


# Identifying Effective Informal Mindfulness Practices in Daily Activities

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## *[Abstract]*

Mindfulness is a state of consciousness that entails regulating attention to focus on the moment-to-moment experience with an open orientation. The ability to evoke and sustain this state can be cultivated by both formal and informal meditation practices. In the hope of making mindfulness practice more accessible to the fast-paced modern lifestyle, this research explores the possibilities of utilizing modern daily activities as informal mindfulness meditation practices. Through examination of relevant Buddhist texts, along with contemporary studies on the mindfulness, this research outlines the mindfulness state, delineates a four-stage process for practicing mindfulness, and hypothesizes five characteristics of effective mindfulness practice. The four interconnected stages shared by all mindfulness practice are: gathering attention on a single focus, redirecting wandering attention back on the focus and sustaining gathered attention, observing ongoing body and mind activities to focus on the present moment, and finally being mindful of the present moment with the absence on internal chatter. Based

on this sketch process of attaining mindfulness, observable mindfulness meditation practices, and relevant literature, five characteristics of effective mindfulness practice are hypothesized: reasonable in time duration, comfortable/pleasurable, limited in sensual inputs, simple/familiar, and repetitive. It is speculated that activities more in line with these five characteristics are more suited for being adopted as activities for informal mindfulness practice, especially for amateur practitioners.

**Keywords:** Informal meditation, Mindfulness, Contemporary Buddhism

## **Introduction**

Although a burgeoning number of researches have eagerly proved the benefits of mindfulness on a wide range of aspects, including mental health and well-being, physical health, self-regulation, and interpersonal behavior, few have considered the cost that mindfulness training incurs. Developing mindfulness skills is not easy and requires the regular practice of meditation. Indeed, formal meditation practice requires practitioners to make a serious commitment in time and effort, while it is unlikely to deliver significant results in the short-term (Brown & Ryan, 2003: 822). One approach for addressing this issue that should be considered is to reduce the expense of time and effort for regular meditation. In particular, if mindfulness practice is conducted not as an isolated activity, but instead as a mode in which the practitioner completes certain regular tasks throughout the day, the practitioner would be likely to find practicing mindfulness on a regular basis more attainable.

Practicing mindfulness when carrying out routine daily activities has long been recognized a way of cultivating mindfulness by the Buddhist tradition. Coined as “informal meditation”, this method of practice is combined with formal meditation to deliver most of the secular forms of Buddhist mindfulness meditation, such as mindfulness based intervention

and therapy. In contrast to the integral role of informal practice in meditation, little investigation of such practices has taken place to date (Hanley, Warner, Dehili, Canto & Garland, 2014: 1095). A vast array of daily activities, including eating, walking, conversing, drinking tea, washing clothes, housekeeping, and even bathing, has been mentioned as informal meditation practices, but the effectiveness of these activities in cultivating mindfulness remain largely unknown.

## **Objective**

By drawing upon both Buddhist psychological traditions of mindfulness and the developing scholarship within empirical psychology, this research proposes to: 1. Outline the mindfulness state and its relevant stages, 2. Heuristically summarize some of the key characteristics of mindfulness practice, 3. Identify the modern daily activities that are suitable for being utilized to cultivate mindfulness using the summarized characteristics.

## **Methods**

This exploratory research is conducted with a mix of documentary and qualitative research methods. Primary sources of original Buddhist traditional texts and secondary sources of contemporary psychological studies are reviewed to formulate an outline for the mindfulness state and its relevant stages. Buddhist mindfulness practices from various traditions and mindfulness practices from contemporary programs are studied, compared, analyzed, and synthesized to suggest for the key characteristics of mindfulness practice.

