually you want to try to prevent being trapped in it when it breaks so that it won’t shake you all over. The wave is there - you can’t choose having it or not - you can choose though (with some swimming instructions) how you meet it.

The awareness and observation of thoughts, emotions, and sensations allows a little gap between the appearance of the inner activity and “you,” and this gap enables having a choice. This is one of the main therapeutic “secrets” of mindfulness. When one realizes that there is an option, that the control is not necessarily in the content of thoughts nor in a certain sensation or feeling but rather in the observer within, one can take control over his/her life.

Again and again I witness clients discovering this secret and learning to deal differently with negative thoughts, worries, rumination, destructive reactivity and even body pain. Recently three clients realized that they have control over their thoughts and feelings and for each one of them it meant something else regarding being in therapy. One, who had issues with a co-worker that caused her lots of

anxiety and ruminations, experienced the relief of having the choice not to fuel those and release energy to positive activities. She learned to listen to her needs and express them and overcame the anxiety and depression she was experiencing. She chose to terminate therapy, feeling that she achieved what she needed and has the tools to cope with future stressors. The second one is just starting to recognize her freedom to choose not to get engaged in negative thoughts that cause her to be depressed. Gaining inner control requires learning, practicing and experimenting. Breaking lifelong habits and habitual reactions is a long process. This client continues to work in therapy to strengthen and establish her emerging freedom. The third one came back to therapy after taking a long break from it. She acknowledges a huge change in herself that expresses itself basically in her ability to be happy again. She is able to face challenges with openness and courage and choose where she puts her energy. She came back to therapy to support the change and work on other issues with this new approach to herself.

When we talk about freedom there is sometimes a sense of magnificence and greatness, but freedom can be quiet and subtle. It can be just an inner sense of release, an inner sense of self-control, recognition of having options, an understanding that the essence of who you are is beyond the content of thoughts, feelings and sensations. Such recognition and this kind of freedom present an inviting potential to positively change your life.