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MINDFULNESS and The Full Catastrophe

Full Catastrophe Living Jon Kabat-Zinn

Catastrophe here means the poignant enormity of our life experience. It includes crises and disasters but also all the little things that go wrong and that add up. The phrase reminds us that life is always in flux, *that everything we think is permanent is actually only temporary and constantly changing*. This includes our ideas, our opinions, our relationships, our jobs, our possessions, our creations, our bodies, *everything*. We learn to dance in the gale of the full catastrophe, to celebrate life, to laugh with it and at our self, even in the face of personal failure and defeat. In doing so, we are never weighted down for long, never ultimately defeated whether by the world or by our own considerable folly.

The “*Full Catastrophe*” captures something positive about the human spirit’s ability to come to grips with what is most difficult in life and to find within it room to grow in strength and wisdom. Facing the Full Catastrophe means finding and coming to terms with what is most human in ourselves. There is not one human being on the planet who does not have one’s own version of the full catastrophe.

Mindfulness is moment-to-moment awareness. It is cultivated by purposefully paying attention to things we ordinarily never give a moment’s thought to. In this learning process the assumptions from the start is that *as long as you are breathing, there is more right with you than there is wrong*, no matter how ill or how hopeless you may feel. But if you hope to mobilize your inner capacities for growth and for healing and to take charge in your life on a new level, a certain kind of effort and energy on your part will be required.

All of us have the capacity to be mindful. All it involves is cultivating our ability to pay attention in the present moment. We routinely and unknowingly waste enormous amounts of energy in reacting automatically and unconsciously to the outside world and to our own inner experiences. Cultivating mindfulness means learning to tap and focus our own wasted energies. *Cultivating mindfulness enables us to be more responsive than reactive*. In doing so, we learn to calm down enough to enter and dwell in states of deep relaxation. This nourishes and restores body and mind. *At the same time it makes it easier for us to see with greater clarity the way we actually live and therefore be more aware of our choices and options which leads to making better changes to enhance our health and the quality of our life*. In addition it helps us to channel our energy more effectively in stressful situations, or when we are feeling threatened or helpless. This energy comes from inside us and is therefore always within our reach and potential control.

The basic idea is to create an island of being in the sea of constant doing in which our lives are usually immersed, a time in which we allow all the “doing” to stop. Learning how to stop all your doing and shift over to a “being” mode, learning how to make time for yourself, how to slow down and nurture calmness and self-acceptance in yourself, learning to observe what your own mind is up to from moment to moment, how to watch your thoughts and how to let go of them without getting so caught up and driven by them, how to make room for new ways of seeing old problems – these are some of the lessons of mindfulness. This kind of learning involves settling into moments of being and cultivating awareness.

Mindfulness is the process of observing body and mind intentionally, of letting your experiences unfold from moment to moment and *accepting them as they are*. It does not involve rejecting your thoughts nor trying to clamp down on them or suppress them, nor trying to control

anything at all other than the focus and direction of your attention. If you start paying attention to where your mind is from moment to moment throughout the day, chances are you will find that considerable amounts of your time and energy are expended in clinging to memories, being absorbed in reverie, and regretting things that have already happened and are over. And you will probably find that as much or more energy is expended in anticipating, planning, worrying, and fantasizing about the future and what you want to happen or don't want to happen. Perhaps you go too fast to slow down, too fast to know the importance of making eye contact, of touching, of being in your body. When you are functioning in this mode, you may eat without really tasting, see without really seeing, hear without really hearing, touch without really feeling, and talk without really knowing what we are saying. The value of cultivating mindfulness is not just a matter of getting more out of a sunset. *When unawareness dominates the mind, all your decisions and actions are affected by it.*

It is important to emphasize that *thinking* is not bad or is it even undesirable during mindfulness or meditation. What matters is whether you are aware of your thoughts and feelings during mindfulness-meditation and how you handle them. Trying to suppress them will only result in greater tension and frustration and more problems, not in calmness and peace. Mindfulness does not involve pushing thoughts away or walling yourself off from them to quiet your mind. We are not trying to stop our thoughts as they cascade through the mind. We are simply making room for them, observing them as thoughts, and letting them be.

The *attitude* with which you undertake the practice of paying attention and being in the present is crucial. The following is the attitudinal foundation of mindfulness practice:

1. NON-JUDGING -- Mindfulness is cultivated by *assuming the stance of an impartial witness to your own experience and just observe it*. To do this requires that you *become aware* of the constant stream of judging and reacting to inner and outer experiences that we are all normally caught up in, and *learn to step back from it*. It is common to discover and to be surprised by the fact that we are constantly generating judgments about our experience. Most everything we see is labeled and categorized by the mind. We react to everything we experience in terms of what we think its value is to us. Some things, people, and events are judged as "good" because they make us feel good for some reason. Others are equally quickly condemned as "bad" because they make us feel bad. The rest is categorized as "neutral" because we don't think it has much relevance. Neutral things, people, and events are almost completely tuned out of our consciousness. We usually find them the most boring to give attention to.