## **Results**

### **1. The Mindfulness State**

#### **1.1 Definition of Mindfulness**

T. W. Rhys Davids was the first to translate the Pali term *sati* as ‘mindfulness,’ a concept that roots in Buddhist and other contemplative

traditions (Gethin, 2011: 263). Initially, the term was defined based on readings and interpretations of ancient Buddhist texts, however, beginning in the 1950s, definitions of mindfulness have become more influenced by the actual meditation practices. Within the context of contemporary research, mindfulness is in general defined as bringing a certain quality of attention and awareness to the unfolding of the moment-by-moment experience. Hanh (1976: 11) defined mindfulness as “keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality.” Thera (1972: 30) defined mindfulness as “the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us at the successive moments of perception.” Kabat-Zinn (2003: 145) defined mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.” Germer et al. (2005: 4) stated, “To be mindful is to wake up, to recognize what is happening in the present moment with a friendly attitude.”

While scholars have provided different definitions, there is agreement regarding the basic core components to mindfulness. Bishop et al. (2006: 231), in delineating an operational definition, proposed a two-component model of mindfulness. The first component of mindfulness involves the self-regulation of attention. In the mindfulness state, attention is sustained on the present moment experience, rather than expanded into the past or the future. This allows for increased recognition of current mental events. Thereby, mindfulness is the opposite of ‘mindlessness,’ a state of mind susceptible to unconscious feelings and reactive thoughts. The second component is concerned with the orientation or attitude towards one’s experience. The orientation should be characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance, regardless of the valence and desirability of those experiences.

In addition to contemporary psychological definitions, the meaning of mindfulness in its traditional roots of Buddhism should also be considered. According to ThichNhatHanh (1998: 3), mindfulness is the ‘heart’ of Buddhist teachings. Right mindfulness (*samma-sati*) constitutes the

seventh aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path, a system that was developed by the Buddha as a path leading to the cessation of personal suffering. Right Mindfulness is practiced by cultivating insight into the functions of the mind by sustaining awareness of both bodily sensations and mental conceptualizations, and by observing the interaction of the two. Right Mindfulness (*samma-sati*) is required to be present in every wholesome thought moment (*kusalacitta*). It is also the basis of all earnest endeavors (*appamāda*) towards liberation.

In traditional Buddhist texts, mindfulness is more commonly referred to as a practice or process, rather than as a mental function or trait. The practice of mindfulness is expounded in detail in the *SatipaṭṭhānaSutta* of the *MajjhimaNikāya*. The *SatipaṭṭhānaSutta* specifies the mental qualities that are instrumental for mindfulness practice: diligence (*ātāpī*), clear knowing (*sampajāna*), mindful (*sati*), and free from desires and discontent (*vineyyaabhijjhādomanassa*).

The *SatipaṭṭhānaSutta* further mentions four objects of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*): body, feelings, mind, and *dharmas*. The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are in a progressive order. Starting with contemplation of the body, the practitioner is directed to be mindful of breathing, postures, and activities (Anālayo, 2014: 31-41). The object of mindfulness proceeds to become the anatomical parts and elements of the body, and then to a corpse in decay. This first stage of contemplation establishes the foundation for contemplation of feelings. Building on the contemplation of the accessible physical aspects of experience, attention shifts to the more refined and subtle objects of awareness that is feelings. The contemplation of feelings involves the division of feelings, first according to their affective quality of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, then according to their worldly or unworldly nature. The latter part of this division introduces an ethical distinction of feelings. The ethical distinction of feelings paves the path for distinguishing between wholesome and unwholesome states of mind in the next *satipaṭṭhāna*. Contemplation of the mind starts with contemplating the presence or absence of four unwholesome states of mind, which are lust, anger, delusion,

and distraction, and proceeds to contemplating the presence or absence of four higher states of mind. Concerned with the presence of higher states of mind, the contemplation naturally flows to a detailed investigation of the factors that obstruct deeper levels of concentration, which are hindrances. Hindrances are the first object of contemplation of *dhammas*. Subsequently, the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* advances to the contemplation of dhamma which come in five types, mental hindrances, aggregates, sense-spheres, awakening factors, and four noble truths. The *satipaṭṭhāna* practice culminates with contemplation of the four noble truths, full understanding of which coincides with realization.

