

Benefits of Mindfulness

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"If you come to mindfulness just expecting benefits, sooner or later you're going to be confused."

-Michael Carroll

If you Google "benefits of mindfulness" you will find hundreds of recent scientific studies. There is proof of mindfulness meditation's effectiveness at strengthening attention in schoolchildren, creating more resilient business leaders, increasing brain density of the pre-frontal cortex, improving the functioning of the immune system, and plenty more. But most seasoned mindfulness teachers will tell you that while all those benefits may be true, they are side-products of the process and not to be focused on as the "goal."

Three years ago I was speaking on the phone to Michael Carroll, the founder of an [organization](#) which focuses on sharing mindfulness to business audiences. We were talking about a new initiative I was involved with, and while I was extolling the numerous benefits of the program he stopped me and said, *"If you come to mindfulness just expecting benefits, sooner or later you're*

going to be confused."

I was admittedly confused.

In theory I kinda understood. Fixating solely on the benefits of mindfulness can lead to craving of pleasant experiences (e.g. calm, clarity, relaxation) and being averse to the neutral and unpleasant experiences (irritation, boredom, anger) that occur both on and off the meditation cushion. This cycle of craving and aversion is precisely what mindfulness practice aims to break through. Our unexamined judgments of what is "good" and "bad" keep us removed from experiencing the world as it is, and practice can bring us in touch with the nature of experiences beyond labels. This ultimately frees us to be in harmony with each moment of our lives as it unfolds. Okay, got the theory. But how does this really play out?

This past winter I resided at [Blue Cliff Monastery](#) in New York for their annual Winter Retreat. During my stay a friend returned to the monastery after a special ceremony overseas, and everyone was joyous upon his return. To celebrate the ceremony his mom had shipped over numerous boxes of homemade sweets: peanut butter chocolate balls, honey glazed pecans, coconut truffles, and his favorite, Oreo cookie fudge. Each box had dozens of large pieces, and he took pleasure in sharing these treats with the entire community of monks, nuns and lay friends. One evening he invited myself and another friend to join him for a sampling. As we sat down he explained that these kinds of treats were his mom's specialty, and they reminded him of home.

Seeing how special these were, I suggested we try a guided eating meditation. This entailed practicing savoring one piece by eating it slowly and mindfully, being aware of sight, touch, smell, taste, and even sound. He was eager to partake, and we all chose a chunk of the Oreo cookie fudge to enjoy.

We began by looking at it in the palm of our hands, examining the delicacy as if we had never seen such a concoction before. Noticing the colors, the ridges, the way the light bounced off it at various angles. Then we rolled it slowly in-between our fingers, noting the texture and solidity. We brought it up to our nose, breathing in the flavor, noticing how the mouth automatically creates saliva in preparation for eating. After placing it on our tongue we let it sit for a moment before chewing, noticing the desire to chew, and how effortlessly the tongue is able to guide the food to the teeth. One bite. Two bites. Three bites. We took note of how taste is felt in the body and the mind. Then, after some time, swallowed.

In the aftermath of our experiment I turned to him expecting to see a big smile, but instead he appeared concerned. He exclaimed: "I found that quite unpleasant." I laughed, and asked him to explain. "Well, after the first bite I was overpowered by the sweetness, and found it difficult to keep going. It's like my body didn't want to eat it...It's strange, I grew up on these kinds of things but I always rushed through eating them, never really taking the time to notice. I thought this was my favorite snack in the world, but maybe it's not?"

In that moment, I understood more clearly the transmission. I had suggested mindful eating with the expectation that bringing awareness to the experience of eating Oreo cookie fudge would

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enhance the pleasure of the moment. This assumption proved incorrect.

Afterwards the friend shared more about the eating habits of his family, and how he was becoming concerned about diabetes down the road. With the cornucopia of sugar in front of us I could see why!

The experiment was a reminder to us all about the nature of mindfulness. It is a torch of awareness, shining light on the object of attention without discrimination. There is a freedom in this awareness, in being able to see an unfiltered view of our experience. But I quickly found this freedom can be shackled by preconceived notions about where the practice will "get me to"...which is ultimately just *right here*, to this very moment.

As for my experience of the eating the Oreo cookie fudge? Delicious.

But, admittedly, a bit sweet.

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