This habit of categorizing and judging our experience locks us into *mechanical reactions* that we are not even aware of and that often have no objective basis at all. These judgments tend to dominate our minds, making it difficult for us ever to find any peace within ourselves. It's as if the mind were a yo-yo, going up and down on the string of our own judging thoughts all day long.

First thing is to be aware of these automatic judgments *so that we can see through our own prejudices and fears and liberate ourselves from their tyranny*. When practicing mindfulness, it is important to recognize this judging quality of mind when it appears and to intentionally assume the stance of an impartial witness by reminding yourself to just observe it. When you find the mind judging, you don't have to stop it from doing that. *All that is required is to be aware of it happening*. No need to judge the judging and make matters even more complicated for yourself.

Practice involves suspending judgment and just watching whatever comes up, including your own judging thoughts, without pursuing them or acting on them in any way. Then proceed with watching your breathing.

2. PATIENCE -- Patience is a form of *wisdom*. It demonstrates that we *understand* and *accept* the fact that *sometimes things must unfold in their own time*. A child may try to help a butterfly

to emerge by breaking open its chrysalis. Usually the butterfly doesn't benefit from this. Any adult knows that the butterfly can only emerge in its own time, that the process cannot be hurried.

In the same way *we cultivate patience toward our own minds and bodies* when practicing mindfulness. Remind ourselves there is no need to be impatient with ourselves because *we find the mind judging all the time*, we are tense - agitated - frightened, we have been practicing for some time and nothing positive seems to have happened. ***We give ourselves room to have these experiences. Why? Because we are having them anyway! When they come up, they are our reality, they are part of our life unfolding in this moment. So we treat ourselves as well as we would treat the butterfly.*** Why rush through some moments to get to others, "better" ones? After all, each one is your life in that moment.

Patience can be a particularly helpful quality to invoke when the mind is agitated. It can help us to accept this wandering tendency of the mind while reminding us that we don't have to get caught up in the "travels" of the mind. Practicing patience reminds us that *we don't have to fill up our moments with activity and with more thinking in order for them to be rich. It helps us to remember that quite the opposite is true. To be patient is simply to be completely open to each moment, accepting it in its fullness, knowing that, like the butterfly, things can only unfold in their own time.*

3. BEGINNER'S MIND -- Too often we let our thinking and our beliefs about what we "know" *prevent us from seeing things as they really are.* We tend to take the ordinary for granted and *fail to grasp the extra ordinariness of the ordinary.* Cultivating a "beginner's mind" is a mind that is ***willing to see everything as if for the first time.***

"Beginner's Mind" *allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in the rut of our own expertise, which often thinks it knows more than it does. No moment is the same as any other. Each is unique and contains unique possibilities.* Beginner's mind reminds us of this simple truth.

Ask yourself if you are seeing a person with fresh eyes, as he or she really is, or if you are only seeing the reflection of your own thoughts about this person. Am I able to see with a clear and uncluttered mind? Or am I actually seeing them through the veil of my own thoughts and opinions? Try this with any person (ex, family, friends, co-workers), pets, with problems as they arise, outdoors in nature, etc.

4. TRUST -- Developing a basic trust in yourself to listen to and consider your thoughts and feelings with genuine honor is an integral part of meditation training. Important to ***honor my feelings and intuition.*** Meditation emphasizes being my own person and understanding what it means to be myself.

Important to become more fully myself - a reason for practicing meditation in the first place. *Ultimately, I still have to live my own life, every moment of it.* In practicing mindfulness, *I am practicing taking responsibility for being myself and learning to listen to and trust my own being.*

5. NON-STRIVING -- *Almost everything we do we do is for a purpose, to get something or somewhere. But in meditation this attitude can be a real obstacle. Ultimately meditation is "a non-doing."* It has no goal other than for me to be myself. *The irony is that I already am. In one sense I am "trying less" and "being more."* This comes from cultivating the attitude of non-striving.

For ***example***, if you sit down to meditate and you think, "I am going to get relaxed, or get enlightened, or control my pain, or become a better person," then you have introduced an ideal into your mind of where you should be, and along with it comes *the notion that you are not okay right now.* "If I were only more calm, or more intelligent, or a harder worker, or more this or

more that, if only my heart were healthier or my knee were better, then I would be okay. *But right now, I am not okay.*"

This attitude undermines the cultivation of mindfulness, which involves simply ***paying attention to whatever is happening***. If you are tense, then just ***pay attention*** to the tension. If you are in pain, then ***be with*** the pain as best you can. If you are criticizing yourself, then ***observe the activity*** of the judging mind. ***Just watch***. *Remember, we are simply allowing anything and everything that we experience from moment to moment to be here -- because it already is.*

The best way to achieve your own goals is to back off from striving for results and instead to ***start focusing carefully on seeing and accepting things as they are, moment by moment***. With patience and regular practice, movement toward your goals will take place by itself.