The divide between the contemporary Western and the traditional Buddhist conceptualizations of mindfulness is apparent. As Djikic (2014: 140) summarizes, in the Buddhist perspective, the root problem that mindfulness is aimed at is suffering (*dukkha*), while in the Western perspective, the root problem is mindlessness. Buddha instilled the practice of mindfulness with the aim of reducing mental suffering, which as understood by him, roots in ignorance of the moment-by-moment construction of the sense of self and ownership in the mind, and the adjoined greed and hatred. On the other hand, in Western psychology, mindfulness is contrasted with mindlessness, a state in which the mind processes environmental cues in an automatic and inflexible manner, and cognition relies on preformed environments determined by automatic categories no longer consciously available for consideration (Ie, Ngnoumen and Langer, 2014: 58-73). In this case, mindfulness is cultivated to approach situations with curiosity and cognitive flexibility, which increases creativity and more fruitful behavioral responses to situations and problems.

## **1.2 Cultivation of Mindfulness**

Despite the apparent divide between the contemporary Western and the traditional Buddhist conceptualizations of mindfulness, the two share a consensus of mindfulness as a state that can be cultivated by practice. Mindfulness by its nature is a state of consciousness that involves

consciously attending to one's moment-to-moment experience (Bishop et al., 2006: 231). The capacity to evoke this state could be cultivated using miscellaneous techniques, most of which originate from Buddhist meditation practices. However, as the state of mindfulness opposes the natural tendency of the mind to be imbued in recollections of the past and speculations of the future, it takes great discipline to practice mindfulness rather than some brief training course (Kabat-Zinn, 1990: 145).

While many different approaches exist for the purpose of cultivating a state of mindfulness, what constitutes a mindfulness practice and what practices or activities could be used to cultivate mindfulness remains unclear due to the discrepancy of mindfulness practices emerged from differing schools of thought. However, the most commonly discussed approach is meditation, which can be generally understood as a practice to suspend randomly emerging thoughts, and thereby focus the mind. There are three subtypes of meditation, which are concentration, contemplation and mindfulness (Leeming, 2014: 134). Concentration is to focus the mind on a single object, while contemplation is to direct the mind to hold or examine an image or thought within. Different from the previous two subtypes, the goal of mindfulness meditation is not to sustain focus upon a specific stimulus. Instead, mindfulness meditation pays complete attention to the present moment, including thoughts and feelings, while remaining disengaged. In actual practice, the three subtypes are often intermingled.

In both Buddhist traditions and contemporary psychotherapy, rigorous programs of meditation practice are developed to cultivate the capacity to evoke and sustain mindfulness. Mindfulness practice is inherently a form of mental training, with the goal of eliminating suffering in Buddhism, and of reducing cognitive vulnerability and enhancing psychological well-being in contemporary programs. According to the Buddhist meditation tradition, mindfulness practice can be divided into two basic varieties, formal and informal. Formal meditation involves setting aside special times in the day for one to engage in meditation, often sitting or lying down, with the breath or body as the primary object of attention.

In most cases, formal meditation requires an environment that is simplified and apart from the clutter, noise and distraction of everyday life. Although the posture and environment are helpful prerequisites to proper mindfulness meditation, they do not ensure its occurrence; nor do absence of the two prevent the mindfulness state from occurring (Shapiro & Zifferblatt, 1976: 520). On that account, informal meditation with no requirement for posture and environment can also be practiced to elicit mindfulness.

