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Mindfulness 101: Mindfulness and the Balanced Mind

By Scott L. Rogers


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Have you ever found yourself so focused on something that you were oblivious to other things taking place around you? For example, being so engrossed in checking e-mails or watching a show that you didn't notice someone asking you a question or entering or leaving the room. On the other hand, have there been moments when you felt a bit spaced out, and it was challenging to focus intently on anything? Perhaps you were feeling mentally foggy or agitated, and it was difficult to comprehend what you were reading, listening to, or even to follow your own train of thought.

These are everyday experiences that can be affected by many factors such as sleep, hunger, and stress. They are ultimately influenced by two related mental faculties: attention and awareness. In this month's column we'll consider attention and awareness and a way to harness them through a practice called "Balanced Mind."

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Attention and Awareness

The ability to focus attention and to be aware are innate capacities. Take a moment and experiment with your ability to manipulate attention and awareness. Select something close by—perhaps a coffee cup, book, or picture frame—and focus on it, noticing fine-level details. Then zoom out beyond this image, taking in the various sounds and sights also arising in this moment. Then, zoom back in on the object. Now try this in reverse by taking in the larger view without selecting any object and then focusing in on an object. When you zoom in, attention predominates. When you zoom out, awareness predominates.

A look at some of the ways these terms have been used by leading mindfulness teachers can be instructive to understand their relationship to mindfulness:

- "Mindfulness . . . is a state of clear, nonreactive, and undistracted attention to the contents of consciousness, whether pleasant or unpleasant."—Sam Harris
- "Mindfulness is the aware, balanced acceptance of the present experience."—Sylvia Boorstein
- "Meditation is a balancing act between attention and relaxation."—B. Alan Wallace

- “Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention in a way that creates space for insight.”—Sharon Salzberg

Among the more common and popular mindfulness practices are those oriented toward training attention (e.g., focused attention practice) and those directed at developing the ability to observe or witness experience more broadly (e.g., open monitoring practice). The training of each is important, and some definitions of mindfulness speak to this relationship directly, as in John Yates’s observation that “mindfulness is the balancing of attention and awareness,” and Jon Kabat-Zinn’s popular framing:

Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges by way of paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience, moment by moment.

Balanced Mind

Much like an auto-focusing lens on a camera, attention and awareness are continuously and spontaneously adjusting throughout the day to meet present-moment demands. Mindfulness practices such as Balanced Mind refine the functioning and calibration of these two capacities, helping to optimize how well they work together.

Zooming in and out on purpose at key moments during the day, much as you did in the experiment above, can be helpful with eye strain and mental fatigue. This is especially so when you are staring intently for an extended period, such as when on a video conference. To counter these ailments, deliberately loosen your focus on the computer screen and zoom out momentarily and observe what appears around the screen, *all while still seeing the screen*. You can even try this now: Soften your focus on these words and expand awareness beyond the screen. You may find that doing so occasions a much-needed breath, just as taking a much-needed breath tends to naturally expand awareness. [This Florida Bar News article](#), which I wrote early in the pandemic, explores this technique in greater depth.

In addition to contributing to eye strain and mental fatigue, the disproportionate favoring of attention over awareness can leave you oblivious to important cues arising around you. After all, your mental energy is a limited resource that needs to be allocated between them. Perhaps you know what it is like when someone complains that they feel ignored when talking to you because you are so locked onto what you are doing. Of course, you’re not intentionally ignoring them. You simply don’t realize they are there. While not intentional, this can affect the quality of our relationships.

Thoughts and feelings can also become a focus of attention in ways that adversely affect our well-being, as when we ruminate over a worrisome past event or can’t stop thinking about something that might happen in the future. It is common to have such thoughts and feelings. The problem arises when we do not realize we are caught in this troubling content—lost in its grip. This brings us to this month’s practice.

Practicing “Balanced Mind”

To practice Balanced Mind, you select what we’ll refer to as a “known” object and rest attention on it lightly, like a butterfly landing on a flower. The butterfly knows the flower is there but is not gripping it. While doing this, you “open” to the larger field of awareness around the object, just as the butterfly naturally takes in its environment.

To keep things simple, select the “breath” as the known object. Feel it flowing through the body for a few moments. Then, open to sounds arising, changing, and passing away. See if you can hold this delicate balance of the singular breath and the diverse soundscape.

The practice invites you to explore the ever-shifting relationship between attention and awareness, moment by moment. For brief moments you’ll experience a sweet spot where the two fall into a natural balance. Such moments feel light and comfortable. The mind is balanced and at ease. Difficult moments can still be challenging, but less so. You also may tap into the subtle shift you can make to recalibrate, as when you find your attention captured by an object or your mind a little spaced out. Importantly, Balanced Mind is not a shifting of attention between objects, e.g., shifting back and forth between the breath and a sound. It is instead a gentle knowing of the breath while simultaneously open to a holistic embrace of whatever sounds (and, in time, whatever else) appear in the field of awareness beyond the breath.

With a little practice, I think you’ll find Balanced Mind to be restful and calming. You’ll also find it to be easy to bring into the many moments of your day. In those moments when you become overly focused or a little spaced out, you’ll find the subtle shift you make—by expanding your “view” beyond an object or by zeroing in a little more on an object—can help you recalibrate and find a more optimal way of being present for your experience, whatever it entails.

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