

January 20, 2022 4 MINUTES TO READ · 900 WORDS

# Mindfulness 101: Mindfulness and Freedom


By Scott L. Rogers

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The law is a project in freedom—justice, fairness, and equality—and it is a work in progress. As we know and see playing out again and again, our experience and conditioning as a society and culture can both advance our interests as we learn and grow, and it can also hold us back from fulfilling our larger potential. As a personal practice, mindfulness has the power to free us from the limiting beliefs and constraints of our unique and shared conditioning—the ways we assume, anticipate, worry, judge, and ruminate in ways that often have little to do with our present-moment circumstance. The mindfulness teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, writes:

**OUR TEAM MAKES SOPHISTICATED M&A DEALS DOWNRIGHT SIMPLE.**

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There are things you've been hanging onto that really are not useful and deprive you of your freedom. Find the courage to let them go.

Practicing mindfulness lays bare counterproductive patterns of thoughts, feelings, impulses, and behavior, allowing you to realize their reactive and ephemeral nature. Do you know the story of Mohini, a regal white tiger who came to America in 1960 to live at the National Zoo? She was one of the world's few remaining white Bengal tigers and the only one outside India. The National Zoo's director, Theodore Reed, marveled:

Her stripes were black, shading into brown, but her main coat was eggshell white instead of the normal rufous orange. Exotic coloring and magnificent physique made her a tiger without peer.

Although Mohini was much beloved, she was placed in a 12-by-12-foot lion house, with iron bars and cement floor, and she spent her days pacing back and forth in her cramped quarters. This went on for years. Eventually, a natural habitat covering several acres with hills, trees, and a pond was created for her. When her cage door opened and she was released, she retreated to a small corner of the expansive space where she lived for the remainder of her life. The mindfulness teacher, Tara Brach, poignantly notes, "Mohini paced and paced in that corner until an area twelve by twelve feet was worn bare of grass." Mohini's story offers us an important lesson about the meaning of freedom and the ways we can become imprisoned behind the bars of our own mental construction.

The mindfulness teacher, Sharon Salzberg, speaks of mindfulness as telling the difference between what is taking place and the story we are telling ourselves about what is taking place. How would you apply this insight to Mohini? How might you apply it to yourself? We all have our own version of a 12-by-12-foot cage.

Mindfulness doesn't eliminate our cage but rather reveals its construction so that we can begin to dismantle it ourselves. This is the gift of self-awareness. Mohini, as a creature of her conditioning, stood little chance of seeing clearly what was before her—as open, spacious, and inviting as it was. While we, too, are creatures of our conditioning, we have the capacity to self-illuminate the darkness that provides cover to bias, self-doubt, hatred, and fear.

## Now Is the Time

The poet Hafiz in his poem “Now is the Time” conveys the idea of freedom as a journey of self-awareness and compassion. He begins:

Now is the time to know  
That all that you do is sacred.  
...  
What is it in that sweet voice inside  
That incites you to fear?  
Now is the time for the world to know  
That every thought and action is sacred.

So, when you are sitting in your chair, whether meditating, reading, or talking, and feel the impulse to get up and go somewhere or do something to feel more at ease, remember you might just be at the very place that offers you all you need. True freedom is not freedom from conflict but freedom within conflict; it is not freedom from boredom, anger or fear, but freedom within it.

Your experience—whatever it may entail—is indeed sacred. And it follows you wherever you go: into the courtroom, the boardroom, or the bedroom. Mindfulness offers a path to navigate these moments, and your intentions and life experiences move you along this path. Appreciating this is true freedom.

## A FREE Mindfulness Practice

We'll close with a short four-step mindfulness practice that can be remembered with the acronym FREE. You might want to try it for a few minutes when you realize that you are resisting your experience, wishing things were different than they are. At such time you may be mentally pacing back and forth in your twelve-by-twelve-foot cage.

- 1 **Focus.** Bring yourself into a comfortable posture and *focus* your attention on your breathing as you take three slower, deeper breaths.
- 2 **Recognize.** *Recognize* what you are experiencing in this moment. This means consciously acknowledging thoughts, feelings, body sensations, impulses, and behaviors.
- 3 **Experience.** Allow yourself to *experience* the moment as it is, as opposed to trying to do something to fix or problem solve. This is what is meant by being present. It is not always easy, but even if you can remain present for your experience for a few breaths, you get a taste of freedom.
- 4 **Entertain.** You may be aware of critical self-talk, that you are judging someone else, or are feeling anxious, angry, or frustrated. Having shifted into a more observational relationship to your

experience, *entertain* what you observe with interest, curiosity, and compassion. Treat yourself as you would a close friend.

As we move steadily into 2022, you may find moments where you feel a little stuck or trapped, wishing for a little more freedom and the peace of mind that comes with it. Practicing FREE for a few breaths can create a little space to see more clearly the vistas and horizons that are before you.

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