### **1.3 Stages of Mindfulness**

The varied mindfulness meditation practices share a very similar core process, which can be summarized into four stages. In the first stage of both formal and informal mindfulness practice, the practitioner attempts to maintain attention on a particular focus, generally one (or one related group of) body sensation or movement. In the case of formal meditation, the practitioner is commonly asked to focus on breathing, and the set of somatic sensations related to breathing, including air moving through nostrils, movement of the chest, and so on (Kabat-Zinn, 1990: 14). In eating meditation, the practitioner is asked to focus on a group of sensations brought forth by the food in a sequential order, from sight to smell and taste (Baer, 2014: 7). In walking meditation, the practitioner is asked to focus on the steps he or she takes, and the sensations brought forth by such movements throughout the body (Hanh, 2011: 8-9). This initial focusing on body sensation and movement is aimed to gather the otherwise scattered attention to the present moment.

In the second stage, the gathered attention inevitably wanders away, from the object of focus into judgment of the present experience, conceptualized thinking, and worries regarding the past or future. Guidance of meditation practice from both the Buddhist tradition and contemporary programs expects this issue to occur, and suggests a very simple solution, that is to repetitively gather the attention as in the first stage (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002). Attention is expected to sustain after a period of practice.



With sustained attention, the practitioner enters the third stage of focused observation, of internal and external body sensations, emotional feelings, and of randomly emerging thoughts. During this stage, attention is sustained on the present moment, while relaxed awareness watches new feelings and thoughts. On one hand, incoming sensations are observed with focus and an open attitude. On the other hand, random thoughts that are not of the present moment are recognized rather than refuted. In this state, the present-centered awareness dwells in a state in which it remains non-judgmental and non-elaborative from moment to moment. Each sensation, feeling, and thought that arises in the attention field is acknowledged and accepted as it is. The automatic pattern of reactivity is suspended, and replaced with a dispassionate state of self-observation that introduces a “space” between perception and response(Shapiro & Zifferblatt, 1976: 521). Attention does not engage or interact with the random thoughts, thus, after random thoughts eventually fade away, attention is naturally redirected to the present moment. The practice in this stage does not suppress the arising of mental events; rather, the aim is to inhibit secondary elaborative processing of the sensations, thoughts, and feelings in the stream of consciousness. In actual practice, the second and third stages often take place interchangeably. Once a distraction is observed and acknowledged, attention is directed back to the object of focus, thereby preventing further elaboration.

With repeated and prolonged practice, the practitioner enters the final stage of being mindful of the present moment with absence of internal chatter. Instead of floating in successive thought streams about one’s experience and its origins, implications, and associations, this mindfulness state expose the practitioner to a direct experience of events in the mind and body(Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002: 25). The process of attaining the mindfulness state is one in which the practitioner gains insight to the nature of one’s mind with a de-centered perspective. The practitioner experiences sensations, feelings, and thoughts in terms of their subjectivity and transient nature. During this process of mindfulness practice, it is within expectation that the practitioner will enter and exit the state of being fully mindful of the present moment repeatedly. In fact, sustaining the mindfulness state by redirecting

attention to back to the present moment from wandering thoughts constitutes an important part of the ability to remain mindful.

## **2. Possible Characteristics of Effective Mindfulness Activities**

Based on the core process of mindfulness delineated in the section above and analysis of existing traditional Buddhist and contemporary mindfulness practices, this section hypothesizes several characteristics for effective mindfulness activities. Here, “effective mindfulness activities” refers to the activities that allow the practitioner to more easily reach and sustain the mindfulness state described in the third and fourth stage in core process of mindfulness.

### **1. Reasonable duration**

As is demonstrated in the section above, mindfulness practice is a process with multiple stages that takes time to unfold. It takes the repeated regulation of the focus of attention to bring awareness to the current experience and be fully present in the moment. This is especially true for beginners. Thus, effective mindfulness practice activity should persist for a period of time.