6. ACCEPTANCE -- Acceptance *means a willingness to seeing things as they actually are in the present*. This attitude sets the stage for acting appropriately in your life, no matter what is happening. If you have a headache, ***accept*** that you have a headache. If you are overweight, why not ***accept*** it as a description of your body at this time? *Sooner or later we have to come to terms with things as they are and accept them*, whether it is a diagnosis of cancer or learning of someone's death. *Often acceptance is only reached after we have gone through very emotion-filled periods of denial and then anger. These stages are a natural progression in the process of coming to terms with what is. They are all part of the healing process.*

We often waste a lot of energy denying and resisting what is already fact. When we do that, we are basically trying to force situations to be the way we would like them to be, which only makes for more tension. This actually prevents positive change from occurring. We may be so busy denying and forcing and struggling that we have little energy left for healing and growing, and what little we have may be dissipated by our lack of awareness and intentionality.

Now is the only time you have for anything. You have to accept yourself as you are before you can really change... When you start thinking this way, losing weight becomes less important. It also becomes a lot easier. *By intentionally cultivating acceptance, you are creating the preconditions for healing.*

Acceptance does not mean that you have to like everything or that you have to take a passive attitude toward everything and abandon your principles and values. It does not mean that you are satisfied with things as they are or that you are resigned to tolerating things as they "have to be." It does not mean that you should stop trying to break free of your own self-destructive habits or to give up on your desire to change and grow, or that you should tolerate injustice, for instance, or avoid getting involved in changing the work around you because it is the way it is and therefore hopeless. **Acceptance** as we are speaking of it simply means that you have come around to a ***willingness to see things as they are***. This attitude sets the stage for acting appropriately in your life, no matter what is happening. You are much more likely to know what to do and have the inner conviction to act when you have a clear picture of what is actually happening than when your vision is clouded by our mind's self-serving judgments and desires or its fears and prejudices.

In the meditation practice, *we cultivate acceptance by taking each moment as it comes and being with it fully, as it is*. We try not to impose our ideas about what we should be feeling or thinking or seeing on our experience but just *remind ourselves to be receptive and open to whatever we are feeling, thinking, or seeing, and to accept it because it is here right now*. *If we keep our attention focused on the present, we can be sure of one thing, namely that whatever we are attending to in this moment will change, giving us the opportunity to practice accepting whatever it is that will emerge in the next moment*. Clearly there is wisdom in cultivating acceptance.

7. LETTING GO – A clever way of catching monkeys ☺... hunters will cut a hole in a coconut that is just big enough for a monkey to put its hand through. Then they will drill two smaller holes in the other end, pass a wire through, and secure the coconut to the base of a tree. Then they put a banana inside the coconut and hide. The monkey comes down, puts his hand in and takes hold of the banana. The hole is crafted so that the open hand can go in but the fist cannot get out. All the monkey has to do to be free is to let go of the banana. But it seems most monkeys don't let go. Often our minds get us caught in very much the same way in spite of all our intelligence. Therefore cultivating the attitude of "letting go," or non-attachment, is fundamental to the practice of mindfulness. When we begin paying attention to our inner experience, we rapidly discover that there are certain thoughts and feelings and situations that the mind seems to want to hold on to.

We intentionally put aside the tendency to elevate some aspects (pleasant) of our experience and to reject others (negative). Instead we just let our experience be what it is and practice observing it from moment to moment. "Letting go" is a way of letting things be, of accepting things as they are. When we observe our own mind grasping and pushing away, we remind ourselves to let go of those impulses on purpose, just to see what will happen if we do. When we find ourselves judging our experience, we let go of those judging thoughts. We recognize them and we just don't pursue them any further. We let them be, and in doing so we let them go. Similarly when thoughts of the past or of the future come up, we let go of them. We just watch.

If we find it particularly difficult to let go of something because it has such a strong hold over our mind, we can direct our attention to what "holding on" feels like. Holding on is the opposite of letting go. We can become an expert on our own attachments, whatever they may be and their consequences in our lives, as well as how it feels in those moments when we finally do let go and what the consequences of that are. Being willing to look at the ways we hold on ultimately shows us a lot about the experience of it opposite. So whether we are "successful" at letting go or not, mindfulness continues to teach us if we are willing to look.