### **2. Comfortable/ pleasurable**

In addition to sustained attention to the present moment, another important component to mindfulness is the orientation to experience that the practitioner adopts. This orientation begins with making a commitment to maintain an attitude of curiosity about the different objects within one’s experience at any moment, as well as the wandering thoughts that inevitably arise (Bishop et al., 2006: 233). All sensations, emotions, and thoughts are considered to be relevant, and subject to observation. Hence, if the activity delivers pleasurable experiences, the practitioner would be more willing to remain an open attitude to the incoming experiences.

### **3. Simple/ familiar, does not require decision making**

As previously mentioned, one of the two key components of

mindfulness is the orientation of acceptance to experience. Acceptance involves allowing the natural follow of the current experience while abandoning one's agenda to have a different experience. However, tasks that involve decision-making propel the mind to uphold filters of beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and desires, which counters the maintaining of acceptance. Decision-making also inevitably evokes the ruminative, elaborative thought streams that distract the direct observation of experience.

#### **4. Limited in sensual inputs**

During mindfulness practice, the practitioner is expected to be open to and aware of body sensation, emotional feeling, and random thought that arise in the present moment. To maintain this awareness at a high level is a rather difficult task. As attention is limited in capacity (Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977), if the sensual inputs the activity involves are too many or too intense, the practitioner is likely to get distracted and tired, which deviates from the goal of attending to the present moment with a high level of awareness.

#### **5. Repetitive**

Repetitiveness is also highly likely to be a characteristic of effective mindfulness practice. The most prevalent form of formal mindfulness practice, mindfulness breathing, utilized the activity of breathing to focus on the repetitive in and out breathe. Many of the common forms of informal meditation also take on activities that are repetitive to some level. For example, walking mindfulness meditation focuses on the repetitive movement of steps. Eating mindfulness meditation is often guided to focus on the repetitive act of chewing.

### **Discussion**

In the Buddhist tradition, the ultimate goal of both formal and informal mindfulness meditation practice is to sustain mindfulness in every moment of the daily life (Rosenberg & Gaï, 2004: 5). Similarly, contemporary psychotherapy program for cultivating mindfulness also aims for practitioners to evoke mindfulness in many situations, and thus respond more

skillfully to the situations that provoke emotional reactions. In this sense, all daily activities can and should be utilized to practice and consolidate mindfulness. However, in actual practice, daily activities do vary in their capacity and suitability for evoking and sustaining mindfulness, especially when attempted by beginners. The mental training of mindfulness here can be seen as quite similar to the physical training of a muscle. While a wide range of activities may engage and thus strengthen the muscle, certain activities are more efficient and effective than others in pursuing this goal. When practiced as informal meditation, certain daily activities precede others in allowing the practitioner to attain the state of mindfulness. Moreover, as mentioned by Khazan (2015: 109), setting a realistic goal for type, frequency, and duration of meditation practices for practitioners is crucial for them to persevere in the practice of mindfulness. Thus, it is worthwhile to identify the suitable daily activities for mindfulness practice.

The previous section deduced five possible characteristics of effective mindfulness activities, which are reasonable in time duration, comfortable/pleasurable, limited in sensual inputs, simple/familiar, and repetitive. Apparently, the measures of these five dimensions for each daily activity would differ on individual scale. Take for example dishwashing, an activity quite commonly adopted as a type of informal mindfulness meditation, some practitioners may find dishwashing to be an activity that lasts for a substantial period of time, while for others this is not the case. The same can be said for the dimensions of pleasurableness and familiarity.

Nonetheless, after taking into account the individual differences that exist among practitioners, a few propositions can still be made regarding which activities can be selected as suitable for mindfulness practice. Repetitiveness and limited in sensual input are two of the more objective dimensions out of the five. Most informal mindfulness practices mentioned in previous literature share these two characteristics, and fall into two major categories. One is simple physical activity, such as breathing, eating, drinking tea, and walking, while the other is simple chore, such as sweeping, dishwashing, and driving. For practitioners who do not routinely engage

in other types of repetitive activities with limited sensual input during the day, activities in these two categories may remain to be their best choice for informal meditation practice. Among the various activities in these two categories, practitioners can choose the ones that they find most pleasurable, simple/familiar, and appropriate timewise.

On the other hand, for mindfulness practitioners who do engage in other forms of repetitive activities with limited sensual input regularly, they may find worthwhile to assess these activities regarding their suitability for the cultivation of mindfulness. For example, those who are adept in playing musical instruments may find the time of instrument practice can be efficiently utilized for mindfulness practice as well. Many musicians and athletes have reported attaining a highly concentrated state as they take on their familiar practices (Ericsson & Charness, 1994: 725). However, as musicians and athletes are able to gather their attention to the task at hand, many are not able to remain in concentration with open awareness and regulation of their body and mind activities, as evidenced by the common report of self-talk (Kendrick, Craig, Lawson & Davidson, 1982; 353). Thus, it seems highly suitable for the practitioners of music and sports to engage in mindfulness practice during their music or sport practice. Practitioners who exercise on a regular basis may also consider taking exercising activities to be a chance for mindfulness practice.

Practicing mindfulness in the workplace may also be a good option, depending on the nature of the practitioners' work. While mindfulness in the workplace has been attracting increasing interest in recent years, most attention remains focused on the application of mindfulness skills cultivated outside of work (Dane, 2010; Dane & Brummel, 2013). Practitioners who regularly encounter work tasks that are repetitive and simple can consider practicing mindfulness as completing such tasks. Furthermore, most research on mindfulness in the workplace has focused on office work; however, workers with manual labor jobs may find it beneficial to cultivate mindfulness skills as well. It may also be more suitable for manual workers to practice mindfulness on the job, as a higher proportion of their work

is highly repetitive and familiarized. Manual workers, especially factory workers, account for a large quantity of the world population. Residing mostly in developing countries with poor work circumstances and disadvantaged income, this group is often in serious lack of psychological health resources (Luthans, Avolio, Walumbwa & Li, 2005; Sun & Ryder, 2016; Panikkar, Brugge, Gute & Hyatt, 2015). Mindfulness practice as an almost costless way of promoting psychological well being, may stand to be particularly suitable for manual workers.

### **Conclusion**

Through examination of relevant Buddhist texts, along with contemporary studies on mindfulness, this study outlined the mindfulness state and delineated a five-stage process for practicing mindfulness. Mindfulness is a state of consciousness that entails regulating attention to focus on the moment-to-moment experience with an open orientation. The ability to evoke and sustain this state can be cultivated by both formal and informal meditation practices. Despite their wide range of variety, mindfulness meditation practices share a similar core process that can be summarized into four interconnected stages. The four stages are gathering attention on a single focus, redirecting wandering attention back on the focus and sustaining gathered attention, observing ongoing body and mind activities to focus on the present moment, and finally being mindful of the present moment with the absence of internal chatter. Based on this sketch process of attaining mindfulness, observable mindfulness meditation practices, and relevant literature, five characteristics of effective mindfulness practice are hypothesized. The five characteristics are reasonable in time duration, comfortable/pleasurable, limited in sensual inputs, simple/familiar, and repetitive. It is speculated that activities more in line with these five characteristics are more suited for being adopted as activities for informal mindfulness practice, especially for amateur practitioners. However, how specific activities rank with regard to the five dimensions is contingent on individual practitioners.

By investigating the interesting and practical question of what daily

activities may constitute as effective practices for cultivating mindfulness, this study hopes to contribute to the currently scarce literatures on informal mindfulness meditation. Successful utilization of daily activities as meditation would lower the “entrance barrier” to rewarding mindfulness practice, improve level of motivation for mindfulness practitioners, and thus engage more people who may benefit from cultivating mindfulness into actual mindfulness practice. However, based on entirely on secondary research, this study would only come to a mere hypothesis on which key characteristics makes modern daily activities suitable for mindfulness practice. The level of accuracy for the results of this study awaits to be determined by future empirical research.

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